

The Assignment

I cautiously followed my host up the gritty, iron stairway, already beginning to regret this assignment.

"Watch your step, Ed." Like a proud father showing off his kid, Torsten Bowman led me through a maze of outdated technology. With a slight German accent, he yelled above the racket of whirring motors, "Two floors up is where the process begins." We reached a mezzanine catwalk and looked down. He could have been a linebacker in his younger days if they played our kind of football.

Fist-sized chunks of glass bounced their way down a conveyor belt to be crushed by mechanized hammers, ground between steel rollers, and the particles sorted by size through a clattering set of four-foot sieves.

"We get a forty percent yield at one hundred microns," Torsten said, shoulders back and chest out.

I nodded. "That's great. With our methods, we'll get you up to sixty-five percent." Torsten shot me a side-eye.

A heavy cloud of glass dust circulated in the sheet of sunlight above us. Breathing heavily from the climb, I imagined a gestating lung cancer cell. The warm, mildew-laden air in the lobby was my first clue. Although it looked nice with a fresh coat of paint, this place needed an air-handling system overhaul with extensive filtration.

My company had purchased A.G.C., a glass-processing plant situated in a hilly area in Germany's former East Bloc, which reminded me of the Ozarks. "It's hard to believe this building is two hundred years old. With some modernization, we'll get it to meet our needs." *Lucky me.*

Torsten led the way to the other side of the room, where the chemical equipment was. Four, six-foot-diameter glass columns poked through holes in the concrete floor from the level below. "These are where we make the pores." This was undoubtedly the finest reactor the sixties had to offer, but it fell way short of today's designs. "In 1962, Professor Grunde at Stutts University designed these reactors through a government grant." What was the German equivalent of a white elephant?

"Processing equipment has changed a lot in the last sixty years, especially with computer control. That's my specialty."

He grinned. "Like in Breaking Bad?"

Shit. Another one. I held my temper. "Yeah, like that." This would be a big project, but I'd recently suffered a tragic loss and hoped the change of scenery would cheer me up. I didn't want to blow it now.

I handed Torsten a copy of our sales history. "Our investment here will triple your output. The Human Genome Project has created a huge demand for our Controlled Pore Glass, the perfect substrate for growing synthetic DNA and RNA fragments. A.G.C. will manufacture for the entire European Union." This brought a big smile to his face.

Torsten nodded as he read. "I've always hoped to leverage the work we've put into this place." I had to tread lightly.

Our new market, genetic engineering, had skyrocketed thanks to the Human Genome Project. Our product had been optimized for a perfect pore size of 500 angstroms. Although our factory in the States was modern and clean, it was too small to keep up with demand, and we needed a presence in Europe.

Torsten's tour ended at a small creek behind the plant where they dumped their wastewater. Our Environmental Protection Agency would have a ball with this place. But this was Achten, Germany, and their equivalent authority had never even inspected the place. *Another major project for later.*

I didn't want to tell old Torsten we'd be gutting his baby and starting from scratch, especially in front of his hardworking employees. Proud of their brand new lab coats, they scattered to make way for us during the tour. I was their first exposure to the new owners. No need to come off as an asshole now. Sooner or later, it would happen.

There were only three restaurants in town, and they opened and closed when they felt like it. Tonight, none of them felt like it. Instead, Torsten took me to the Brenner Club, a second-floor dive perched atop a residential hill. The twenty-car gravel parking lot was half full.

Hints of stale smoke grew stronger as we climbed narrow wooden steps to a small landing with a paisley curtain entrance. Beyond the gaudy red-and-gold cloth, the room reminded me of my grandfather's basement, complete with a ten-foot-long Formica-covered bar. It had a dozen or so crowded tables, and an even smokier two-lane manual bowling alley—the first I'd ever seen.

The clientele's age ranged from sixteen to eighty. Everyone knew my host by name, and some of the younger guys, clustered at the end of the bar, passed joints around. The din of alien conversations made me wish I'd paid more attention in German 101.

The pungent, earthy odor of pot took me back. I had my share of troubled years in L.A. and survived them. My heart grew heavy as I thought of my brother, Chuck. He would have been right at home here.

A few of the younger ladies at the bar nodded and nudged each other as we walked in. I thanked my Swedish mom's tall, blue-eyed, blonde genes. At least ten years older than most of them, and here on business, I avoided eye contact.

