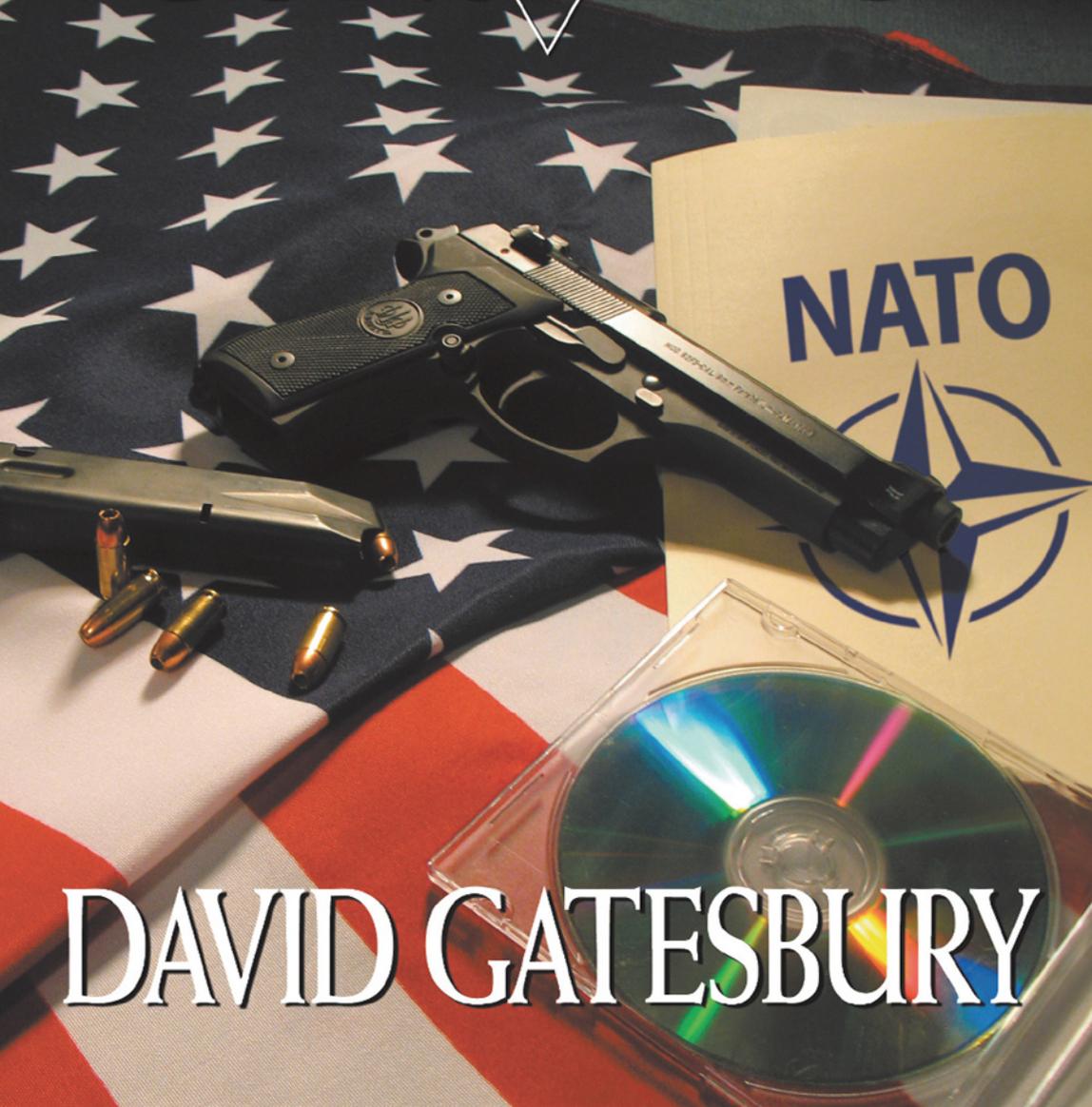


A HITCHCOCKIAN SUSPENSE THRILLER

# THE TRIAD CONSPIRACY



DAVID GATESBURY

# **The Triad Conspiracy**

By David Gatesbury



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*To Marianne*



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# INTRODUCTION

When looking back on history we see how the League of Nations (1920-1945) failed. This organization's principal purpose was to maintain world peace. Its primary goal was to prevent wars and international disputes through negotiation and arbitration. The League did not have a military force and relied on the Great Powers to enforce resolutions. It had successes and failures, but was ultimately powerless at preventing aggression by the Axis Powers. Germany, Japan, and Italy withdrew from the League to pursue their dictators' aspirations.

