COINCIDENCES

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Chapter 1

Landing in Brazil

The airplane landing in São Paulo was uneventful. Elsa Hermann, a prominent academic physician within the Texas Medical Center, was asked to be a Visiting Professor at Albert Einstein Hospital. The duties of a Visiting Professor involved giving a lecture and making rounds with physicians-in-training. The invitation was initiated by her very wealthy and influential patient, Franz Richter. This trip was not unusual. In the leadership of many prominent medical organizations, Dr. Hermann had participated in international medical meetings and had treated many patients from around the world. As a result of clinical trials, these medical meetings presented ground-breaking therapeutic advances that saved lives – including the life of Franz Richter. Franz Richter was a Brazilian captain of industry. Like many, his German parents had emigrated to Brazil shortly after World War II. Focused on his care and respecting his personal privacy, Elsa had never probed beyond what Franz had shared in his background. All Elsa knew was that Franz and Marlena were childless.

Elsa took her responsibilities as an academic physician very seriously. Clinical research, that improved survival and the patient's quality of life, was the foundation of the many responsibilities of being an academic physician. Without question, all academic physicians were expected to be outstanding clinicians and compassionate doctors. Teaching and providing a role model for the next generation of physicians was a critical duty for the academic physician. Like this trip to São Paulo, sharing research results, clinical insights, and developing outside collegial relationships were essential to the institutional mission.

Disembarking from the plane with her overhead luggage, Elsa saw a tall, handsome man in a business suit holding a sign with her name at the gate. Elsa was concerned and surprised as it was nearly impossible for anyone other than ticketed passengers to be at the gate. Catching her eyes focused on the sign, Elsa heard her name in the form of a question, "Dr. Hermann? I'm Mr. Richter's business associate, Kurt." Unlike most Brazilians, Kurt was blonde, blue-

eyed and had a slight German accent. About six-foot three-inches with steel posture and strong musculature, Kurt quickly dispatched the next question, “May I take your luggage? The driver is waiting for us.” By the look of his suit and demeanor, it was clear that Kurt was reasonably high up on the organizational chart, and that Franz Richter did not send a flunky to meet Elsa at the airport. Kurt flashed a smile at the customs official in the VIP queue, who rapidly stamped Elsa’s passport, and they headed off.

Feeling safer in a very unsafe city, Elsa was grateful that she did not have to make her way alone with an unknown taxi driver to the hotel. The car, a bullet-proof Rolls Royce, was waiting by the airport exit. Renowned for its violence, all of Elsa’s colleagues in São Paolo had bullet-proof cars and she was warned never to open a car window. Even though it was a Rolls Royce, the car was a nondescript black and the windows were darkly tinted so that its passengers would not be easily identified. Kurt opened the heavy door for Elsa and the driver put her luggage in the trunk. Once settled in the soft tan leather seat of the Rolls, Kurt said, “Mr. Richter has reserved your hotel room at the Palácio Tangará, which is one of his holdings. Please let me know if your room is not adequate. Here is my card should you need anything at any time. The hotel management is also aware that you are Mr. Richter’s special guest; they are instructed to provide you with anything you might need.” Putting the card in the zippered pouch of her professional espresso brown leather tote bag, Elsa simply said, “Thank you” with business formality.

The hotel was located only minutes from the airport. Unlike the noisy, crowded city bustle of São Paolo, Kurt noted that the hotel was surrounded by the famous Burle Marx Park. Opening the car door and walking in with Elsa to assure her safety, Kurt fluently spoke Portuguese to the manager who was awaiting their arrival. Living in Houston, Elsa was fluent in Spanish but she longed to learn the more lyrical Portuguese – even if it wasn’t as functional worldwide. Kurt then gave Elsa her instructions, “Mr. Rodrigues will now show you to your room.” Handing her his card, Elsa noted that Mr. Rodrigues’ last name was spelled with an ”s” and not a “z” as in Spanish. Kurt then reminded Elsa that he would pick her up in the lobby in four hours to have dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Richter at their home. The itinerary, which included the dress

requirements for the events, had previously been emailed to Elsa. Wishing to remain very formal, Elsa once again said, “Thank you” as Kurt nodded his head and walked to the Rolls with military precision.

