

# **Topaz Eyes**

Nancy Jardine

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## **About the Author**

An ex-primary teacher, Nancy Jardine lives in the fabulous castle country of Aberdeenshire – Scotland - with her husband who feeds her well. That's just perfect, or they'd both starve. When time permits, ancestry research is an intermittent hobby. Neglecting her large garden in favour of writing, she now grows spectacularly giant thistles. Activity weekends with her extended family are prized since they give her great fodder for new writing.

Teaching historical periods was a joy, and it heavily influences her writing. One historical novel, set in A.D 71 Celtic/Roman Britain, is now available; a sequel to it under construction. Nancy has published two ancestral mysteries and one light-hearted contemporary romance mystery. Whenever possible, Nancy includes her homeland of Scotland in her work, and many of the wonderful cities she has been fortunate to visit. Look out for those clues in her novels and detect which are places she really has visited and those she has only internet knowledge of!

A time-travel adventure has been written for pre-teens and a family saga is a work in progress. Life is now one of travel from the keyboard - in present and past time!

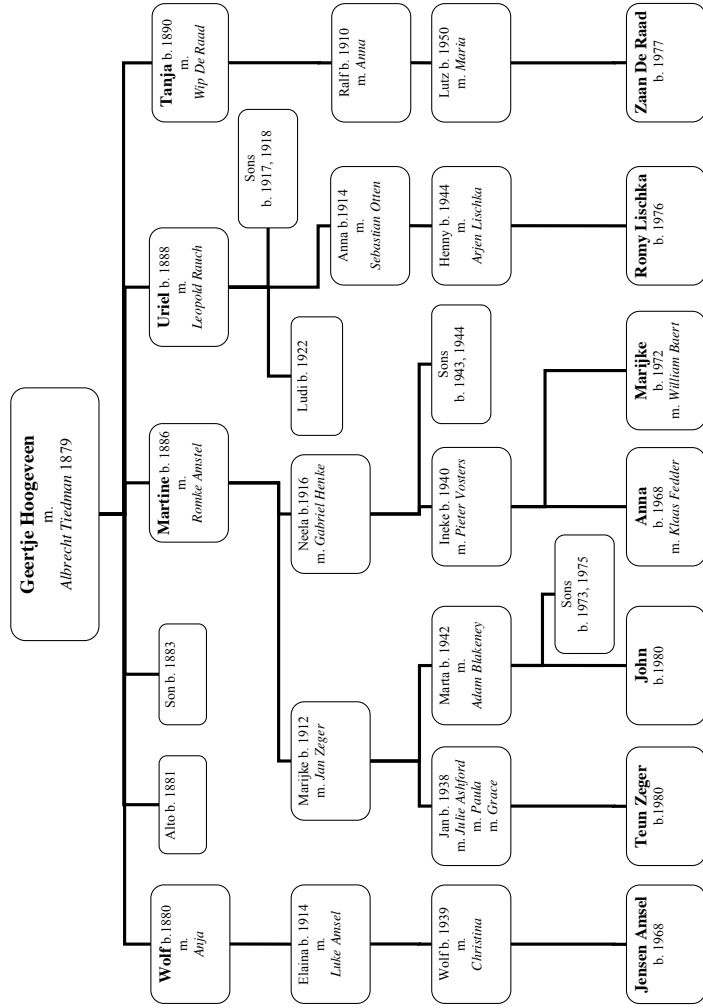
## **Acknowledgements**

Ancestry research can throw up the most amazing details – some very good, and some very naughty. Anyone reading Topaz Eyes will see I've become a devotee of sleuthing out ancestral misdeeds. I love ferreting out details about my own relatives and could not have created the fictitious descendants of Geertje Hoogeveen, for Topaz Eyes, had I not had some prior dabbling with family trees.

I dedicate this book to my paternal cousin, Sandra, and in turn to her maternal cousin, Duncan. If Duncan, a serious amateur ancestry researcher, had not started the ball rolling for my own investigations into our shared distant family tree I would not have learned so much about the black sheep lurking there. To them I give my heartfelt thanks for sparking the idea of creating my totally fabricated family tree for my mystery-Topaz Eyes.

To my editor, Christine McPherson, my thanks for making the editorial process a painless one. To Crooked Cat Publishing – I'm very pleased to be one of your authors.

# Topaz Eyes



## Chapter One

Keira Drummond had found the bizarre request to return to Heidelberg, Germany, impossible to resist. After almost six years, little had changed on the street named Steingasse as she sat looking down towards the Brückentor – the towers of the old bridge spanning the River Neckar with their distinctive helmeted tops.

Still tremendously busy, Steingasse was too narrow for the clutches of tables adorning both sides. Even in the middle of the street it was difficult to see the cobbles, the pedestrian traffic a constant procession undulating along its length, since it was one of Heidelberg's most popular tourist areas.

Sipping her coffee, she now had great reservations over accepting the strange summons and couldn't fathom the compulsion she'd felt to comply, because caution normally imprinted itself on her forehead. Now she was in Heidelberg, the circumstances surrounding the request were even more nebulous, and so shrouded in secrecy. Apprehension that there was something underhand about it sat heavy in her stomach. She'd yet to meet her host, and presently wasn't convinced she wanted to.

*"Frei, or besetzt?"*

The abrupt question, in halting German, startled a smile from her. Free, or occupied, the tall man beside her was asking? A curve to her lips lingered as he stared, his focus intent. Dull flutters skittered inside her. Something about the man tripped a little switch, yet glued her mouth. Shut. The words free, and occupied, adopted whole new hues.

Her nod was infinitesimal.

Sharing tables in places like this was the norm; in fact, the waiting staff positively encouraged it, liking their tables groaning with potential tips. She already shared with a Norwegian couple who'd been happy for her to take the third seat at the table: the only table in the vicinity with spares. It would be downright mean of her to deny this man the fourth.

*"Danke."*

His thank you nod encompassed all of them as he glided a small package and an envelope onto the tabletop, before shrugging out of his dark grey jacket.