In 1938, prior to the Second World War, the free world gave into Adolf Hitler's rants by handing over the Sudetenland districts of Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany as a way to bargain for "Peace in our time." Czechoslovakia had no voice in this compromise, and on 16 March 1939 that entire nation fell to German occupation. The world stood by and said little when Japan overran Chinese provinces without provocation. Today, the poses and postures of Benito Mussolini rate a comical figure, but not so when he invaded and annexed Ethiopia in 1938, or in 1940 when he signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Japan.

The United Nations is structured much the same as the League of Nations and has many of the same problems. As long as loudmouthed dictators spout untruths and distortions while making threats against other nations before the U.N. General Assembly, world peace is threatened.

There is strength in unity, and an example of this came when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Saddam Hussein learned what happens when one nation stands defiant against world leaders speaking with one voice. Yet it wasn't the U.N. that acted, but a group of nations forming a coalition that kicked the Iraqis out and freed Kuwait. These forces considered ousting Hussein from power at

that time, but Arab nations participating in the military action threatened to break up the coalition. However, if Kuwait hadn't been an oil-rich country, and Iraq had not stood to gain control of a large portion of the world's oil supply, the coalition may not have acted so swiftly. In the wake of Saddam Hussein's capture at a later date, Iraqi government officials openly voiced their displeasure with the United Nations' failure to help their people during decades of oppression by the deposed leader.

In January 2003, U.N. members voted Libya, one of the worst sponsors of terrorism, the chairman of their Human Rights Commission, despite opposition from the United States and human rights groups. It is a well known fact that Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qaddafi was behind the downing of Pan AM Flight 103 in 1988, which took the lives of 189 Americans. What were these people thinking? Muammar Qaddafi fell from power in August 2011, but unfortunately, the West has little influence over incoming transitional governments replacing such regimes.

The U.N. also failed to bring an end to the Bosnian-Serbian war, as the NATO Alliance stepped in to bring an end to that conflict. For the U.N. to play a stronger role in maintaining world peace there must be changes introduced, for there is corruption in this organization, and funding has disappeared. Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter addresses how to deal with aggression and ruthless dictators. Yet this written agreement for maintaining peace has done little to prevent aggression and oppression, and world leaders need to clearly define the organization's role or continue facing failures.

When one nation bullies another, should there be military action before a multitude suffers? Should action be taken against totalitarian states run by dictators who slaughter their people and commit atrocities to remain in power? At the completion of this book, war-ravaged Syria is in a two-year civil war with over 93,000 lives lost, and yet, the United Nations is powerless to do anything about it. As the death toll rises, various sources report confirmation of chemical weapons used by Syria's government in this conflict. How many Syrians must die before the U.N. acts against Bashar Hafez al-Assad?

When a U.N.-Arab League envoy arrived in Damascus, Syria under the leadership of Kofi Annan on a mission to halt violence there, he declared that further militarization would make matters worse. This was not what a people outraged by the brutal murder of fellow citizens wanted to hear. Assad's regime has used military force to crush all rebellious opposition, and as a head of state exerting control with an iron fist, he will only step down under the threat and pressure of military force. While Assad denies responsibility for what's taking place in his country, insisting he is not accountable, a diplomatic solution is unlikely and more are sure to die. U.N. members must commit to taking a stand against corrupt leaders like Assad, or the U.N. is destined to fail, just as the League of Nations did.