Following Mr. Rodrigues to her hotel room, in impeccable English, he reminded Elsa to avail herself of the spa, fitness center and beauty salon. Although she had just finished a busy clinic, slept little and had been traveling all day, Elsa did not think she looked that worn. Elsa was escorted to her suite, which was nearly as large as her home in Houston. A baby grand piano was in the living area with lush couches and suede chairs. There was a bar with Waterford crystal glasses nearby; never drinking alcohol, Elsa was glad to see bottled water, juices and soda in the refrigerator. A bountiful exotic fruit basket sat on the table. Mr. Rodrigues walked in and opened the 10-foot French doors to the room’s balcony, and then carefully placed her luggage on the footboard bed bench. Like the Windsor Court Hotel in New Orleans, Mr. Rodrigues showed Elsa that the television was tucked into a stately wooden box at the end of the bed frame. For her convenience, multiple electric converters and cords were also provided. Elsa looked forward to resting this evening on the luxurious mattress covered by embroidered and flawlessly ironed bedroom linens. The marble bathroom had an array of soaps and body lotions to provide a private spa experience.

A sophisticated international traveler, Elsa knew that there were a wide-range of cultural norms. Always having money in her pocket, Elsa pulled out the $200 U.S. dollars in $20 bills which seemed paltry for Mr. Rodrigues’ level of clientele. Not knowing Mr. Rodrigues’ circumstances, she said, “I am not sure how to express my gratitude for your thoughtfulness…” Stopping Elsa in mid-sentence, Mr. Rodrigues gently shook his hands with open fingers, indicating that a gratuity wasn’t necessary. At that moment, Elsa understood that the best way to thank him was to discreetly mention to Kurt the outstanding service provided by Mr. Rodrigues upon her arrival.

Not wanting to be late for dinner that evening with Mr. Richter, Elsa unpacked and prepared her clothes for the evening’s event. A seasoned traveler Elsa always packed sophisticated clothes that would not wrinkle. Having personal shoppers within Tootsies,

Esther Wolf, and Nieman's, Elsa indulged in exquisite designer clothes. At five-foot seven-inches Elsa had big brilliantly blue eyes, and natural light blond hair that was almost platinum in color; her hair was cut in a sophisticated bob just below her chin. A perfect four dress size, the personal shoppers considered Elsa to be their mannequin. With her excellent posture and reserved elegance, Elsa's personal shoppers loved to "exhibit" their clothes at the many events she attended in Houston and around the globe. The rigors of college, medical school, residency, and a training fellowship left no time for Elsa to find a husband. Now she was very busy climbing the academic physician career ladder, using much of her vacation time to write manuscripts for peer-reviewed medical journals and medical textbook chapters. Dealing with horribly sick patients, death and dying, Elsa often listened to morose music and movie soundtracks like those composed by Thomas Bergersen and Nick Phoenix who founded Two Steps from Hell. While writing, Elsa often had Adagio for Strings, and the theme music from Schindler's List and Succession as background music. Taking a few extra vacation days after an international medical meeting provided her much needed rest and relaxation. Having tested out of a year of high school and college, Elsa was younger than most of her peers. At thirty-four years old, she had given up on getting married and having children. With all her work, Elsa was content at this point in her life to attend premier Houston events in her stunning clothes with one or another divorced attorney which friends insisted would be a "good match".

Elsa's mind drifted to her parents, who would have loved this trip. Long before IVF, Elsa became their mid-life miracle. As the only child of affluent parents in Detroit, Elsa had her tenth birthday party at a supper club in Windsor, Ontario. It had been the first time she was allowed to wear pantyhose and small heels. Elsa had traveled the world with her parents. Following European tradition, her industrialist father liked to stay in the best hotels and they always dressed for dinner. Realizing that she was now an orphan with no other family, Elsa missed her parents who died three years ago. They had always been so proud of her academic achievements. Fiercely patriotic Americans, she knew very little about them except that they had both been born in Germany. They never spoke of their childhood, or Elsa's grandparents, or of any

other family either in the U.S. or in Germany. Unlike most of her friends at school, she was truly an only child. Regretting that she did not press her mother and father for information about their immigration to the United States, Elsa always promised herself that she would explore her ancestry and genetics through a website. In some ways, her immigrant German parents who escaped Communism were not much different than Mr. and Mrs. Richter who escaped the destruction and deprivation of post WWII Germany. Not wishing to alienate either her parents or the Richters, Elsa never asked about their experiences in Nazi Germany.

