

BOOK 1
D.V. HUNTER



PRIDE
SUPERBIA



UITGEVERIJ VERHULST
ONTREKEN DE SPANNING, BELEEF DE MAGIE.

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Pride Superbia paperback

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D.V. HUNTER

PRIDE

SUPERBIA

a mortalia peccata series

International Thriller

BOOKS IN THIS SERIES



Pride Superbia

1st print (Dutch) - 2022

2nd print (Dutch) - 2024

1st print (English) - 2024

Greed Avaritia

1st print (Dutch) - 2024

English - Yet to be announced

Spin-offs:

The Ultimatum

1st print (Dutch) - 2025

English - Yet to be announced

*For my grandmother
Clementine Malfliet
1934, † 07-09-2011*

Because you were always there for me.

FOREWORD



I want to sincerely thank my fiancée Ilse for her unconditional support in every area. It is your support that made the realization of this book possible. You are a true inspiration to me that gives my life meaning.

To my children, Dean, Mack and Oliver, cherish your eternal smiles, optimism and the love you have to offer. In life, we often ask what we want to accomplish. Once you decide to undertake something, don't hesitate and take that step. Life is too short to doubt yourself. I love you all unconditionally.



TO THE READER



I hope this book gives you great pleasure. Writing this story has given me great satisfaction. Like any writer, I did not go through each chapter without doubts, often rewriting to get the best result on paper. Enjoy reading and who knows, maybe we'll meet at a book fair or lecture someday!

*"There is no pride. There is no humility.
There is only truth or falsehood."*



Multatuli

Dutch writer (ps. Van Eduard Douwes Dekker) 1820 - 1887

John speaks...



Finally. I didn't expect anything less than for you to read my story. My reputation preceded me, and it's obvious that my world has aroused your curiosity. That's why you picked up my life's work. But remember, however, that I am the one pulling the strings here, not you. With every word you read, you get one step closer to the truth. A truth that holds a deeper meaning for me. Often, you will feel that you can trust me. Good. That's exactly the feeling I want to give you. My past has shaped me into who I am today, but there is only one person who can change me. The person who made me feel like I was more than the psychopath you might see in me. She had me in her power. Yet, I couldn't let her lead control me. My plan was going to be carried out and my revenge was fueled by those who stood in my way.



You can trust that the path I will take, will be my truth.



*This is my life's work. My signature.
My place in the history books.*



PROLOGUE

I saw her for the first time at the Groenplaats in Antwerp. She looked like someone who had just stepped out of the shower and walked out the door without using a hairdryer. Her jet-black hair flew around her. The wind blew strong across the square.

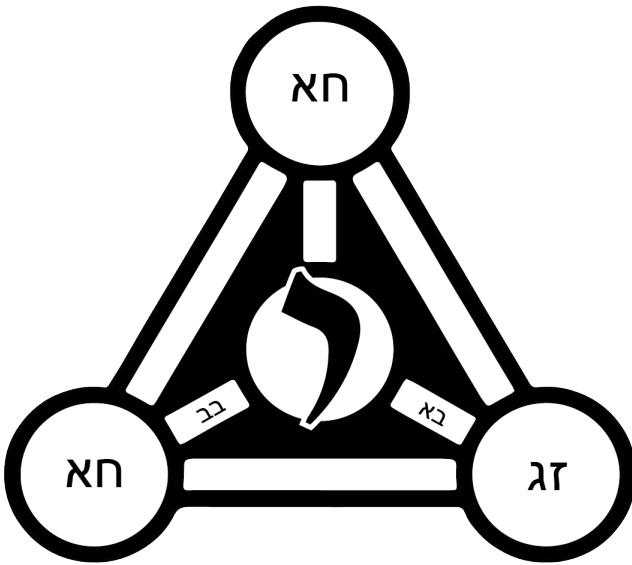
She had just turned twenty. How did I know? Simple, she wore a headband with a big "twenty" on it. She also wore a high leather vest and a short burgundy and black striped skirt. Her stunning legs caught my attention, encased in sheer fishnet stockings and high black boots with metal rings. Every guy who walked past her stole a glance. She had my attention too, and she knew it. Her eyes wandered, but so did mine. I could feel it, even though I was almost a hundred feet away from her. Was I mistaken? No, I couldn't be. I pulled the hood of my hoodie over my head and followed her from a distance. She crossed the street and stopped at a kiosk. I walked past her, and again our eyes met. Deep blue eyes sparkled in the moonlight as she gave me a flirtatious look. Two hundred feet further, I stopped and waited for her.