With no conscious intention of being nosy, it was difficult for Keira to ignore someone who dominated her airspace as he shuffled around in the impossibly tiny gap. She contemplated the swallowing of his throat when his glance alighted on her, and then halted. Interest flared, a widening of his grey eyes accompanied a hint of a smile, just crinkling the corners of his mouth. Blinking a few times, she considered looking away but found she couldn't. It wasn't impossible, she just didn't want to, and it seemed neither did he.

Without breaking eye contact, he fumbled the jacket over the back of the wrought-iron chair and then squeezed in as best he could, a tighter smile coming her way.

Irritability, or perhaps frustration, draped over him as much as his business clothing, the slight pull at his brows not something she could miss. Before tugging her gaze away, she returned his smile. She doubted it was the lack of privacy on the street which bothered the guy, or he'd have moved on to a quieter place.

Alongside her, his fingers idled then tapped on the table edge as he surveyed the area, his head lifting to appreciate the architecture, much as she had done a few moments earlier. Taking stock

over his shoulder, by bowing his torso to an uncomfortable angle, he was also able to view the towers, but before Keira could catch it his envelope slipped off the table edge, dislodged by his extended fingers. Bending to grasp it at the same time as he did, she barely avoided a brow collision. Sheer male and a hint of some kind of herb, assailed her nostrils. She savoured it before they both moved; his now smiling mouth within centimetres of hers.

*“Danke.”*

Deep and throaty, the single word of thanks rippled towards her. She answered in English as she held out the envelope. “No problem. Here you go.”

“You’re English?”

“Scottish. And you’re American?”

The man laughed, his teeth bright against the tan of his skin. “I am, though how could you tell my German was non-native?”

One moment of shared amusement was enough. Sitting back in her chair, as he did, they began a casual conversation. Mischief lurked behind her answer. “Mmm. Let’s see which might offend the least. Hesitation? The wrong ‘a’ sound maybe? Or perhaps it’s just the fact almost everyone around here isn’t a German native, including most of the wait staff.”

The raising of his brows stoked a nice little fire. “How can you possibly make such a judgment?”

“I worked at a wine bar, only a couple of streets away, for the best part of eight months, right here in the heart of Heidelberg’s tourist areas. Though, it was almost six years ago.”

Something about his steel drum gaze, the twinkle perhaps, indicated she’d impressed him.

“No restaurants to wait tables on in Scotland?”

“Oh, sure. I waited on plenty of tables there, too. I attended the university here in Heidelberg, as part of my languages course and, in the nature of things, had to finance my way. But don’t get me wrong. A job like that was the best way to improve my fluency.”

“Yeah, but how did you manage if most people around were non-German?”

“Did I forget to say my boss was German?” Memories of the slave driver he’d been brought forth another smirk. “I absorbed a dictionary worth of very nice words from him, I can tell you. And not the German I learned during seminars along at the university.”

A slight pause descended, the waiter having arrived at the table. Keira studied the man when his attention moved to their server. His thick hair was mid-brown, short, yet not so cropped she’d be unable to slide her fingers through. A nice idea, but she’d no time for dalliance so why did these errant imaginings even enter her head? Still, she couldn’t help notice the polite smile he flashed at the waiter before glancing at her half-full coffee cup. His pointing finger, and questioning glance, she took to mean did she want another: her simple headshake all he needed before he placed his beer order in halting German. Economical with words he, nonetheless, seemed a generous person.

Assessing the character of strangers was a favourite pastime, and it always pleased when her judgment was spot on.

“Are you impressed? I just ordered me a beer.”

“I’m guessing your German’s limited?”

“How much can anyone learn in transit from London?” Dark laughter rippled down her nerve endings, though there was an abashment that didn’t seem to match, because the man oozed



masculinity. He flashed a small phrase book taken from his back pocket.

“My German is worse than non-existent, and doubly embarrassing since my father was of Dutch descent. Not the same as German, I know, but I believe some of their words are quite similar.”

Her laugh rang along with his, since it was so easy to join the bandwagon of his mirth. “No lessons in Dutch at your grandma’s knee?”

“Not a word. The only thing I’ve got that’s Dutch is my name.”

Keira expected him to introduce himself. Yet, opportune or not, he didn’t. His gaze lingered, though, just enough for her to wonder if it was what he expected of her. She chose to resume the topic of his Dutch ancestry. Her own association with Holland went way back, but in many ways her knowledge of the language was no better than his. “You’ve never visited Holland?”

“Nope. Never visited Holland: never visited Germany before either. Till around midday today, I’d never stepped foot in mainland Europe. The closest I’ve been across the Atlantic have been visits to London.”

“Heidelberg is beautiful, I’m sure you’ll enjoy being here.” Confidence that he would rang through her tones. It was a fabulous place to visit, especially for a first visit to Europe – the architecture and old world splendour spectacular to view.

The man’s smile faltered, his eyes momentarily clouding as he re-pocketed his phrase book. “Nice thought, but I’m not so sure I’m going to be here long enough to see the best of it.”

“Your beer, sir!” The waiter’s chirrup in English halted their conversation when he appeared at the man’s elbow.

The stranger slid his package and envelope towards her, clearing off enough space for his beer stein, since the table was so small. A long pull at the frothy drink brought a satisfied smirk to his face as he appreciated the chill of it. “I needed that.”

“Even businessmen are due time off to gallivant just a little, surely?”

A twitch at one side of the man’s mouth indicated unease with her statement. As a translator she often had to work one-to-one with people, and though in no way a psychologist, she’d gotten very good at reading expressions, especially when people couldn’t formulate the words they needed or were unsure of the meaning of something. Something puzzled the stranger.

“There’s the hell of it. I’m not here on business. You?” His personal question sounded as tentative as hers.

“No, I’m not here on business and not for tourist reasons either.” Keira’s mood dipped, the reminder of her summons spoiling what was proving to be a pleasant interlude with the stranger.

A bit of mystery hung, and hovered, as she sipped her coffee and the man glugged his beer. His thirst appeared great, though he wasn’t in the least bit apologetic about being so driven to drink. She wished his tongue wouldn’t do that nice little lip-wiping after each sip. Silent sighs did nothing to quell the temptation to lick off the beer froth herself. Hmm. She hadn’t been in any kind of relationship for months. Too long, obviously, since she eyed up this stranger with such relish.