Seeking perfection in all that she did, Elsa focused on details. Meeting Mr. and Mrs. Richter's elite friends this evening, Elsa selected a conservative light celery-colored long-sleeve dress from Esther Wolf, that was trimmed in satin on the neckline, cuffs, and hemline. The straight cut skirt was contoured enough to show her figure, but it allowed her to enter and exit the car without being indiscrete. A satin belt showed her small waist, which was always hidden underneath her lab coat at work. Small rhinestones adorned the buttons at the satin cuffs and belt buckle. Elsa pulled out her matching shoes and purse. Emptying her tote, Elsa plugged in her laptop and phone. Placing her thin wallet with credit cards, passport and breath mints in her evening purse, Elsa then remembered to take the business cards of Kurt and Mr. Rodrigues and entered them into her phone. Finally, she discovered Kurt's identity, as defined by where he stood in the organizational pecking-order, and his last name so she could properly address him. Gazing at his thick crème-colored business card, Elsa realized that Kurt von Reibnitz was a Senior Vice-President of Legal Affairs. Although this very high level of attention was flattering, Elsa could not help but think that Mr. Richter had another agenda. Did he want to sponsor an international medical symposium? Was Mr. Richter's goal to become a Michael Milken?

Once Elsa had carefully set out her clothes, she was anxious to shower and meticulously prepare for the evening. She hated to rush. Elsa wanted to feel human again and savor the events of the trip. The hot shower and luxuriously scented bath gels rejuvenated Elsa. Her short blond hair, that had been freshly cut before the trip, fell into a stylish "do" after blow-drying. After precisely applying

her make-up, Elsa slipped into her chosen dress and heels. Although warned not to bring her best jewelry to Brazil, she did so anyway knowing that Brazilian women routinely wore haute couture and fine jewelry. As a last touch for luck, Elsa wore the diamond earrings and bracelet that her parents had given her upon medical school graduation. Perfectly put together and twenty minutes ahead of schedule, Elsa leisurely walked down to the lobby.

As the elevator doors opened, Elsa was shocked to see Kurt again. He looked stunned by Elsa's transformation. Apparently, this was to be a serious dinner as Kurt had changed into a slim fit tuxedo. Elsa realized that Kurt resembled Nick Bateman with lighter blonde hair. He was a very handsome man who obviously faithfully worked out. Given his high-ranking position within Mr. Richter's business empire, Elsa assumed that Kurt was in his thirties, but she couldn't be sure of his age. Suddenly, Elsa felt as if she might be old enough to be Kurt's big sister. Oh, well. Elsa was here on business and to see colleagues, and she was taught to always be gracious.

As she approached, Kurt said, "I see you were also raised not to be late. Mr. Richter very much likes punctuality." Elsa smiled and was escorted to the Rolls. As a gentleman, Kurt again opened and closed the door of the Rolls for Elsa. Although he had allowed sufficient time, Kurt hoped that they would not be caught in traffic. Silence fell as they left the hotel compound. Not wishing to be thought of as probative or chatty, Elsa felt uncomfortable initiating a conversation. Finally, Kurt said something. "Mr. Richter lives in Jardim Europa, which will be about twenty minutes from here. I believe you previously received the guest list." Expressing her thanks to Mr. Richter for his thorough preparations, Elsa said the itinerary and guest list greatly assisted her in planning for the visit. A cocktail hour was scheduled prior to dinner, allowing Mr. Richter to personally introduce Elsa to each of his guests. Since the guest list had been forwarded to her, Elsa had done the expected homework of finding information on each of the guests and their spouses. Although Elsa had previously met dignitaries and attended formal events, this trip was different. There was definitely another agenda. And then there was Kurt von Reibnitz. "Ah, traffic has cleared – Mr. Richter's compound is just ahead."