This was our first encounter...

PART I

HIC ET NUNC



ARS VIVENDI

THE ART OF LIVING



CHAPTER 1

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2021



My bright red Porsche 959 from the 1990s tore across the asphalt with screeching tires, leaving black streaks on the road. The name is Jonah Hunter. My passion for powerful engines, especially sports cars, knew no bounds. It was the art of living—the way the sound of the car filled the streets, everyone looking back as I turned the around corner. Pure bliss. Since my discharge, I've thrown myself into enjoying life: partying, drinking, drugs, seduction, sex—anything to keep my mind occupied. My time in service broke me. It was like being chased by a shadow I couldn't escape. I tried to dispel that shadow by constantly pushing myself to the limit and taking risks; that was what I lived for. Anyway, I was ready for the next phase of my life.



Sweat soaked my back as I tore through the streets of Antwerp. Every turn, knowing the cops were out there, sent my adrenaline soaring. A run-in would have killed the buzz. My heart pounded in my chest. Ever felt that? My windows were down, and the radio blared "No Fear" by The Rasmus, a symphony of freedom and rebellion. I cranked up the volume, the guitars screaming through the speakers. This. This was the life I chose, even if it wasn't always this way. I left the past behind, at least for now.

Red light. I hit the brakes full force and came to a stop with screeching tires. An elderly couple, probably in their seventies, looked at me with envy as they walked across the street, as if staring me to death with their eyes

and judging me like I was some punk with no respect. They were most likely on their way to their last coffee stop after the weekly Friday's market. Some girls crossing the street giggled at each other. They shot mischievous glances my way, their eyes flitting between each other and me. I couldn't blame them. I had the quintessential '80s haircut, like M.J. Fox, and dark aviator shades perched on my nose. Irresistible, if I did say so myself. They peered deeper into the car. My muscular arm, tattooed with a falcon, stuck out the window, and of course, that caught their attention. I slid my glasses down slightly, looked at them with my bright blue eyes, and frowned. They laughed. Quickly, they walked across the street as the light jumped to red. The blonde winked at me and made a playful gesture. Damn, I had my eye on the brunette with the top sticking out just above her belly button. The deep red coloring of her cheeks indicated she was shy and would need some effort to be charmed. Green light; with my foot on the gas pedal and my clutch depressed, I floored it. My tires screeched over the asphalt. I was trying to pick up where I left off, though now I was six years older and in my thirties. I got my master's degree in psychology just before joining the Army. A few months on mission and a foreign assignment went south, ending with my honorable discharge by the Army psychiatrist. Unfit for service, they said. Did it make me a bad person? Maybe.



CHAPTER 2



'I've always had a fascination with human history. It was like a fire that ignited in me, an urge to decipher it.'

This is how I began my job interview for the position of part-time psychologist at Dr. Janssen's practice. Eight piercing eyes stared at me as I tried to sell myself during the conversation.

'Go on, Mr. Hunter,' Dr. Janssen said. 'what do you think might be a challenge in your future career?'

Are you serious about this? Jesus, dude. Do you really think anyone buys this? Blood pumped through my veins, and adrenaline was rushing to my brain. I had to convince this group that I was the perfect candidate for this job. This was my plan. This had to work. I needed this job.

'The biggest mistake you can make is claiming that nothing affects you during your career. As a psychologist, you might not show that you're deeply involved, but the pressure you feel after a session is overwhelming.'

I spoke with my hands folded open, and at the same time I made a pedal motion. 'Conversations with clients must be confidential and constructive, so they feel good after the session.'

I saw the person to my right grinning and nodding in agreement. It was as if I had told one of the world's leaders that a new law would ensure he received a retroactive bonus package with immediate effect. I could talk someone out of their seat to get what I wanted. How did I do that? Simple. I just didn't stop talking. I kept going until they recognized I was in the right place at the right time.

I suspect that one of the personal challenges is that things that weren't

considered problematic at first can suddenly become the reason they're in therapy.'

The recruiter looked at me and added: 'You are indeed right. Have you encountered this problem during your training?'

No, of course not. What were you thinking?'

'Indeed,' I replied affirmatively, 'I have spent much of my training discovering and addressing underlying problems.'

'I can imagine that treating underlying problems is a complex task,' the recruiter noted. 'Can you share a specific situation from your training where you successfully addressed underlying issues?'

I hesitated for a moment, thinking about which situation I could share without breaching confidentiality. Then I remembered a case that might be illustrative.