The man’s head whipped back, a question coming at her in parts, as he again tongued off more beer froth. “If you were a tourist... with only a few hours to spare... what would you do first?”

She laughed at his intent stare. Something lurked in his gaze; most likely nothing to do with a desire to tramp the cobbled streets of Heidelberg. Any innuendo wouldn’t embarrass her, though,

since she was just as guilty of ogling. “Hmm. I guess that depends on your tastes.”

His eyes danced over the rim of his stein as he hesitated, his beer mug held aloft. “Apart from quenching my obvious dehydration, what do you recommend to see in the near vicinity of Heidelberg?”

Keira became an enthusiastic guidebook during the next while as she gave him some pointers – all within a short walk of the Old Bridge.

The American’s responses were equally animated until their easy conversation suddenly faltered. Toying with his beer glass in one hand, he reached for his envelope in the other. Concentrating on the white paper with fierce intensity, he fiddled with it as though weighing it up both in his fingers and in his mind. A tense and awkward silence permeated the air around the two of them, which was ridiculous really as the area thronged with noise and busy movements.

Abruptly, he snagged her gaze, his eyebrows a neat little frown. His words rushed out as he set down his beer before wafting the envelope. “Look. I know you don’t know me, but... if you’re not busy this evening? With friends, or some kind of appointment, or whatever...”

She couldn’t look away. Could do nothing but wait. Was this total stranger about to ask her for a date? Or translate for him? Definitely the disappointing one of the two possibilities. Except? Could this be an escape clause from the appointment she did have, and now didn’t want to attend?

His words hung in the air. Agitation of some sort held him in a tight grip. Strangely, Keira felt it appealing to witness his hesitation, maybe even vulnerability?

“See, I’ve been given this invitation right out of the blue, and I wondered if you’d like to accompany me. If you’re not busy elsewhere?”

The envelope pinged free of his fingers when a woman at the table behind him stood up, her overstuffed bag bumping his arm, but the plummeting invitation was only one casualty of the collision. In her embarrassment to apologize profusely, in what Keira guessed to be some Eastern European language, the woman grasped the falling envelope and set it awkwardly onto the table, dislodging his beer stein. Keira squirmed as a wash of pale gold liquid sloshed right over the envelope, and headed towards her lap. More apologies, and an even fierier red face, ensued as the woman extricated herself, and flurried off.

Grabbing napkins from the centre stand, Keira swabbed the soggy envelope free of beer, before she wiped the remainder of the flow off the table.

“Don’t worry about it.” The guy’s grunt barked out as he peeled a card free of the saturated wrapping.

Keira’s breath hitched when she glanced at the invitation being uncovered, her eyebrows wincing at the distinctive gilt-edged border and flowery script. This stranger had one of those invitations, too? An invitation which looked exactly like the bizarre one she’d received earlier that afternoon. ‘... *You will find it to your advantage to attend the opening of the Myer Gallery.*’ A request which should have seemed positive, yet lacked so much.

An icy shiver skittered all over her skin, and lodged deep at the base of her spine. Why would a stranger, who’d randomly sat next to her, have a similar invitation? Heidelberg was a large city. It couldn’t be good.

Coincidence? She couldn’t make herself believe it. The flutters she felt invade her now were nothing like the former desire generated by the stranger; they were of sheer, unadulterated alarm.

The invitation she'd been given, less than two hours before, had caused her a lot of disquiet when she'd received it, since it had been handed over in such a peculiar and secretive fashion. That this stranger had a similar card was so weirdly coincidental there had to be something odd going on. Perhaps this American had a sinister motive for revealing it? He could have left it in the soggy wrap. Or was he literally showing his card to lure her into a false sense of security? Her mind ran amok with many possibilities, but all of them alarmed her.

While he stared at the card, her eyes scanned, up and down. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but relief didn't come to quell her panic. Patrons still exchanged noisy talk, and a steady swarm of people trooped along the potholed cobbles, past her table as before, heading for the riverside. None of them looked furtive, yet she couldn't shake off a feeling of unease.

Why had this American not moved on to another street? Knowing the area from before, it was very likely the next street along would be less crowded. Was it also coincidental he, too, seemed on edge and agitated about something? His concentration was intense on the card as he wiped off the dregs of beer.

The feeling of threat escalated. He didn't seem like a stalker – though she'd never confronted one. Yet, the man must have followed her, and awaited the opportunity to insinuate a meeting. To gain her agreement to accompany him to the evening event. But why? There had been too many unanswered questions – by the third party organizer – even before she'd encountered this American.

His head turned away to catch the attention of the waiter. Grabbing her purse, Keira pulled out a few euros to pay for her coffee, and fumbled them beside her cup. Slipping neatly around the other couple at the table, she sped along Steingasse towards the towers of the Old Bridge, and blended in with the surge of tourists. She ignored the man's plea and shouted apology. Let him believe she'd been annoyed at being drenched with beer, but she wouldn't stay one more minute.

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Teun's entreaties made not a blind bit of difference. The woman up and ran – make that squeezed – as best one could along the heaving street. He sat down, sending a brief glance of apology to the other couple for startling them, realising his pleas had been loud. What exactly had just happened? Surely the woman hadn't been upset by a little beer? As he reflected on her haste, he knew it wasn't the beer spill that had distressed her, because she'd been smiling as she wiped away the flow.

However, something had.

They'd been getting along quite nicely till she'd taken flight. Maybe he'd been too crass in mentioning the invitation so soon in the conversation, though she hadn't looked to be the type of female who'd be shocked by his fumbling request. Too poised and too assured. Gorgeous didn't describe her. Beautiful seemed too clichéd as well. More appropriate was stunning; exactly how she'd grabbed his attention.

He still felt whacked when he envisioned her face. Eyes, just like the huge imperial topaz he'd seen on his Aunt Marta's finger years ago, had lured him. He'd never forgotten his fascination with the stone, the name having etched itself in his memory banks. The varied golden brown-twinkling facets of the ring were just like the individual hues of the woman's amazing irises, the tiny little diamonds around Aunt Marta's ring like the whites of the Scotswoman's eyes. Her straight dark brown hair matched those drugging eyes since it, too, had many tints, falling as it

did from a side parting to well past her shoulders, in a softly uneven cut at the ends. So uniformly uneven, he guessed clever styling created it.