Chapter 2

Cocktails and Dinner in São Paolo

Attached to the 16-foot high and 2-foot thick white stuccoed cement wall around the Richter compound, the thick steel security gate opened as the Rolls approached and closed rapidly behind the car. Unlike many ornamental gates, this solid gate reminded Elsa of the steel doors required for a radiation therapy vault. Although inconspicuous, it was clear that cameras were everywhere. Uniformed men in black clothing with silent Dobermans on leashes walked the grounds.

Many luxury automobiles were already there. Worried that she misread the itinerary Elsa asked, "Are we late?" Appreciating Elsa's courteous concern, Kurt gave a small smile; "No, Mr. Richter wanted his guests to arrive first to facilitate introductions." Soft landscape lights lined the driveway as they approached the house, although Elsa could also detect large lights in the trees for security. The softly lit house that loomed ahead reminded Elsa of the mansions in River Oaks and along Memorial Drive in Houston that belonged to oil barons, benefactors and consulates. Not to be conspicuous, the four-story home architecture was California modernistic with white stucco covering the thick cement walls. The roof was metal for fire safety and to make home invasion more difficult. Most assuredly, all windows were bullet-proof.

Although Elsa had seen Mr. Richter through a difficult time, this reception was overwhelming. Despite Mr. Richter now being free of disease five years out from his diagnosis and treatment, there was always a concern that his disease would return, a second malignancy would occur, or that he would develop treatment-related side effects. The rationale for continued long-term follow-up was fully discussed with Richter three months ago during his routine follow-up visit. Elsa always told her patients, "Remember, at each stage of your treatment, I get paid to worry for you. I'll always be honest with you. I will tell you what I know and if I don't know something. I do not want you to waste your energy on worrying." Richter had appreciated her kind forthrightness.

Sensing Elsa's discomfort, Kurt reassured her, "Mr. Richter is simply having his closest friends join him to celebrate this

milestone." By this time, the Rolls had stopped to let them out. The driver opened her door, and Kurt delivered Elsa to Mr. and Mrs. Richter who were waiting for her to cross the immense threshold into the house. The entry door had deceptive wood covering thick steel. The interior design was more traditional than the exterior style belied. Although the white stucco exterior made the house rather non-descript in this neighborhood, the interior design was intended to mute the bright Brazilian sun and pay homage to their European heritage. The cool green marble flooring of the foyer was large enough to host a receiving line. Much like the Von Trapp mansion in the movie, "The Sound of Music", two curved staircases connected the foyer to the second floor. To the right was a reception room with wide-plank wooden floors covered by huge Persian rugs, love seats, and straight back chairs upholstered in rich colored brocades and velvet. To the left was the dining room with an ornate mahogany table set for Mr. Richter's 30 guests. Tuxedo-clad butlers with white gloves discretely served cocktails and wine to the guests before dinner.

Almost as if they were celebrating a significant wedding anniversary, the Richters looked happy and lovely. Adhering to a rigorous exercise schedule, they both were very fit and appeared 10 years younger than their late-60's age group. Both were blond and blue-eyed, although some gray was noticeable in Mr. Richter's short sideburns and temples. Consistent with the occasion, Mr. Richter wore a splendid tuxedo, and Mrs. Richter wore a smart slim black sheath adorned with a sophisticated diamond broach, bracelet and earrings. They appeared stunning.

Stepping inside, Elsa was scooped up by her hosts who immediately began to introduce her to their glittering friends. With German wafting in the background, Elsa now wished that she had been more attentive to her parents and had become fluent in German. As a child, Elsa learned German recipes, and was raised with the culture of being successful, scrupulously on time, and cleanly. Not knowing if it was a residual from World War II, her parents rarely spoke German in the home and they did not attempt to teach German to Elsa. Unlike Milwaukee and the plains states that had enclaves of Germans, the immigrant populations in Detroit were largely Polish, French, Scots, and Slavs. Most of the parents and grandparents left their countries in the late 1880's to the early

1900's due to oppression and a lack of opportunity. They were happy to be Americans and put their unhappy past lives behind them. Other than recipes and a few family customs, many second- and third-generation Americans knew little to nothing about their heritage. Especially with inter-marriage among the cultural groups, English became the common denominator and other languages were rarely spoken. Elsa had a friend in elementary school whose paternal grandparents had emigrated from Serbia before World War I, and her maternal grandparents had emigrated from England via Canada. Her friend had a total of three uncles and four aunts; each of them married outside of the Serbian and English cultures, having relatives with Scottish, Italian, Polish, French, Spanish and Irish backgrounds.