One of the most serious problems is that members of the Security Council have a dubious record. Russia is Syria's closest ally, and while Syria snubs the world while killing thousands of its citizens, Russia stands by Bashar Hafez al-Assad. Vladimir Putin, a former KGB official and currently the Russian President, has made it clear that he does not want foreign intervention with regards to Syrian affairs.

Russia gives the impression it wants improved relations with the West. However, ties with the U.S. have faltered under Putin's leadership. According to an international press agency, in Brussels on 30 April 2009, NATO ordered the expulsion of two Russians over the Estonian Spy Affair. A diplomat reported the expulsion of two Russian agents in connection with the case of Herman Simm, an Estonian jailed for twelve years for treason. Simm was convicted of handing over more than 2,000 pages of information to Russia's SVR Foreign Intelligence Service. The two expelled Russian diplomats were not believed to be directly involved in this spy incident, but one of the expelled Russians was the son of Vladimir Chizkov, Moscow's ambassador to the European Union.

On 28 June 2010, the FBI arrested ten people dubbed "illegals" for allegedly spying for Russia while living covertly in the U.S. These agents were tough spies for the FBI to catch. The Bureau made the arrests in the Northeast, charging them with failure to

register as foreign agents, a crime less serious than espionage, which carries up to five years in prison. Courtroom documents alleged that these defendants lived in the U.S. posing as Canadians and American citizens. Two ring members were husband and wife, raising concerns that Moscow had recruited and planted others. Prosecutors charged the suspects with following Russian Intelligence orders to become “Americanized” enough to infiltrate policy-making circles to acquire a wide range of information on U.S. weapons. The court cited numerous communications intercepted by the FBI, but there was no clue about what sort of information the agents provided to their Russian handlers.

Court papers indicate that Anna Chapman, who the media quickly branded a *femme fatale*, was about to go to Moscow, and viewing her as a flight risk, the FBI moved in. The then-twenty-eight-year-old Chapman, a sultry beauty with striking red hair, became a high-profiled tabloid darling. Said to be a savvy Russian agent, she made a weekly Wednesday intelligence report to Moscow while working undercover in Manhattan real estate. Her arrest, along with those of the other operatives, broke up the largest foreign intelligence network discovered on American soil since the Cold War.

At the courtroom hearing, prosecutors described Chapman as a “practiced deceiver.” Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael Farnbiarz called the evidence “truly overwhelming.” He noted Chapman in particular, saying she was a sophisticated agent of Russia with extraordinary training.

Russian officials initially denounced the arrests as “Cold War-era espionage stories” with elements in the U.S. government attempting to offset the relationship between Moscow and Washington.

Our relationship with Red China’s communist government has improved over the years, as they love trading with us, but they hardly view us as a friend. At or near the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse, eastern European nations found freedom from the Soviet’s handpicked dictators, leading to the unification of West and East Germany. The Russians are no longer governed by a hard-line communist regime and those eastern European

nations that were considered Soviet satellites are now independently self-governed. These changes in Europe did nothing to change the situation in Southeast Asia, though, and those nations under Communist China's sphere of influence at that time are still under Chinese influence today. What the U.S. represents is much the opposite of communism, and since communists govern China, they view us as their enemy. People who've lived through the Cold War era should understand this, but there are many who think the wave of change in Europe opened the door for change elsewhere, and that China is our friend and ally.

Communist China has propped up the North Korean government since the Korean War, and they still support North Korea by supplying them with practically everything. The main reason for this is that if North Korea fell and merged with South Korea to become a democratic republic, as happened with Germany, it may serve to undermine China's government.

Many regard North Korea as nothing more than one big concentration camp, and it is pathetic how its citizens are starving. The physical stature of its people is shrinking from malnutrition, as South Korean citizens have grown in height. When it was reported that North Korean authorities were arresting citizens for not crying hard enough after the death of their longtime leader Kim Jong-Il, I could have laughed, but the fate of those people isn't a bit funny.