Three guys in their twenties eyeballed me, traded comments with Torsten, then picked up their drinks and left us their table. Torsten smiled. "I told them you were my new boss." He turned his head anxiously and waited for my response.

Avoiding the boss comment, I discussed the more obvious upgrades to the factory.

I sipped my beer. "Some areas of production will have to be rebuilt from scratch." Torsten's smile faded.

He needed some reassurance. I said, "Of course, our factory was recently built using the latest equipment." He relaxed a little. "And I intend to train you and your employees on our procedures." We raised our beers to that.

The night plodded on, and those leaving the club tapped twice on selected tables on their way out. This was Achstenian for "I'm too drunk or high to remember, but if I missed saying hello... goodnight." Finally, Torsten did the same, and we left for my hotel. It had been a long first day.

The Hotel Friendship was on the other side of town, about three blocks away, and on another of many hills. Torsten's front bumper scraped the cobblestones as we climbed the steep driveway to the dark two-story building. He parked and used his phone light to retrieve a key from a planter by the front door.

As we walked down the hallway to my room, sconces automatically lit ahead of us, eerily switching off as we passed. The front door key also opened my room. Although small by U.S. standards and decorated in Early Communist, with gray walls, a gray ceiling, and gray linens, it was clean. The coarse army-style blanket held a small dish of hard candies—a Friendship welcome.

The next morning, Torsten met me in the three-table hotel dining room for a filling breakfast of cold cuts, black rolls, and strong coffee. On our brisk fifteen-minute walk to work, we passed old, modest wooden homes barely separated from each other by strips of garden and clothes lines. Shadows moved behind window shades, but the streets were curiously empty for the hour. Didn't these people work?

Everything in the town was stained dark grey. Torsten explained, "We have shale mines one town over."

The rest of my week was spent with Franz, the only chemist in the company, a recent Ph.D. from Stutts University. His first question was, "Have you watched the TV show, 'Breaking Bad'?" It's so popular in Germany." He meant no harm and had no idea how that show now tore at my guts.

For the next few days, Franz reviewed process details as I diplomatically critiqued. He'd huddle in Torsten's office during my email breaks, the two glancing at me when they thought I wasn't looking.

After a week, I should have been back in California, but every day held another set of problematic surprises. I wrote a detailed renovation plan, including estimates from suppliers and craftsmen far and near. While the A.C.G. crew was respectfully polite, and a second week passed, I sensed my welcome slowly evaporating.

Franz often joined me for dinner at either Madsen, a pizza and bratwurst joint, or The Brenner, which served pizza, pretzels, and bratwurst. Brenner's local tough guys seemed to ignore me, but Anna, a young lady with blonde braids and a nose ring, always offered a warm smile.

She spoke little English, but we muddled through bowling sessions and even table-tapped together before walking back to my room one night. No one seemed to care, and a few of the youngbloods were nodding their approval as we left. Anna must have put in a good word. It was apparent she just wanted to hook up with an American.

This place was growing on me and keeping my mind off... well, things I wasn't ready to process.

On Friday, Torsten invited me to dinner to discuss my progress. I told him I'd seen enough for this trip and would make my recommendations to my upper management. After five steins of beer, he turned to me with a twisted smile. "One more thing. Since you own the building, you should tour the sub-basement. It's truly remarkable."

This was not my idea of a fun Friday night, but what the hell. It was our place now, and on Monday, I'd be out of here.

Torsten took me back to the factory, switched on the lobby lights, and fumbled through his four-inch key ring. The heavy coating of glass dust on the other side of the closet-sized door spoke to the solitude below. I was creeped out as we slowly descended a narrow staircase lit only by the lobby lights. I counted twenty-two steps, just in case.

The sub-basement was pitch black. Torsten pulled a lantern from a shelf, softly illuminating a sprawling and disturbing storage space. He led me past lines of shadow-cloaked cots that were interspersed between rows of cabinets and tables holding what appeared to be rusty surgical instruments. In the flickering light, it was hard to tell.

Torsten squeezed my shoulder. "During the Third Reich, this place was quite busy, but that's far behind us now."

I glanced at my watch. "I should really get back to my room and pack." I didn't know where this was leading, but it was one history lesson I could do without.