Brazil was much different than America's melting pot as cultural groups tended to remain very insular. Given the devastating hyperinflation causing economic depression and deprivation in the Weimar Republic after World War I, many Germans emigrated to Brazil in the 1920s. After World War II, many Germans and Italians settled in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, fleeing the destruction of war, legal jeopardy and political retribution. As the spoils of war left Europe a divided continent, East Germans and other Eastern Europeans behind the Iron Curtain tried to escape post-World War II Soviet oppression. After the fall of the Berlin wall, it took decades for Eastern Europe to stabilize. Not being naïve, Elsa understood that most of these guests and/or their families had probably escaped from Nazi Germany to Brazil after World War II. Most likely, many had family remaining in Germany with the lucky ones in the Western Sectors. Following medical ethics, a patient's political background was irrelevant to Elsa and her institution; an appointment was made once a patient had a legal visa to enter the U.S. and the financial services criteria were met. Elsa was simply a physician who cared for everyone assigned to her clinic - ranging from a Texas oil wildcatter to officials from the Middle East to a Brazilian of German descent. All of them wanted the same thing – to get well and embrace life.

During the reception, a string ensemble softly played classical music in the background. The impeccably attired guests were exceedingly courteous and proper. Readily available in the nearby Amazon region and in Columbia, the women had tasteful emeralds

and other exquisite jewels set in precious metals. They all spoke flawless English. Doing her homework, Elsa made it unnecessary for the Richters to undertake the gauche task of discussing the guests' bios during their introductions. Mr. and Mrs. Richter were obviously pleased that Elsa graciously listened and chatted knowledgably with each of their guests without a faux pas. So many physicians knew nothing beyond medicine. The Richters were also thankful that Elsa had European manners and was not a brash American. Once done, Mr. Richter nodded to his butler who announced that dinner was served.

Recognizing the brands from her parents, the table was meticulously set with a heavily starched embroidered tablecloth and linen napkins, Reiner silver flatware and Nachtmann crystal. The seating arrangement was an organizational chart. Mr. and Mrs. Richter sat at each end of the table. Elsa was escorted to her chair on Mr. Richter's right, and Kurt sat to the right of Mrs. Richter. Women were flanked by men, and wives were separated from their husbands. Seated on Elsa's other side was an industrialist. On Mr. Richter's left side, located across from Elsa, was the wife of a Deutsche Bank Vice President; next to her was a prominent politician who had made his fortune from gold and rare metals dredged from the Amazon River near Manaus. European table manners were applied with cues from Mrs. Richter who directed conversations to the guest on the right or the left.

At the start, Mr. Richter offered a toast to Elsa who had provided him a second chance at life. Everyone joined in, "To Dr. Hermann" while Elsa blushed and lowered her head and eyes. Dinner conversation was sophisticated and as polished as the three silver stag table centerpieces. Much of the conversation revolved around travel with a bit of politics that centered on safety. Most had homes in Switzerland, Germany, and the Caribbean. All had private jets which were kept ready at a private airport just in case a political upheaval unexpectantly occurred in Brazil. Breaking the rules, the wife of the Deutsche Bank VP gratuitously asked Elsa if she was married, had ever been married or had children to which Elsa replied, "I have been married to medicine". Elsa knew immediately that this wife was tasked with prying into her background to confirm information from the investigators.

Vibrantly, Richter said that he was proof of Elsa's dedication to medicine.