I believe China props up this wretched nation's puppet government to taunt the West, using North Korea's nuclear ambitions to harass neighboring nations. The idea is that Communist China needn't provide the North Koreans with everything so long as they lend them nuclear weapons and missile technology as a way to gain leverage to acquire food and other provisions from other countries. The West will do what it can to slow down the spread of nuclear weapons by giving much needed aid to North Korea, and as a result relieve China of the burden. Where is this backward and diminutive country going to get missile and nuclear technology, unless China gives it to them? For the present, China is in control, pulling the strings, and they stand to lose nothing with this charade.

It shouldn't take a long leap of understanding to grasp why, whenever there are meetings with Western countries, the North Koreans insist that Chinese officials sit on their side of the table. While China supplies this regime with everything entering that country, they have a great deal of influence about what happens there. In addition, if China was a sincere member of the U.N. Security Council and seeking peace, all they'd have to do is threaten to cut off North Korea's supplies to initiate change and quiet them down.

On 11 April 2012, the North Koreans tested a missile under the claim that it was launching a satellite. I find it ridiculous that a nation that cannot feed its people is building missiles. Another strange thing that I don't find a bit surprising is that the launch site was at Tonchang-ri, about thirty-five miles from the border with China. Had any other nation set up a launch pad that close along China's border, Chinese officials would've regarded such a move as a threat, but it's not a problem when they're dictating how things are run in North Korea. Had India or Pakistan made a similar test launch thirty-five miles from their border with China, this most assuredly would have placed those nuclear nations on the brink of a full-scale war.

No doubt, the United Nations is destined to one day fail, for there is little unity in this organization so long as Russia and China represent the U.N. Security Council. If world leaders cannot find common ground for blocking the ambitions of dictators, we're sure to repeat history and once again find the world engulfed in turmoil. If the way the U.N. approaches these problems is not erroneously distorted, perhaps it is human nature that is flawed, which is certainly a possibility.

Lastly, while sanctions against Iran have taken their toll on its economy, they have done little to slow its pursuit of nuclear weapons. The leaders of Iran are fanatical extremists, determined to arm themselves with nuclear capability, and they will continue this endeavor no matter how much their people suffer. The world is changing, and if they succeed, it is sure to become a far more dangerous place.

## CHAPTER 1

# An Unexpected Turn of Events

The morning sun reflected off a two-story Victorian-style home with cobalt blue siding and white shutters located at 3411 Arlington in Staten Island, New York. A black ornamental iron fence bordered the sidewalk with short, well-trimmed hedges running on each side of the walk leading to the front porch. A tall pin oak with sprawling branches provided shade for the yard. The house was coming to life as Louise Hagen, a kindhearted, thin, silver-haired widow who handled most of the house chores for the Morelands over the past two years, was in the kitchen making breakfast. A live-in maid of sorts, she almost always wore an apron with a design of yellow flowers when cooking, keeping mitten potholders in roomy, waist-high front pockets.

Linda Moreland was getting ready for work, and she'd set out a striped, short-sleeved pullover shirt and tan pants for her only child, a five-year-old boy named Allan, to wear to preschool. Allan had been home from the hospital only a few days after undergoing treatment for a liver disorder that impaired his growth, robbed him of energy, and left his hair sparse and stubby.

Shaking him gently to wake him up, she kissed the child on the cheek as he began to stir, and she stroked the short, bristly hair, saying, "C'mon, lazybones, time to get ready for school."

"OK, lazybones," he responded with boyish enthusiasm, sitting up in the bed to wave goodbye to her with a bright smile on his face.

Linda came down a flight of stairs to an L-shaped entry hall, gazing into a large mirror that gave a view of the oversized doorway to the living room that contained French provincial furniture. She left a black attaché case on the floor and placed her purse on the shelf below the mirror that supported an assortment of ceramic birds. The most prominent pieces were a cardinal with a bold crown, holding its head tilted to look at the viewer, a nesting robin feeding its babies held center, and posed on the right was a colorful, proud parrot.