'Certainly,' I began thoughtfully. 'There was a client struggling with severe stress symptoms, but after a few sessions, it became clear that this stress wasn't purely caused by external factors. By digging deeper, I discovered underlying past traumas were at play at the core of his issues.'

The recruiter nodded and probed further, 'How did you handle that?'

'It required a careful approach,' I explained. 'First, I built a trustful relationship with the client. Then, we gradually explored the underlying traumas. I applied various forms of therapy to help him understand and process the causes of his stress.'

'And what were the results?'

'In the end, I noticed significant improvements in his emotional well-being. He developed better coping mechanisms and was able to handle the stress in his life in a healthier way. This experience showed me that it is essential to understand and address the deeper layers to create lasting change.'

The recruiter seemed satisfied with the answer and turned to another question. 'How do you deal with ethical dilemmas in your work as a psychologist?'

An interesting twist. I explained how I carefully weigh ethical issues and always prioritize the client's interests. I discussed situations where I had to maintain confidentiality and explained how I work as part of a team to provide the best possible care.

'Captivating, the experience you've accumulated seems like a solid foundation for further development,' remarked the person all the way to

my left, before launching the next question: 'Now, let's look at your experience outside psychology. I see you also served a few years in the Belgian army?'

'That's correct,' I said confidently. Did they really want to hear about the battles I'd faced? The bombings? Seriously? They were just looking for some cheap thrills during this interview, something to gossip about later.

'Can you tell us more about your time there?' he asked.

Apparently, so ...

'I carried out several missions abroad for the department of defense, details of which I'm unfortunately not allowed to disclose. In addition, I trained as an IT engineer.'

'We genuinely understand that. You have some excellent references, Jonah.'

The door to the room opened and a dazzling woman entered. She had long dark brown hair, wore a short skirt, and a long white lab coat that stood open, accentuating every curve of her body. Her eyes drew me in, as if she wanted to shove me into a closet and rip my clothes off. Did I really want that? How did she get away with it? Her perfume filled the room, a scent so intoxicating everyone could savor it.

'Dr. Janssen, could you come with me, please?'

'Alexis, I'm in the middle of an interview with one of our candidates. Can't it wait?' he replied in a commanding voice.

'No, doctor, this is really urgent,' she said, as someone began shouting loudly down the hallway.

'No one! No one can help me! Let go of me!' cried the woman who was running hysterically down the aisle.

Dr. Janssen immediately got up and disappeared through the door. The room we were in had a black steel frame and frosted glass walls. The sunlight streaming in from the other side of the building cast shadows of Dr. Janssen, Alexis, and the woman.

'Ma'am, you need to calm down.'

'You...,' the woman screamed with a commanding voice, 'you were supposed to help me! You were supposed to free me from these dark thoughts!'

'Calm down, ma'am. I understand you're feeling distressed, but you're disturbing our other patients.'

Through the glass, we saw the woman swinging her handbag, hitting Dr. Janssen a few times. We all watched in astonishment as he tried to calm

her down by holding his hands out in front of him. The woman grew even angrier, pounding her fists against the glass.

'Alexis, call our hotline, please, and escort this lady to the isolation room,' he said as two men grabbed her by the arms. She kicked around wildly several times and knocked over a small table, causing a vase in the hallway to break into a thousand pieces.

'The hotline ...,' I thought to myself, 'probably the police.'

'Understood, doctor.'

The door to the room swung open with a powerful turn. I felt a mix of curiosity and excitement about the potential outcome of this interview.

'My apologies, Jonah. As you can see, things aren't always pleasant here.'

'No problem,' I replied.

'I think you're a suitable candidate to strengthen our team, Jonah. We could use someone like you.'

Surprised, I looked up at Dr. Janssen, my eyes drifting slightly towards Alexis. She looked at me and frowned her eyebrows. Her look betrayed how happy she was that I was becoming her colleague. Do you really want this? No. Don't let your mind be influenced to get her under the sheets on the first meeting already. My brain said, No, Jonah. But another part of my body could control itself a little less.

'Thank you, doctor. You won't regret it.'

'Feel free to call me Daniel, Jonah. But not in front of the patients, of course,' he said with an enthusiastic smile.

'Thank you, Daniel.'

'Would you be so kind as to walk with me to the reception? I'll introduce you to our staff and show you around. When can you start?'

'If you like, I can start on Monday,' I replied.

'Perfect. I'll get all the paperwork sorted out today.'



With my head held high, I left the room with Daniel. I glanced back at the others and nodded kindly. As I walked towards the exit, Alexis gave me a flirtatious look and winked. My day couldn't get any better.