His palms curled around his beer stein, his restless imagination replacing the cold glass with warm soft flesh. He'd wanted to toy with the unusual necklace she'd been fingering, her hand drifting to it, circling sensually around it. There'd been such a temptation to finger the little bunch of golden charms dangling below her throat, her lightly tanned skin below it seeming to beg for his touch. Nothing blunt, or harsh, about her.

He sighed before picking up his now replenished beer, the waiter having lifted the woman's unfinished coffee cup, and the money she'd tucked alongside. She'd been a bright spot in a very odd day.

Gone. Like a will o' the wisp.

Teun fingered the condensation off the side of his beer stein, his focus on it intent. His detour now seemed an unwanted interruption to his carefully planned schedule. Too many things remained unknown, and mysterious, about this invitation to Heidelberg. Fingering the card, he debated whether to collect his luggage from the hotel, which had been booked for him, and disappear as well.

Like the elusive siren he'd just encountered.

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A new wave of nerves assailed Keira as she stood in a short queue. The venue was in a prestigious part of the old city, the Altstadt, where art studios and galleries dotted themselves around.

After fleeing the American, she'd flashed past the gallery during the late afternoon, needing to check it out. She wasn't entirely sure why, but there had been an urgency to know where it was located, and how to escape it quickly. Then the interior had been almost empty, but now? It burst at the seams, even though she was bang on time.

The queue moved up, vanishing quickly inside, till her turn. Tendering her invitation to the doorman, she greeted him as she scanned around. "*Guten Abend.*"

"Good evening, Miss Drummond," he replied in faultless English. Whipping out his phone, he fingered a brief text. "Herr Amsel will be along shortly to speak to you. Please remain in this front part of the foyer."

She nervously licked off some of her lip gloss. How the hell could the doorman possibly know her name, since the invitation card she'd just handed him bore no name on it? Her confusion must have been worn like a banner, though, because the door attendant made a hasty explanation.

"You haven't noticed the embossed motif on the bottom right here?"

She hadn't, but when she looked closely and fingered the area, she could see what he referred to.

"There are only three guests tonight who have had their invitation stamped with Herr Amsel's special insignia... and only one of them a young woman. That's how I know your name, Miss Drummond."

Accepting his simple explanation, she moved away from the door to allow the next guests to enter. Knowing she was one of three special people didn't make her feel any less vulnerable when she glanced at the surrounding faces. A new fish in a large bowl of established guppies couldn't possibly feel any more out of place. She wondered if the phrasing on the invitations of

all the animated guests around her, was just as odd as her own, but then immediately discarded the thought. No-one close by looked insecure as they chatted in little clusters, and pointed, and noisily commented on the displays. There had to be a couple of hundred people crammed into the gallery.

Her host couldn't possibly have given all of these guests the same enticement he'd given her. She'd not only been invited to attend the event, all of her expenses to Heidelberg had been paid. Did it mean the other two special guests had had similar treatment? She wondered if the two special males felt they were in a similar weak position as she did; felt as hesitant about their decision to attend.

Not so for the crowd, though, in her near proximity. All the smiling and nodding, here and there, indicated nothing but pleasure.

Mulling over her situation made her fret even more. If she moved even a few steps away she'd be eddied in the shoal. Yet, cowardice wasn't a familiar trait. Her profession demanded meeting new people. Her inner sister berated her for being such a wimp, urged her to get a grip.

Reaching out, she plucked a champagne flute from the tray of a passing waitress, for liquid courage, before she peered at the intricate detail on a piece of etched glass. Way beyond her disposable funds, nonetheless, it was a work of art she could appreciate. A few sips of champagne drowned some of her disquiet, as she determined she'd make the best of what was the strangest event to happen to her in ages. Maybe even ever.

The door attendant's voice intruded. "Miss Drummond? Herr Amsel won't be available for a while, but I've another of his three special guests with me now. I'll leave you to get to know Meneer De Raad."

Keira looked up at him. Very tall was her immediate impression. Very slim in the way people of Dutch descent often are: not skinny by any manner of means, just a very long drink. An appetizing one if it were the height of summer, since cool elegance radiated from him; though all that Germanic blondness might be chilly in winter time. Her observations grounded her a little more.

"Good evening."

His voice had lightness to it she associated with people very familiar with the meeting and greeting process; assured, confident... and just as assessing as she was. Whiskerless pale skin matched his thatch of streaked blond hair. A strong nose sat above thin lips. The eyes, which displayed a high degree of interest, were an ice-blue behind light lashes.

Though definitely handsome, he packed none of the punch of the stranger on Steingasse. Something about Meneer De Raad spoke of determined ambition. The set of his jaw maybe? Her gaze shifted momentarily while she made a swift check of the faces close by. The American wasn't visible, yet could be anywhere in the throng, if he'd taken up the invitation. She wasn't sure why she seemed to be looking for him... but she did.

"Miss Drummond?" Meneer De Raad's words came after a long pause, as though he carefully considered what to say, yet she surmised it wasn't due to any language impediment.

Her hand was engulfed, small against long, smooth fingers that had nothing roughened about them. The polite smile on her face turned to a grin when she found his handshake as cool as he was. Yet, rather than put her off, it contrarily did the opposite and made her feel more at ease. She felt her tense shoulders relax a little while her hand was released.

“Keira Drummond, and from the introduction, I’m guessing you’re Dutch, Meneer De Raad?”

“Yes. My name’s Zaan.” He waved his invitation. “We are two of a privileged three people here tonight, according to the doorman.”

“That’s what he told me. Though I wonder why? I’ve absolutely no idea why I’m here, except I’ve to meet someone called Jensen Amsel.”

When expressed in such fashion, it sounded so simple, so ordinary. She broke off eye contact to gaze around, feeling a dull heat creep over her cheeks. How ridiculous she’d been earlier when the American’s invitation had spooked her. Embarrassment deepened further over her silly reactions, making it difficult to resume the conversation and eye contact.

“I, too, have been asked to speak to Jensen Amsel. I’ve never met him, though I know of him through trade sources.”