Glimpsing her appearance after having put much time into getting herself ready for her position as a fashion designer at a Manhattan-based firm, this vibrant and alluring slender blonde had once been a model. Dressing stylishly and businesslike for the day, she wore a white ruffled blouse with a soft peach bow and slim-fitting black skirt. She approached her job with vigor, and had a flare for arranging and color-coordinating the gowns she worked with, giving a touch that often enhanced a creation. Her vivacious personality and aspiring self-confidence had helped her gain a key position with Mona Shelton, a leading designer.

Mrs. Shelton, an affluent woman who took pleasure in the pageantry and fanfare of fashions, was particular about the way she wanted her exhibitions run. There had come a time when Mona had her hands full entertaining prospective buyers, and Linda had stepped up to consult clients by exhibiting a few alternative alterations that stirred their interests. Linda showed an eye for accentuating the looks of extravagant gowns that helped close sales. She had an appealing knack for communicating with people that caught Mona's attention, and a bond had been forged. Linda had later presented a portfolio of sketches and photos of herself wearing her own homespun business outfits that had impressed the fashion mogul. Mona had gone on to introduce a new line under the designer name "Adrianna," and had arranged for Linda to manage it for her. While Mona paraded outrageously excessive gowns, Linda presented a lucrative line of conservative but fashionable dresswear for the career-minded workingwoman.

Hearing the tapping of a car horn, Linda knew the taxi she'd called for was waiting. She grabbed her purse and the attaché case before going down the hall to wish Louise a good day and rushing out. The breakfast Louise had made for her would remain untouched, but that was the routine, and Louise would see to it that Allan was ready in time to catch his ride to school.

Settling in the backseat of the cab, contemplating the activities she'd planned for a 3 p.m. fashion show at the Waldorf Astoria in midtown Manhattan, Linda had a lot on her mind. The taxi dropped Linda off at the dress shop where she pointed out updates the girls making alterations would need to know, and noted changes in the presentation to open the modeling exhibition. She had a luncheon engagement at noon to meet Mona Shelton at Tony's, an Italian restaurant two blocks from the Waldorf Astoria. Especially known for its pasta dishes, the place had rich décor and a warm, welcoming atmosphere. Photographs of famous Italians in the entertainment field spanned the walls, and she'd occasionally recognize an actor or athlete dining there, as it was a favorite meeting place for iconic figures making the rounds in the New York area.

From the restaurant's entrance, Linda spotted Mona's frosted hair at a table for two by a window. Sophisticatedly well-dressed and with slightly overdone makeup, Mona projected a wealthy image, and she had a beaming grin upon seeing Linda coming her way.

"I took the liberty of ordering you a strawberry daiquiri," said Mona. "I hope that's alright. Or would you prefer a Bloody Mary?"

"No, that's fine," replied Linda, placing her purse on the table and leaning the attaché case against the wall before sitting down.

"Just look at you," remarked Mona. "You look ravishing."

"Oh, Mona, I don't see how that's possible with how hectic this day's been with organizing this show."

"How's Allan?"

"He's very conscious about his hair because kids at school are giving him a hard time, but it's starting to grow out."

The waiter brought their drinks and took their orders, and Linda then opened the case she'd brought to show Mona photos of the dresswear she'd be promoting that afternoon. When the waiter arrived with their meals, conversation halted, and Linda whisked away the photos to make room for the dishes.

Two men sitting at the bar finishing their drinks had their backs to the restaurant's main floor. One took notice of Linda through the mirror on the back of the bar and studied her facial features. Baby-faced, blond, and stocky was Hermann Gensler, who wore a gray suit and steel-rimmed eyeglasses. His dark-haired companion, John Mehlnick, sat to his left. Mehlnick was a large man of Romanian descent with five o'clock shadow, and the only person in the place wearing sunglasses; he had the looks of a Mafia figure. The left sleeve of his dark blue pinstriped suit jacket loosely rolled up to his elbow gave clear indication he had no left arm.

Gensler stood from his barstool to pull the wrinkles out of his sport coat, using his reflection in the bar's mirror as though straightening his tie while taking a long look at Linda. He inconspicuously nudged his partner with his elbow to get his attention, and Mehlnick turned to him, placing his right elbow on the edge of the bar.

"What is it?" asked Mehlnick, his eyes on his drinking glass.