CHAPTER 3



I left the practice and walked toward my car, a joint purchase with my father from my teenage years. We discovered the car in a junkyard—a twin-turbo six-cylinder boxer that was brand new under the hood, though the body was dented on all sides. The windshield was cracked, and a rod stuck through the passenger seat—a silent witness to a previous collision by the former owner.

My father convinced the giant of the junkyard that the car was in bad shape. I called him the giant because the man was huge. Back then, he towered over my father. It was our luck that the car had just come in and had not yet been disassembled for parts. We bought it for a paltry six thousand euros, a bargain considering that it would now sell for an astronomical 1.7 million euros.



'Nice car, young man,' spoke a sultry voice behind me.

I turned around.

'Alexis, I...'

My mouth got stuck on an incoherent answer. She stood inches from my face, her glasses slightly pushed down.

'Congratulations; even I wasn't hired that quickly,' she continued. 'I felt a little tension between us, so I thought, why not?'

'Yeah, um...'

That's all I could get out. She had me wrapped around her finger. She was leaning in so close that she could put her leg between mine. Suddenly, I felt a different kind of tension in another place. Her hand reached for my

lips, and I felt a gentle touch of her index finger that made my breath stop for a moment. Gently, she moved down over my chest.

'Here's my phone number,' she whispered, slipping a piece of paper into my pocket. 'Call me later.'

She stepped back and returned to the practice. I continued to look at her in bewilderment. For a moment, she turned as she walked up the stairs and blew a kiss my way.

Damn, what a woman, I thought, and I got clumsily into my car.

'Let's hope no one saw that,' I said to myself.

A deep growl of the six-cylinder turbo filled the parking lot as I turned the key. In first gear, I stepped on the gas pedal, and with a loud bang from the exhaust, I left the parking lot and turned onto the road. About a hundred yards ahead, the traffic light turned yellow. Adrenaline surged through my body, making me press the gas pedal even deeper. The speedometer ticked sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety. The light jumped to red. Out of nowhere, a police car with flashing lights appeared next to me.

Shit. This had to happen now. He was driving a Ford Mondeo—no match for my car. I floored it even more and screeched through the red light at the next intersection, turning right onto the Antwerp Ring Road. A bus. Fuck. What the hell was this? The bus unexpectedly veered into my lane, and I slammed the brakes. The police car, which I was constantly watching in my rearview mirror, overtook me. The siren forced other drivers to clear the lane. I swerved into the left lane and sped past the bus. When I past the driver's cabin, I briefly pressed the brakes and opened my sunroof. I needed to vent my frustration. Then I purposefully raised my middle finger at the man. The bus driver clearly couldn't laugh at it because, as reckless as it was, he jerked the steering wheel, missing me at the last minute. At least me, anyway. Not the patrol car. How stupid could you be? I pressed the gas pedal just in time as the police car drew alongside the bus. In my rearview mirror, I saw the bus's front wheels climb over the front of the police car, causing a severe crash. The bus landed on its right side and slid a good fifty yards. The siren went silent like a dying battery, and the road behind me grew emptier and emptier.

Suddenly, a nervous feeling hit me. My license plate. No; did I forget to switch them? I glanced at the back seat and saw them lying there, flipped over. Damn! I reached back and tried to turn them over, clutching the steering wheel convulsively with my other hand. The car didn't have servo steering, so staying straight was no easy task. With an outstretched

arm, I could just about reach the license plate with my fingertips. Got it. I looked at it and saw my registered plate. Thank god. I hadn't switched them after my last ride. Firmly, I pressed the gas pedal again and floored it to the next corner. Home was almost in sight, and it was time to contact her. I wanted to give her goosebumps when I finally got her on the line. She would find out who she was dealing with and what my intentions were.



A tingling sensation ran down my spine at that thought.



CHAPTER 4



'Three victims. Three!'

'The press is tearing us apart. We have three bodies in the morgue with no trace of the perpetrator!'

The commissioner snarled at his colleagues as his face contorted in frustration.

Joseph Fields was a man who couldn't stand being outdone at every step. For twenty years, he had been in charge as the commissioner of the Antwerp police department. No one had ever dared to contradict him. He was gruff, with a slightly aggressive edge and a hint of dry humor. Only if you were the best of the best in his eyes could you get him to do whatever you wanted. He remembered once giving a young recruit, who had just started as a trainee, a cuff during a patrol. That was the last time, as the young guy was stuck doing paperwork at a desk. His motto was clear: "Don't tread on my turf, or I'll make you sink."