She allowed Zaan De Raad’s ease in the situation to rub off on her. No disquiet or insecurity plagued him, she was sure of it. Rather, there seemed to be a repressed excitement behind those ice-blue eyes when she looked closely. “You’re way ahead of me then, since I know nothing. Perhaps you could tell me about him?”

She didn’t mean to plead, but it would make her feel less out on a limb if he could tell her something about her host.

“Jensen Amsel is the money man behind this cooperative gallery. He’s not an artist, but is an avid collector. He holds investments in galleries and various businesses.” Zaan’s smile encouraged her to ask questions as he gave her more information. “Amsel’s based here in Heidelberg. In addition to this gallery, he has shops in the Altstadt, mainly selling jewellery and crafts; though his jewellery chain extends to other cities in Germany.”

“You make it sound as though you’re also in the retail market, Meneer De Raad?”

“Yes, I am, but please call me Zaan, and I’ll call you Keira?”

“Fine by me.” She grinned at the courteous bow of his head. He was definitely a smoothie. “I’m not connected to the retail trade, so that’s not why I’m here. I’m a translator but, since almost everyone speaks English, I’m not going to make any money translating tonight.”

“If not your profession, have you any other association with Heidelberg which may have drawn you into this intriguing situation?”

“You find it intriguing, too?” She was quick to latch onto that, though Zaan De Raad didn’t look as if he believed there was anything fishy about it. A twinkling amusement lurked there in his expression.

“Oh, I’ve a good idea why I’m here, but till Jensen gives his explanation I must wait in anticipation. I think, perhaps, we need to divulge a little of our backgrounds for this to make any sense to you.”

Keira desperately wanted an explanation for the request of her presence in Heidelberg, though she wasn’t in the habit of sharing personal information with strangers. Yet, hadn’t she done a little of it with the American? If the content of his envelope hadn’t been revealed, she was honest enough to admit they might have moved on to even more private disclosures.

She metaphorically kicked herself for being so stupid. Her gut reaction to flee from the guy had been way off base. A degree of anxiety still clenched, but she wasn’t so inclined to run off now – especially if Zaan could prepare her for the situation she’d got herself involved in.

She followed the Dutchman to a less crowded space, though still not too far from the entry

door if the doorman needed to alert her to Jensen Amsel's arrival. Once there, Zaan had no hesitation about speaking of himself. Cockiness settled on him as comfortably as his pale-cream linen suit, worn with typical European panache. His gaze snagged hers, his concentration absolutely focused. Blunt. A little proud. Yet somehow the attitude suited him, and didn't give the impression of being a negative quality. She couldn't consider him an ally, not quite, though he was, to a certain extent, the best she had at present.

"I'm thirty-four. Born near Den Haag, I've always lived there. I've two antique shops in Den Haag, another in Amsterdam... and I believe the mystery which brings us together this evening began many years ago with my great-grandmother."

## Chapter Two

“Wow! Really? You deduced all that from an invitation to a gallery opening?” His quizzical expression made her grin. “I’m impressed by your sleuthing powers.

“Thank you, but I told you I’ve some knowledge of Jensen Amsel. Even better is the fact my lawyer spoke to Amsel’s lawyer yesterday, so when I went along today for my appointment, I had a belt full of ammunition.”

The wink which followed was unexpected. She belatedly realised Zaan awaited her response since she’d been slow to process he’d also had an appointment with Herr Amsel’s lawyer, like she’d had earlier that afternoon. She desperately wanted to know if he’d come out as confused as she had, though doubted it.

“You arrived today from The Hague? With your ammunition hanging from a very strong belt, from the sound of it.”

Zaan’s laughter echoed around and drew interested stares from a stunningly-dressed woman who mingled close by. To Keira’s surprise, he turned his shoulder away from the female’s blatant interest. She didn’t know Zaan, but her quickly-formed opinion was someone as good-looking as he was would pick up a come-on signal right away. But he didn’t even blink an eyelash.

“I did. Herr Amsel is looking to add to his already extensive collection. Our invitations to talk with him, I believe, are in regard to something we may have, and which he seeks to own.”

Confusion spread. “Me? I don’t have a single thing a serious collector might want. Old or new.”

“Ah, but as someone who’s in the antique business, I know it’s not always the obvious which holds the most value. Sometimes people have treasures, but they’re not necessarily aware of them.”

“I can believe it, though why would I get an invitation? I’m not in your business, and I don’t know anyone who deals in antiques, far less collects them. Unless he does need a translator?”

Zaan fingered his sharp-shaven jaw, drawing her attention to his pursed lips. An endearing little quirk hovered there which made him appear younger than his years, and less poised than before.

“No.” Zaan sounded categorical. “I don’t believe it’s your translating skills he’s after, Keira. Perhaps your beauty draws him.”

She couldn’t prevent her inelegant snort. “Now that really is unlikely, Zaan.”

“What? You don’t believe any man might want you for your beauty?”

Zaan looked so confident she’d accept his easy evaluation of her, but she wouldn’t be sidetracked by his smooth tactic. “Let’s say, I prefer to believe I’ve been invited because of some totally different reason. Maybe I do have something after all?”

A little quirk at his lips made her embarrassed by her wording.

“Share your background. We’ll work from there. See if we can make a connection.”

Keira glanced at the entrance. The queue had dwindled to nothing, and now a young woman attended the door. Herr Amsel had made no appearance at her side, though he could be any one of the many men mingling around the large and overcrowded area, but she didn’t feel like hogging just the one space all night.

“Shall we admire what’s close to here as I tell you? You must be interested in what the gallery has to offer, I imagine, even if it’s just to poach display or merchandise ideas?”



Zaan's quirky grin gave her an idea of what he thought of her assessment.

As they wandered around, servers floated among them with tasty little morsels, inviting the guests to choose from their trays as they passed by. In between nibbles, Keira gave brief details she thought might be relevant.

"Strange though it may seem, I was also born in Holland." She broke off at Zaan's indrawn breath and raised eyebrows, and then hastily resumed. "My father's job took him to Holland, where he worked for about four years. My young sister and I were born there, but we returned to Scotland when I was about three."

"So..." Zaan's expression showed keen interest. "Where were you born? I might know of it."