Gensler nodded to the mirror. "Take a look at the blonde sitting by the window."

One-armed Mehlnick shifted his position to look in the mirror, clenching his glass to raise it to his lips and consume a mouthful of bourbon and crushed ice, uttering, "Very sexy."

"Take another look," said Gensler, "and this time, instead of scoping out the legs, see if you notice anything familiar about her face."

Instead of using the mirror, Mehlnick nonchalantly turned his swivel bar seat around to focus on Linda, and lifting his glass to his lips, his hand froze. After recognizing her, he placed his drink on the bar before raising his sunglasses to make sure of what he was seeing.

Gensler spoke beneath his breath. "Don't stare, you idiot."

Mehlnick turned to face the bar and lifted his sunglasses again to look at her in the mirror. Gripping his drinking glass firmly to pull it in front of him, he spoke quietly, saying, "Except for the woman seated with her, she may be here alone."

"It appears that way, but agents could be shadowing her. Get the car and wait for me outside."

Mehlnick read in his partner's expression that he was serious about formulating a daring plan, and keeping his drinking glass close to his lips, he said, "You're not seriously thinking about trying something in broad daylight?"

"Shut up and do as I say. Get the car and watch for me out front."

Mehlnick got up and downed the remains of his drink, his eyes scanning the room. "What if the heat gets turned up?"

Gensler responded insistently, "I'm not going to make a move unless I'm sure we have a good opportunity to act."

Mehlnick went outside, and while casually walking past the restaurant's glass front, he eyed the two women through the windowpane.

Mona looked at her watch. "You'd better get going, Linda. I'll take care of the bill."

"I'll see you later at the show," said Linda. Eager to make certain preparations for the fashion event were ready on time, she picked up her purse and the attaché case before hurriedly leaving the restaurant.

When stepping outside on the walk, Linda didn't notice the man in the gray suit following close behind. Nor was she aware of the gray four-door Mercedes-Benz idling at the curb half a block away. As she started up the busy street toward the Waldorf Astoria, the automobile lurched forward and quickly caught up to the man tailing her on foot who gave the driver a hand signal.

Linda had a thousand things on her mind when the Mercedes sped up to the upcoming corner to cut in front of her at the crosswalk. The driver jammed on the brakes, causing the front end of the car to sink before leveling off. Standing near the car's back door, she avoided stepping off the curb, tilting her head to

glimpse the driver of the car wearing sunglasses. The one-armed driver placed the gearshift in park, stretched to lean between the bucket seats to pull the handle on the rear passenger door with his right hand, and threw it open. He looked over the rim of his drooping sunglasses at her. “Excuse me. Could you give me directions to the Chrysler Building?”

Linda hadn’t replied, and as a forceful hand caught her by the neck bringing her downward, a hard shove drove her forward into the automobile’s backseat. The person pushing landed on her backside, and his weight prompted her to raise her legs. At the same time the automobile accelerated, weaving while picking up speed with the door swinging shut.

Overcome with panic, and struggling fiercely to get out from beneath him as they swayed with the car’s movement, she twisted and strained to push free of his hold, screaming, “Let me go!” Fighting desperately, she released her purse and the attaché case to claw at his face, tearing off his eyeglasses. He stayed on her, trying to hold her down and control her fast-moving hands to protect his face.

Fear escalated, and unable to shake loose her abductor, she whimpered at the terror of knowing she was losing her fight for freedom. She kept up the struggle to push him off and kept clawing at him until her fingernails dug into the left side of his face, peeling flesh away.

He struck at her brutally with his clenched fist, his knuckles clipping her brow, but the next punch slammed into her cheekbone, knocking her out cold. She fell limp, and he shoved her body behind him to the back of the seat so he could scoot forward and take an upright position.

“The bitch damn-near took my eye out,” came through his gritted teeth, and straightening up, he reached over the back of the front seat, rapping the rearview mirror with his knuckles until he could view his reflection. Examining the scratches she’d given him, he then reached for a handkerchief from his coat pocket. Dabbing the bloody cuts in the side of his face with the handkerchief, he shouted, “Slow down before you get us pulled over for something as stupid as speeding!”