'Can anyone explain this? Does anyone have any idea what's going on here?'

No one dared to open their mouth.

'Goddamn it!' he shouted furiously, throwing the stack of papers he was holding to the ground.

'You're picking that up!' he roared to a student who was returning the beamer to the room.

'We know he always has the same motive,' someone remarked. 'It's always an attractive woman with dark hair between the ages of twenty and twenty-five.'

‘The medical examiner found a rose petal in her pocket, just like with the other two women,’ Chief Inspector Stone said.

‘Has anyone found a link between the victims?’ Commissioner Fields asked.

You could hear a pin drop in the room. The silence created an unpleasant atmosphere until everyone started staring at each other.

‘Gather all the information you can to apprehend this individual as soon as possible and bring him to justice! Thank you for your attention. Get to work!’ he roared. ‘Lara, can I see you for a moment?’

Lara Stone. At the age of 37, she had reached the peak of her career, her name resonating like a legend within the corps. From recruit to chief inspector, she climbed the ranks due to her intelligence. The last three years had been crucial for Lara, in which she solved more cold cases than any other colleague in the corps. Her specialty? Cracking psychological murder cases. Her powerful approach and sharp mind made her indispensable in solving complex mysteries. Since her promotion to Chief Inspector, she has become the femme fatale of the police team, with her captivating black-brown hair falling just above her shoulders and her signature deep velvet red lipstick. Her appearance was alluring and exuded confidence. As she moved gracefully through the workplace, men turned to catch a glimpse of this mysterious woman. Always clad in a tough black leather jacket, black jeans, and Dr. Martens, Lara embodied the rebellious spirit of the team. Her badge, the symbol of her authority, was clipped with a clasp around her belt, a detail that emphasized her fearless attitude.

‘Yes, of course,’ she replied.

‘Follow me to my office.’

She hated it when the commissioner invited her to his office, despite the strong bond they shared. Whenever he got reprimanded from above, which happened more often than she could count, she could feel his simmering anger from a distance.

The door to the briefing room swung open, and the hum of a busy room full of police officers filled the air.

‘Lara, how far along are you with the report on the third victim?’ he asked.

‘I’ll have it finished by noon.’

‘Leave “by noon” out of it. The Chief Commissioner wants it on my desk within an hour. The case has stirred up the public now that information has leaked to the press. She wants it resolved as quickly as

possible so she can hold a press conference in Brussels this afternoon.'

'I'll make sure it's on your desk as soon as possible, Commissioner.'

That's how she was. Every case that landed on her desk became a personal obsession. She wanted to thoroughly investigate every piece of evidence and every testimony. She worked by the book, and no one could take away her driven ambition to solve the case.

'Fine, Stone,' he replied.

Lara walked out of the office straight to her desk.

'What was that all about?' asked her partner, Inspector Ronny Mitchell, who was waiting behind the door.



Ronny, who just turned forty, clung to his short, spiky hair with blonde tips from the nineties. A large black-framed pair of glasses, mainly intended for reading, adorned his face, which already showed slight discolorations from the summer sun. A dark stubble, sprinkled with a few gray hairs, decorated his face. Like many men without uniforms in the police station, he wore a shirt with blue jeans. His excellent sense of direction gave Lara a sense of security when he covered her.

'It needs to go fast. Someone leaked information to the press, and the case has skyrocketed,' she said. 'Look if you can find anything.'

Ronny opened his laptop and typed 'Rose Catcher' into the search engine; immediately he got the first result. He sipped his coffee and set the cup down on the desk. The coffee splashed against the side of the cup.

'Here.'

'The Rose Catcher strikes again,' he read aloud. 'It's an article from this morning.'

Yesterday afternoon, J.P. was found dead at the edge of the port. She had been missing for two days before her boyfriend reported her missing. According to our source, 'The Rose Catcher' has once again left a rose petal in the woman's pocket. New clues suggest he chooses public places as his hunting grounds. Camera footage, obtained from our source, proves that he knows exactly where the cameras are and avoids them by hiding his face. Chief Commissioner Mary Steele of the police urges women between 20 and 30 years old to stay alert and be cautious when going out alone at night.



'How on earth did they get their hands on internal information about that rose petal and a public place?' Stone wondered. 'They even have camera footage! Call the newspaper that wrote this immediately and ask for a clear answer on where these allegations come from. If necessary, ask

for a court order from the public prosecutor's office if they're not willing to provide information.'



'I'll get right on it,' he replied.