"If you're a keen sailor, then perhaps you will." She chuckled as Zaan popped down his empty flute and gathered up two full ones, transferring her near-empty one with deft ease. "Do you know the Vinkeveense Plassen, the lake near Vinkeveen?" At his easy nod of recognition, Keira continued. "We lived in a village not far from there."

Zaan clinked his flute to hers, the crystal tinkle like a little bell of attraction since those around them stopped to stare, assuming an announcement of some sort was about to be made. Zaan ignored them and concentrated on her.

"Well, we have the land of our birth in common to celebrate at least. I have distant relatives who still live near Vinkeveen. One of the many ties to this mysterious invitation, perhaps, but not quite the answer yet?"

The strangeness of the summons gave way to an unexpected enjoyment of Zaan's company as they chatted on, yet she focused on trying to make some sort of connection, a reason for her being brought to Heidelberg.

"I've no family connections in Holland, though my parents took us back for holidays. We visited friends, though it stopped some years ago, after they died." Zaan's nod indicated some sympathy, so she ploughed on. "I do have an association with Heidelberg, though, since I spent the best part of a year studying at the university. I knew the city pretty well, but it was almost six years ago."

Zaan's gaze was all encompassing as his gaze roamed top to toe. "Twenty-six?"

"Near enough! I'm twenty-seven, but my time at the university seems immaterial to why I'm here today. I made a lot of friends while I studied here, though none were local."

"What made you accept the invitation to come, Keira?"

Zaan was getting to the heart of the matter, though she truthfully wasn't sure of her answer. "Nostalgia? I had a very happy time here, though it was constant slog. When the opportunity to return on someone else's tab landed in my lap, I was completely mercenary. Although it annoys me, and truthfully the cloak and dagger aspect scares me too, the unknown situation also intrigues, I suppose. I needed a break from work, and Heidelberg is just so tempting. I couldn't refuse."

Zaan had been slowly imbibing his champagne during her monologue, though he looked far from bored. A certain degree of friendly interest, and perhaps a hint of sexual heat, lurked behind his gaze. She had no intention of reciprocating anything sexual, but friendship might be pleasant.

"What made you accept?" It was his turn to talk.

"Insider knowledge. I told you I'm in the antiques business, inherited from my mother."

His smirk engaged more interest till, all of a sudden, Zaan sounded cagey. Almost as if he

didn't, now, want to give further information. It occurred that he teased, perhaps withheld something important.

"And?" Keira wouldn't be put off by his mischievous approach as she stared him down. One blond eyebrow lifted before Zaan eventually answered, his tone low, yet not quite a whisper. He deliberately bent closer to her ear, as if about to impart a secret.

"It came to my notice recently, through the grapevine, that Jensen Amsel has added to his collection. And I have something I believe he wants to own."

"You're being deliberately mysterious, Zaan, but you're going to tell me what it is. Aren't you?" Intrigue was one thing, but toying with her quite another. Her tone sharpened. "Why should I be asked here, if you're the one who has something of interest to him?"

Zaan lips moved, again close to her, his body indicating a familiarity too early in their acquaintance as his hand descended lightly on her shoulder. The merest twitch of his expression indicated some sardonic humour she hadn't cottoned on to. "I said he wants to add to his collection. He's not looking for just one single item, Keira. He wants a whole set of related items."

"But I can't possibly have anything he's looking for!"

Zaan's fingers tightened on her upper arm as she looked straight up into his eyes, her body tensing with an inexplicable unease. She didn't hate the contact with him, but it wasn't something she wanted to encourage, her slight squirm indicating she wanted to be free from his hold.

In a heartbeat she felt Zaan's clutch release her, the conversation interrupted by the arrival of two men. One man she didn't know. The other was... familiar. The older of the men offered his hand in introduction.

"Miss Drummond. I'm very pleased to meet you. I'm Jensen Amsel." His words broke off as he wheeled around to introduce the second man. "This is Teun Zeger. Teun has come from California to be with us, and he is the third special guest I invited here tonight." As Jensen Amsel pumped her hand in welcome, her gaze strayed to the other man.

Teun Zeger?

The American from Steingasse. He was another of Jensen Amsel's special guests? Was that why he'd also seemed edgy earlier on Steingasse? Maybe he'd been feeling as vulnerable as she had about the mysterious summons. Heat pooled in her cheeks. What a stupid idiot she'd been!

"Miss Drummond."

Teun Zeger's cool tones assailed her – nothing like his honeyed warmth of the afternoon – his expression forbidding and now distinctly unfriendly. He appeared to be completely ignoring the fact they'd already met, his gaze flashing to Zaan, and then back to her. There was none of his former interest; his mouth tightened as though with distaste. Maybe she had been right to flee him that afternoon, but she couldn't now.

His handshake was brief. Despite his disconnection, her palm tingled from the brief contact. A frisson of awareness started again, trickling down her spine and, in spite of his antipathy, the same desirous warmth of the afternoon pooled low in her torso. She hoped her face didn't appear as flushed as she felt. Though speaking was difficult in the face of his brusque delivery, courtesy ruled her response. And, like him, she chose to ignore their earlier interaction. "Hello, Mr. Zeger."

After a quick introduction to Zaan, who regarded Teun Zeger with undisguised curiosity, Herr Amsel ushered them through the gallery. "I'm so pleased you have all accepted my invitation. If we may talk first, you will be very welcome to browse around the exhibits afterwards?"

An unnecessary question, since they all trooped after Herr Amsel anyway; eager to get on with whatever they were there for. He led them through a door at the back into a small office and indicated three chairs which sat lined up, ready and waiting for them. Teun Zeger politely stood aside to allow Keira to take the middle chair, though didn't acknowledge her nod of thanks, his focus on Zaan sliding onto the chair at her other side.

When all were seated, Jensen Amsel began. "At least one of you has an idea why I've asked you all to come, although I don't believe the other two have any idea at all. Is that correct, Meneer De Raad?"

Keira picked up Zaan's chuckle as he answered.

"Wasting no time?"

Jensen's smile was appreciative, the tiniest nod of acknowledgement moving his head at Zaan's statement. "Indeed. There's no point in being discreet any more, Meneer De Raad. Your identities have all been verified by my lawyer this afternoon, so, if no-one has any objections, we'll use our first names? It'll make things easier."