“OK, just keep that wildcat off me,” Mehlnick snapped back, and stopping at a red light, he rummaged through the glove compartment to present a plastic tie strap to Gensler. “Here, bind her wrists with this before she comes to.”

After securing her wrists, Gensler looked inside the attaché case to view its contents. Seeing photos of sashaying models, he commented, “I thought I’d find government documents in this briefcase, but all that’s here are photos of females.” Gensler spread the pictures out on the front seat for Mehlnick to see. “What do you make of this?”

Mehlnick took his eye off the road to give the pictures a quick glance. “I don’t know, but let’s get her back to base and let the others sort it out.”

They drove to an abandoned six-story apartment building, and when Linda came to, she first noticed a stench in the air coming from a nearby industrial plant. Trying to move, she discovered straps pinning her down to a hospital bed, and she squinted as she felt a puffy tenderness under her left eye. Taking on a worrisome expression as she recalled the punch she received in the car, she wondered about the intentions of these men who preyed upon her. She attempted to jerk her shoulders free again, but the straps wouldn’t budge.

Her mind racing with fear, a helpless feeling of vulnerability swept over her as she surveyed her surroundings. A ragged shade hung crooked in the room’s only window, flaking flowered wallpaper covered the walls, and the ceiling near the outside wall had discolored as a result of a leak in the roof. The room was nearly empty except for the narrow bed she lay on and a broad desk paired with a lamp that had a flexible, spiraling neck aimed upwards in the company of a wooden chair. The desk drawers were facing her, and she saw her purse and the attaché case she’d carried lying on the desktop with photos spread of the models she’d shown to Mona earlier.

She thought they must’ve targeted her for a purpose, and believed it had something to do with Mona, since she had been in her company just before the abduction. Seen with a wealthy socialite, she considered they’d kidnapped her for monetary

gain, but if that was so, then they should've gone after Mona. Concluding something else must've drawn them to her, and speculating on what that something else was, drove her to near panic, but the way they had her tightly strapped down made it almost impossible to get free.

Taking a deep breath, she got a whiff of smoke from a smoldering cigarette left in an ashtray on the desk, and then heard the distinct ringing of her cell phone from inside her purse. Having no idea where she was, she saw the phone as her only contact with the outside world and immediately drove her shoulders against the straps to loosen them, but the fasteners wouldn't budge. She realized the importance of reaching the phone: the authorities could find her location by picking up the signal it transmitted, utilizing the triangulation of cell phone towers. She tugged desperately against the straps holding her down once again to gain her freedom, but her efforts were getting her nowhere.

After a few seconds, the phone stopped ringing, and she heard voices outside the room. The echo of a door closing and footsteps coming nearer gave way to the thought she had little chance of escape. The room's door opened, and a thin, dark-haired woman with high cheekbones made her entrance, giving Linda a long, calculating look as she closed the door behind her.

"Ah, I'm glad to see you've come to." Her husky voice carried a German accent that mimicked Marlene Dietrich, and Linda gave no reply.

The woman's cold demeanor did nothing to make Linda feel comfortable, and her smile was little more than a sinister grin that created dimples in her lean face. The woman went to Linda's purse to find the cell phone. She removed its batteries and commented, "You and I have some important issues to discuss, and I'd prefer no interruptions."

Leaning against the edge of the desk, she picked up the lit cigarette, and after taking a deep drag crushed the cigarette out in the ashtray. She then spoke with a reassuring tone as smoke expelled with her spoken words. "My name is Adele, and I don't want your stay here to be any longer than necessary."

Linda finally said, “What do you people want? Why are you holding me here?”

“I’m glad you asked, as conversation is so much better when there are two participating. We require information on the Triad MX-11 project.”

“Triad—MX-11. I don’t understand. What is that?”

“Fraulein Werner, as long as you tell us what we need to know, you have nothing to fear. Give us the information we need and you can simply walk right out that door.”

“But my name isn’t Werner, and if you look in my pocket-book you’ll find proof of who I am.”