The five-course menu was thoughtfully constructed to include Brazilian and German gastronomy. A white-gloved butler was assigned to every guest to elegantly serve each course. As the courses were presented, the plates were synchronously placed before the guests. Served on refined Meissen porcelain, the starters were Wagyu beef tartar followed by smoked Scottish salmon. The main course was poached Tambaqui from the Amazon with black truffle risotto and asparagus. Desserts included Black Forest cake followed by fruit and cheese. Each course was accompanied by a carefully selected wine, and Portuguese port was offered with the last course, fruit and cheese. "Do you not like the wine selections?" Richter asked Elsa since she had only taken sips of each to be polite. Elsa responded, "Please excuse me, but because of constantly being available for my patients, I generally don't drink any alcohol." Richter's expression was like a father pleased with his teenage daughter. "As your patient, I am glad to know that!" At the end of dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Richter simultaneously rose from their chairs, which was a signal to all of the guests to do the same. Richter at that point, bid everyone good evening indicating that Elsa had to give a lecture tomorrow. Elsa quietly thanked Mr. and Mrs. Richter for a lovely evening while they flanked her in walking to the door. More relaxed in their body language, Elsa apparently passed the test. Stepping outside, Kurt was there to collect Elsa and they were the first to leave.

Opening the door of the Rolls for Elsa, Kurt then walked around to join her in the back seat. As they began to drive away, Kurt asked, "Did you enjoy the evening?" Elsa replied in a professional tone, "Yes, very much. I am profoundly grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Richter who have been so thoughtful and generous." Kurt courteously responded, "It is they who are grateful to you for your care and the extra concern given to them during a difficult time." Lowering her head with humility, Elsa then realized that this was the first conversation she had with Kurt. Not knowing if his comment had crossed a line, Kurt said he would pick Elsa up at 7:30AM to take her to the Albert Einstein Hospital tomorrow to give her lecture. Elsa then asked, "Would it not be safe for me to go to the hospital alone?" Recognizing Kurt's high level position,

“I have never had such an esteemed security detail, and am so grateful for your care. But I do not wish to burden you by my visit, especially given your own critical work responsibilities and family.” Kurt courteously replied, “Mr. Richter said that you are my responsibility for the next few days. It is not a burden and, like you, I have been married to my work. The Richters are my family.” Looking understandingly, Elsa simply said, “Thank you for your kindness.” Staring out the window, Elsa wondered how Kurt knew what she had said at dinner even though he sat at the other end of the long dinner table.

The drive back to the hotel seemed very quick. Understanding protocol, which was rooted in safety, Elsa waited until Kurt opened the car door, and he walked her to the elevators. Elsa was grateful that Kurt was tasked to watch over her as São Paolo was notoriously unsafe. With a less formal tone, Kurt bid Elsa good night and said that he would see her in the morning. “Good night, Mr. von Reibnitz. Thank you once again.” Waiting for her to enter the elevator, he nodded and gave a slight smile.

The room had been serviced and was as fresh as when Elsa arrived. While Elsa processed the evening, she took a moment to thank her Mother and Father in heaven for teaching her social graces. She then tried to focus on getting ready for her lecture the next day. The first priority was to get up early enough to run through her lecture one last time, have the USB port and her backup laptop ready – Check. Her phones and laptop were plugged in – Check. Elsa put her passport, wallet and itinerary in the tote bag - Check. She put her beloved diamond earrings and bracelet in a safe tote bag pocket - Check. For efficiency, Elsa always set out her clothes and accessories at night. Tomorrow, Elsa planned to wear a knit navy St. John suit that she loved. The suit was professional yet comfortable with its pleated skirt, gold and white ribbon sailor trim and gold buttons. Not knowing how long she would be on her feet, Elsa brought her comfortable navy Ferragamo Vara pumps. A simple gold herringbone chain necklace, bracelet and button earrings completed her accessories.

Elsa slipped into her nightgown and finally fell asleep with all the events of the evening pleasantly swimming in her head. Deciding to worry about the hidden agenda later, Elsa focused on the contentment she felt from a lovely evening while filing away

her responsibilities tomorrow. As in her other travels, especially to the Middle East, China and Vietnam, Elsa clearly understood that she was being watched.

End of Sample