Keira had no objection. Since there were no howls of protest, Jensen continued.

"Zaan can confirm, I collect many types of artwork. Currently, I want to bring together a complete set of associated objects. I have one article, but I believe all three of you either have missing items from the collection, or have access to them. What I'd like is to amass the set, in its entirety, with your help."

Keira studied Jensen as he clicked his fingers; not a becoming trait, something she always found annoying – even a bit repellent. Somewhere around forty-five, Jensen emanated poise. Polished to the nth degree, this included his bleached-white teeth. Honey-hued, manicured hair had not a short strand out of place, his heavy cologne permeating the air in the small room. Though quite tall, Jensen's height didn't measure up to either of the other two men present. What he projected a lot of was money, self-possession... and purpose.

Regardless of his appearance, Keira didn't believe she had anything this man could possibly want.

Teun Zeger leaned forward in the chair, bracing his palms on his knees. His fingers curled around his kneecaps, demonstrating something of the same disquiet she'd sensed had been his problem on Steingasse, but now, she was sure she was the target of his annoyance as well. Snapped words, and sidelong glances, bore out her evaluation of his mood.

"Would you ditch the mystery, Jensen, and just enlighten me as to what you think I have that interests you? And tell me why you couldn't have asked for it in the letter you sent to me? I came here of my own free will – granted – but I'm not hanging around any longer if you're going to drag this out, for I'm damned sure I've no idea what you're referring to."

Jensen's reply lacked emotion, his face a blank screen, his gaze focused on Teun as Keira regarded the by-play.

"Teun. It may come as a surprise to you, but you actually know more about this invitation than Keira. At least you knew from my letter I had something of family interest you might be glad to take back to the USA with you. Keira had no such suggestion made to her."

Tension rose in the room, which didn't only radiate from Teun.

Keira sat uneasy, also unwilling to be in the dark any longer. "Would you please explain why you think I may have something you want, Herr Amsel?" She found herself reluctant to use his first name, considering the antagonism now mounting.

"All in good time, Keira. And please call me Jensen. I don't set out to be anyone's enemy. I believe each of you can provide access to items belonging to the collection. All the pieces are likely to vary in monetary value but, viewed as a complete entity, it will make an impressive display. It's a historic set... and unique."

Zaan intervened. "Keira and I have shared a little of our backgrounds, Jensen, but nothing, so far, links her with me."

The conspiratorial smile Zaan flashed her way couldn't be missed before he twisted back to Jensen, and then again, she felt Teun's still bothered gaze.

"You introduced yourself just as I started back through the generations with Keira. I had just informed her I believe what you are looking for, from me, once belonged to my great-grandmother."

Jensen's smile was indulgent. Keira felt that his hazel eyes assessed, perhaps even admired, Zaan's shrewdness.

"To be historically accurate, the collection belonged first to your great-great-grandmother – a woman called Geertje. Reciting the family tree isn't complicated, since there are very few still alive in the branches, but it'll make it easier for Keira, to follow her connection, if I reveal it like a story."

Some head nodding went on. She braced herself, unable to narrate her own family lineage back more than a couple of generations.

Though Keira didn't understand it, a hyper-awareness of Teun's movements persisted when he relaxed back into his chair, seemingly prepared to listen to Jensen for a bit longer.

"In 1879, Geertje Hoogeveen married Albrecht Tiedman. She gave birth to her first son in 1880, and then had two more sons in quick succession. Afterwards came three daughters, the youngest of these born in 1890. For the purposes of our story, two of the sons are of no importance since Geertje only bequeathed her collection to her daughters."

Teun's fingers drummed the chair arm. "I got that. This Geertje woman had six kids. So what?"

Zaan's droll voice grated, as low as he lolled in his chair. "Her daughters were given a fortune."

Jensen carried on as though no disruption had taken place. "The three daughters in order of age – eldest first – were named Martine, Uriel and Tanja. Teun and Keira – you have connections to Martine."

"Teun's connected to Keira? That should please you then, Mr. Zeger." Again, Zaan's dry tones cut short Jensen's explanation.

"Zaan – your link is to Tanja. I am a descendant of Geertje through Wolf, her first-born son."

Jensen wasn't best pleased with how the explanation was going; the interruptions not to his taste, from the tightening of his lips, though it gave Keira an opportunity to question. "I don't have any Dutch relatives. My background goes back generations Scottish on one side, and Irish back two generations on the other. What does your search have to do with me?"

Keira turned first to Teun, to see if he knew what Jensen meant by their connection to the

woman named Martine. But Teun wasn't looking at her. His gaze narrowed on Zaan, who now appeared highly amused. Teun might be put out with her because of her earlier abandonment, but it had no bearing on the antipathy he now demonstrated towards Zaan. Though, perhaps some family lore caused it? Some old bad blood she didn't know about, but Teun did?

Or maybe the affable stranger of the afternoon was a figment of her imagination, and bad moods were his norm?

With no idea of those answers, it galled that the awareness of his presence continued to be acute. Zaan merely occupied a physical space on her left: Teun did something quite different on her right. She banished the frown appearing between her eyebrows though, as soon as she felt it forming, determined not to allow this ill-tempered man to affect her equilibrium.

Zaan broke the silence, his smile sardonic. "So, Teun Zeger, we are distant cousins?"

"Guess so. Three ways down the line, or some such relationship?" Teun's attitude didn't soften any as he grilled Jensen for more information. "Where does Keira fit in?"

Teun's gaze lingered on her as he awaited Jensen's answer. She wanted to know the answer, too. The minutest flinch she noticed in Teun's steel grey irises echoed the afternoon's flame of interest.

Jensen painted a family timeline. "We'll take Zaan's relationship first. You were the only child born to your parents?"

"Correct." A secretive smile again sneaked at the corners of Zaan's mouth. Keira felt, yet again, he withheld important information.

"Your father was Lutz De Raad, and your grandfather, Ralf De Raad?" Jensen continued after he had Zaan's agreement. "Ralf De Raad's mother was Tanja Tiedman. Is that correct?"

Zaan's tiniest lift of an eyebrow was confirmation. "My father had no siblings, and my grandfather's two brothers died in World War Two before they had any offspring."