An ugly, intimidating smirk grew on the woman’s face. “You’re not seriously expecting us to accept the identification you’re carrying.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Linda insisted excitedly, as her concerns heightened for the outcome of the encounter. “You’ve got to believe me. My name is Linda Moreland.”

“Linda Moreland?”

“Yes!”

“And you’ve never heard of the Triad MX-11—the Triad Satellite?”

“I don’t know what it is you’re talking about.”

The woman shook her head, giving Linda a pitiless look of disdain. “You’re only going to make it hard on yourself playing this silly game.”

Opening the wide top desk drawer, the woman revealed surgical instruments displayed on a white sheet, and Linda’s eyes enlarged with a look of terror.

“I have the afternoon free and we have ways of making you talk.”

Linda began screaming, “Help me! Somebody help me!”

“If it makes you feel any better to shout, go ahead and scream your lungs out. No one can hear you.”

“Someone, please help!”

“Have it your own way,” she said, acting sure of herself as she removed a folded white cloth from the drawer.

“Listen to me,” Linda pleaded, “you’re making a mistake. I’m not the person you think I am.”

Looking at Linda disappointedly, she jammed the cloth in her mouth and then took a wide roll of gray duct tape from the drawer as though getting ready to place a strip over her mouth. Pausing, she removed the cloth and said, “I’ll give you one last chance to talk.”

Linda swallowed to clear her throat, and spoke calmly but insistently. “My name isn’t Werner, and I don’t know how to convince you otherwise, but I’m not the person you think me to be.”

The woman responded with a straight face, quickly jamming the cloth inside Linda’s mouth before ripping free a piece of duct tape and strapping it across her mouth. From deep in the desk drawer, she removed a pair of rubber gloves and put them on, and picked up a small bottle containing a pale green liquid to remove its cap.

“I was hoping to avoid using the serum because the process takes hours, but we’re prepared to do whatever’s necessary.”

Linda watched wide-eyed as the woman moistened a cotton swab with alcohol and wiped her forearm at the bend in the elbow where she detected a blood vein. Taking hold of a syringe and biting down on the needle’s cap to pull it off and expose the needle’s stem, she ran it through the rubber skin covering the bottle’s top. Careful about the minute dosage drawn, she withdrew the needle from the bottle while commenting with the cap still held at one side of her mouth, “You may have witnessed a similar solution used to extract information from others. Now you’ll discover firsthand the affects of psychoactive medication in a potent form of sodium amobarbital.”

Tensing up, Linda’s eyes widened when focusing on the syringe held by the woman’s index and middle fingers with the needle upended, tapping it with a fingernail to get a bubble to the surface. She squeezed the end of the syringe with her thumb, and the pressure applied caused a short stream of the liquid to squirt.

“Now hold still,” the woman said, and as the needle came into contact with Linda’s arm, her eyes bulged. She cringed as the needle punctured her skin and the injection began. The woman checked Linda’s pulse before leaning her backside against the desk, casually lighting another cigarette and exhaling a trail of smoke. “You should be feeling something soon.”

The woman’s voice suddenly deadened as a strange feeling rushed over Linda, and she tried fighting the drug to keep her senses, but it was useless. The drug’s effects intensified while a dizzying sensation overtook her and blurred her vision. A blot of red appeared on the ceiling that expanded until it was running down the walls. Squinting and blinking, she shook her head while rigidly squirming. The red faded, but the walls began to swell in waves, and for a moment she saw the woman as a silhouette figure.

Overcome by hot and cold flashes until nauseated, Linda now saw the woman as a distorted figure checking her eyes with a penlight. The drug’s influence accelerated as illusions took on new forms of imagery, envisioning the projected light as a blazing sun. Checkerboards of various sizes appeared in her field of vision, shifting as they rotated clockwise, turning with ever increasing speed, and replaced with more of the same in succession. Caught up in this sequence, her mind couldn’t keep up with the drug’s mind-bending effects, and she fought to keep conscious as long as she could, but soon she lost all touch with reality.

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