He flashed that strange smile again and continued the circuit around the room, passing several plastered-over doors on our way out—sealed chambers? I didn't ask. My shoulder still ached from Torsten's shoulder squeeze.

Torsten read my face. "We'll go soon, but first, the tunnel. It's also part of the deal." He opened a wide, overhead door leading to a dank, earthen-walled corridor.

Oh shit, this was not in the blueprints. We crouched under the low ceiling and trudged up a long incline. Torsten's lantern swept a path, casting shadows as rats ran for cover.

"Achten was where they developed punishment and interrogation protocols during the war. "But, of course, that's far in our past."

Yes, of course. Get me the hell out of here.

Finally, a glow at the end of the tunnel. Under a low-hanging bare bulb, most of the bar's potheads sat. Franz, the company chemist, waved from the head of the table.

Torsten gave them a thumbs up and patted my back. "We are now under Brenner's. It's time for a secret."

My throat tightened as Torsten's vice-grip again closed on my shoulder. "Here's an offer you can't refuse."

He walked me through two large, state-of-the-art chemical labs that were partially set up. He laughed. "Just like Breaking Bad. Franz was only a month away from fentanyl production when your company bought A.G.C." He slapped me on the back. Hard. "You're here just in time to help."

I tried to keep my cool. "Sorry, guys, I don't want any part of this shit. I have my reasons."

Torsten closed his eyes. "I know that, but it's not your choice." He slid a photo across the table. My parents stood in front of our home. "My colleagues in the States did their homework on you."

I tried to stand, but my legs went numb, and my head spun. The truth was, they had me by the balls. "You bastards touch them, I'll blow this place up with me in it."

He laughed. "No need to hurt them physically. They've lost one son. Want to see them lose another?"

To buy myself some time, I'd told my boss that I needed at least another week, an easy sell considering the millions they'd be investing in this hellhole. They'd have no idea that this factory was a perfect front. A little drug mixed in with the white glass powder would be undetectable, and A.G.C. had a sixty-year history of shipping glass powders around the world. Now I had to help them sneak product into the U.S. These guys were dead serious.

My nights filled with sleepless agony. I'd relive good times with Chuck when we were kids. The theater of my mind cycled through our last argument, our only fist fight ever. Chuck was on his toes, screaming in my face, "Who the fuck are you to complain? You got me started on this shit!"

I racked my brain to figure a way out. There was none. Lab accidents happened all the time, and Torsten's guys could easily arrange one when I wasn't looking.

Then came Munich....

The weekend before I left for home, Torsten picked me up at my hotel. "We're going to Oktoberfest! A reward to help you What's the word? Assimilate. With Covid, we've missed two years, so this party should be extra special."

"But it's only September."

"I know. We never wait. Pack a few things, just for one night."

My trip to Munich was memorable, even though we never set foot inside a beer tent.

We checked into a four-star hotel, complete with a gourmet steakhouse. We were met at the restaurant by three thugs even bigger than Torsten. Each one bulged in a custom-made suit. They had to be from the cartel. Everyone selected a prime cut of beef from a high-tech, controlled aging cabinet.

Torsten took delight in tormenting me in front of his buddies. "You should have seen the look on this guy's face when I took him through the sub-basement." This brought a round of laughs. "And then when he saw the lab, he nearly shit himself!" The waiters presented sizzling plates of meat covered in garlic butter. Too bad I'd lost my appetite.

Torsten swirled his glass of wine and toasted. "To our dumbasses at Brenner's." Confused, I nearly choked on my cabernet.

He nodded to me. "Let me introduce my friends." They weren't cartel goons. I was dining with a CIA team.

Torsten gulped down a mouthful of steak as if he were Jaws. "We were waiting for the first batch of fentanyl to be produced before we shut the lab down and put those shitheads away. Then, when your company acquired A.G.C., Franz and his pals started to panic."

The lead CIA agent, a six-foot-three ex-soccer player from the looks of him, grinned. "That's when we had the idea to include you in our plans. We had to introduce you to those dufuses in a believable way."

Torsten refilled my glass. "Your company is already in on this. They consider it a cleansing process for their new acquisition and will be grateful for your part in the process."

My heart lightened. I closed my eyes and pictured Chuck's signature peace sign.