Jensen's gaze scoped to include them all. "Geertje's middle daughter, Uriel, moved to Dresden after her marriage to a German, and established her family there. Romy Lischke, who can't be here today, is the last of Uriel's family line, as most of the offspring didn't survive the Dresden bombings of World War Two. Romy now lives in Vienna and, like all of us here, is unmarried and has no children. Although I've been in contact with Romy, she's currently hospitalized, having been involved in a skiing accident about seventeen months ago. Her most recent surgery has been a hip replacement, which will hopefully restore her to full mobility." Jensen broke off for a second to share his gaze amongst them. "Although Romy is unable to be active in the search, she's given me useful information, and her approval of my plan."

Teun interrupted, as though uninterested in the absent cousin. "My grandmother's name became Marijke Zeger when she married Jan Zeger and went off to Minnesota, way back in the 1930s."

Jensen nodded his acknowledgement. "Yes. Your grandmother, Marijke, was the daughter of Martine, the eldest daughter of our trio. So, like Zaan and me, you are also the great-great-grandson of Geertje. I, too, am your third cousin. Similar to Zaan, Romy and me, you had no siblings and are the last of your branch line."

Keira laughed at their expressions. Curiosity, dismay and doubt lingered in Teun's gaze, yet it was good because it had banished his antipathetic frowns. Zaan looked engrossed, even more animated. Jensen was all cool blandness; given none of it was news to him. But as for her?

“Well, that certainly puts me in my place! So, if I’m not your cousin, why am I here?”

Jensen eyes brightened for the first time. “Your link is not through blood, Keira, but through a long lasting friendship.”

Pieces of the puzzle fell into place. She leaned toward Jensen, understanding better her role as one of the three special guests. “Are you talking about my *Oma* Neela?”

Zaan’s gaze whipped round, the sudden movement pulling her attention away from Jensen, his tone sharpening to accusation. “Your *Oma*? You said you had no Dutch relatives.”

“Not my real grandmother. My *Oma* Neela was an acquired granny. Her name was Neela Henke. Does she fit into your puzzle, Jensen?”

Good at interrupting, Teun’s tone had gone from prickly to more inquisitive as he slid forwards to confront Zaan. This time, she sat back to observe them.

“You don’t know Keira at all, do you?”

Zaan didn’t seem to be put off by Teun’s abrupt cross-examination. “We’ve never met each other before tonight, but I find her much friendlier than you, my long-lost American cousin.”

After a brief hesitation to gain the attention of the two men, Jensen carried on. “Marijke and Neela were daughters of Martine. Having borne seven children, Martine only had those two daughters who survived infancy.”

“Wow! That’s amazing. So, Neela was your grandmother’s sister, Teun. I guess I am kind of connected to you.” Excitement burst free as she scanned her companions in turn, the whole secretive invitation thing less threatening than before. “Neela was the most fabulous person. I loved her a lot.”

“So you’re definitely not a blood relative of mine?” Teun’s question was loaded with something she couldn’t quite decipher, since his regard had warmed up – a good bit. “But Jensen believes you’ve something of interest which originally belonged to Geertje? Which you’ve acquired from Neela?”

Jensen nodded while Zaan questioned her close association with Neela. “How did you come to call Neela Henke your *Oma*?”

“Neela had retired from nursing before meeting my mother, but our village doctor was happy to have her be a secondary assistant at my birth in Woerden, the town where our nearest hospital was situated. And Neela helped my mother when we got home.” She related how the friendship lasted long after her family returned to Scotland. Neela and her husband had visited them often, and vice versa, over the years as she grew up. But, as to her having anything of value from Neela? Absolutely not.

“Neela brought souvenirs but never anything costly: dolls, clogs and typical Delft Blue items.”

A slight twitch marred Jensen’s brows. “She never gave you any jewellery?”

“Only a pair of tiny Delft Blue and silver ear-rings.”

Jensen nodded, absorbing her resume. “And your mother? Would she have received anything from Neela?”

“My mother? Neela brought cases full of edible goodies, but not jewellery. We loved Droste; those Dutch chocolate medallions in the hexagonal boxes.” That triggered a surge of remembrance. “If her visit was for my birthday, or my sister’s, she’d bring traditional *beschuit*... you know those rusk crackers? We’d spread them with butter, and top with a groaning layer of chocolate *hagelslag* and aniseed *muisjes*; those pink and white sprinkles.”

She looked at the men around her, hoping they weren't bored. "Our close relationship with *Oma Neela* wasn't about expensive material things. What she gave us was her time... and her humour. Always cheery, always laughing, she constantly looked on the bright side."

Teun's question was unexpected. "Did Neela have no family of her own?"

"Yes, she had children. Her daughter's called Ineke, and Jan was her son. Jan died in his late teens: a motorbike accident. I've met Ineke, though not since Neela's funeral, a few years ago."

"Ineke has two daughters. Do you know them, too, Keira?" Jensen shuffled the piece of paper he'd been consulting back onto the pile in front of him.

"I met Anna and Marijke when my parents took me to Holland for holidays, and more recently at Neela's funeral. I don't know much about them now, though, since I only trade a brief Christmas card with Ineke."

"If they're also relatives, why aren't they here tonight, Jensen?" Teun was good at grilling, his tone demanding.

Jensen clicked his fingers, making her shudder. "I invited Ineke, but she declined my invitation. I couldn't locate Anna. It seems she's estranged from her mother – at present – and Ineke wouldn't, or couldn't, give me contact details for her."

"And Marijke isn't here, since she lives in New Zealand?"

Jensen's smile showed approval. "Exactly. I invited her but she declined, due to work commitments. However, she's the one who suggested I invite you, Keira, and your sister."

"Really?"

Teun was thorough. "Your sister also declined to come?"

"Isla's a teacher. She only travels during school holidays."

Jensen carried on, "When I told Marijke my reasons for getting us together, she informed me Neela considered you, and your sister, as surrogate grandchildren. Marijke believes she probably has something handed down from Geertje, and wondered if Neela had given you something, too."

"So, Keira, if one of Neela's real granddaughters has a piece of Geertje's jewellery collection, are you very sure you don't have something priceless, too?" Zaan's brusque inquiry and demanding manner startled, since he'd seemed amiable just moments before.