

VIENNA: AUGUST 2014

Vienna, one of my ancestral homes, is a city of old-fashioned elegance where the Viennese dress in fine clothes to shop for milk and eggs, and look down their noses on tourists in skimpy dresses, shorts, and sandals. In the summer, no matter how high the mercury, men sport their conservative ties and jackets, and ladies appear in traditional nylons and low-heel shoes for their sensible morning chores.

When my Embraer landed in Schwechat, the airport shimmered with heat. After a quick check with the officials, my pilots stayed behind to park the plane, deal with the rest of formalities, and wait for further orders. It was a short flight from Amsterdam, and I intended the visit as a quick turnaround after my business concluded.

It was unpleasantly hot. As the limo passed through the traffic lights unimpeded, the city looked deserted. But not surprisingly, the Graben, Vienna's famous promenade for the rich and poor alike, was bustling as far as the eye could see. I kept to the shady side, walking close by elegant store fronts, perspiring heavily in the August sun. Across the huge square, near the plague column, a line of tourists in front of a gelato shop grew long.

I loosened my tie, unbuttoned my linen jacket, and joined them.

The line moved slowly. Nearby, visitors of all ages and nationalities, single and with families, enjoyed coffee with their late breakfast, sheltered under the heavy canopy of an outdoor restaurant, with waiters running in and out.

"Visiting, are you?" A plump woman with an American accent broke the silence as her short husband joined her in line.

"Umm," I replied, as my cell rang. A barrage of words hit my ear.

"Dank u! Begrepen. I will be there, for sure!"

She pursed her lips. "Oh, goodness. You're not an American?"

I tried to be polite.

"Pieter Van de Graeff, at your pleasure! I am Dutch. Aren't all Dutch blond, M'am?"

"So you are..."

Her chatter ran by me, being miles away in thoughts.

Why was Opa Johann von Graben-Stein, and not Van de Graeff? Peter, our first ancestor, was a dour, uneducated apprentice to a stone mason, earning him a nickname Grabstein.

A grave stone!

Before long, Peter's manly charms caught the attention of a young Habsburg prince, who ennobled him for services left conspicuously blank in our ancient family bible. He had a scribe record his words, followed by his enterprising descendants. They spread their seeds across the continent, eventually merging our line with the Van de Graeffs. For centuries our blood was blue, but it became extinct. Not that it matters, except that Opa never told me why he had changed his name back from the Dutch line. His secret went to his grave.

I, the last descendant, love my name. After all, a *Graeff* is a "count."

So perhaps names matter, after all.

If I were humble, I'd say I was a successful merchant of art.

Egotistical and proud, I admit that I own one of Europe's finest auction houses.

"Unless it makes money, don't touch it," Opa would say. His greatest gift to me.

Now, my last tie to Vienna and to my grandfather would be cut. His large apartment complex near Schoenbrunn was to be sold. With a great profit, I might add. I could invest the money, and donate a tidy sum to the Rijksmuseum in his name. Yet, the sale suddenly burdened my thoughts with guilt, imagining Opa handing a bag of roasted chestnuts to a boy in the palace gardens. Painfully strict, his biggest dose of love to me was discipline.

Not that I wasn't grateful. Without him, I'd have ended up in an orphanage.

The line leaped ahead. A family finished their orders, and left with already melting cones.

"Excuse me, please," I bowed politely to the woman. "I'm next."

I looked at the chocolate and apricot bins, but instead, ordered pistachio and lemon ice. The two flavors made sense, the first on top, with the luxurious taste of nuts in cream, and the second below, with a lasting bite of lemon to cleanse the palate, especially in the heat.

Kaertner Strasse, the shopping street toward the Viennese Opera, was moderately busy with pedestrians. A few tourists enjoyed their open-faced sandwiches, but across, the Rosenthal china shop was empty. I prefer shopping in Paris, where my couturiers and tailors know my taste. A phone call, and a package would arrive at my Kaisersgracht's house.

With business to conclude only later in the day, I needed a quick diversion.

I chose an afternoon at the Kunstmuseum, the city's art museum. In the cool entrance hall, a large poster announced the opening of Giuseppe Arcimboldo's unusual

paintings of composite heads. A clever mélange of fruits, vegetables, animals, and even pots and pans, I knew most, except for the two on loan from private collections.

Art buried for centuries often emerges from the darkest places.

I should know that. Art is my family's ancient trade.

The elegant staircase rose toward a magnificent painted vault. Behind the top landing, in a darkened chamber reserved for special exhibitions, gentle spotlights focused on Arcimboldo's bizarre heads. I didn't feel like visiting the permanent collection.

I practically knew the location of every painting by heart!

As I entered the small room behind the landing, one painting instantly mesmerized me.

Rudolf's Flora was painted for a bachelor emperor who couldn't resist a woman's breast, even one made of millions of flower petals and dotted with rosebud nipples. I wanted to touch her pearly skin fashioned with pale roses and white primroses, breathe in the sweet scent, and kiss the virginal breast. Blond, octopus-like tresses wound around her neck, ready to ensnare a lover with the first kiss.

Petal-by-petal, my eyes bored into the surface, settling on every detail of the face and clothing as the real person began to emerge before me. She must have been beautiful. No one could touch her now. I wished to have admired her at least from afar.

She was ethereal and disposable, like all women who are after my money.

"Hey! There are other interesting paintings here. I've been watching you for nearly half an hour, and you didn't move an inch. If I didn't know better, I'd say you turned into a statue!"

My eyes flashed with disbelief. What is it in Vienna, where within one hour a second stranger has addressed me uninvited? I hadn't the slightest idea how to respond without blowing my temper. Instead, I stepped closer to the surface, ready for the alarm to sound.

"There is another Flora here, never seen before, the new one. Is your preference..."

The voice drifted off without completing the sentence.

I waited for a moment to compose myself, and turned around. She was quite tall, with eyes barely below mine. Long honey colored tresses were stuck to her skin pearling with sweat. Strangely, both women had a light dimple in their chins, hardly ever seen in women. The real one would also be pretty, if only she combed her hair and changed clothes. Her sweaty t-shirt clung to her body like second skin. A short skirt revealed muscular legs in sneakers.

Not bad, all things considered.

"What do you want?" I barked.

She grew flustered, but only for a moment, and then removed her chewing gum and held it in her hand. "Tissues?" I offered one, teasing her with my eyes as I looked her over once more.

She shook her head at first, but took one and wiped her brow.

"You looked like someone interested in art. Most people come and leave."

"What?" Yes, interested in art. And in young women. With my sight riveted on her legs, her point missed me entirely. "You're a cyclist?"

"I borrowed a bike at the pension house. I wanted to see the paintings before I return..."

"Return where?"

"It's not important." First she opened the conversation, and now she was in a hurry.

Who was this irritating girl with a dimple in her chin? Maybe I should introduce myself.

"I'm Pieter Van de Graeff. Could I offer you a bite at the museum café?"

"Karolina. Světlá. Have to run back—well cycle—and then catch the train."

About to extend a hand in greeting, she found the chewing gum still stuck in her palm.

Her German sounded hard, with every consonant and vowel clear. "Are you Czech?"

"*Naschledanou!*" I've heard the good-bye in Bohemia. It's impossible to pronounce.

Then she was gone.