



Evil Genius

by

Patricia Rice

Copyright © 2010 by Patricia Rice

Electronically published in 2011 by Bookviewcafe.com

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No portion of this book may be reprinted in whole or in part, by printing, faxing, E-mail, copying electronically or by any other means without permission of the publisher. For more information, contact www.bookviewcafe.com

This is a work of fiction. All names in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to any person living or dead is coincidental.

Chapter One

In which EG and Nick arrive bearing trouble.

My name is Ana, and I'm a doormat.

I'm also one of the best virtual assistants in the world, if you'll pardon my modesty. Being a virtual assistant and a wuss often go hand in hand. Most of us are introverts who prefer to work in cyberspace because human nature is messy and unpredictable and computers aren't. My excuse is that my family is messier than most and so far beyond volatile as to establish whole new spectrums of the definition, so being their doormat involves a great deal of mud and muddle that I couldn't take anymore.

So four years ago, I left my family half way around the world, and I never had reason to believe they had interest in finding me until the day my doorbell rang. At the time, I lived and worked in the basement of a Victorian tenement in Atlanta. Expecting the usual FedEx or UPS delivery, I ran up to the foyer, blinking to adjust to the sun filtering through the dirty transom before opening the door. Even though she stood right before me, I still couldn't believe my eyes.

The last time I had seen EG, she was only five. I had fiercely missed my eccentric half-siblings, but once I developed the gumption to quit enabling my mother's dysfunctional lifestyle, I had no choice but to walk out on them.

Since escaping, I've been practicing hard to overcome my doormat tendencies. Granted, it may not seem that way since I'm small and dark and work at blending in, but in my world, invisibility is a defensive position. After twenty years with my flamboyant, nomadic, mother and half-siblings, I treasured the anonymity I'd achieved since my declaration of independence. Invisibility allows me to be myself, giving me hope of establishing a normal life, with a real

home someday.

I'm not angling for sympathy, but growing up as the responsible eldest of a family of drama queens, I felt responsible for their welfare, which required more assertiveness and the best therapists my mother's government health plan could afford. It took me twenty-six years to conquer my need to act as mother-hen. And apparently, four for my family to find me again.

If I was as good a virtual assistant as I thought, I wouldn't have been so surprised when EG appeared like a raven of doom that late August afternoon.

"I've brought my own bed," she announced the second I opened the basement door.

In the gloom of the boarded up sidelites, I stared down at her shiny black hair. Since she was only nine, she was still shorter than me.

"EG?" My reaction times were a little off due to lack of use. "How did you get here?"

As far as I was aware, my mother never crossed the Atlantic. Panicked questions like *How long were you on an airplane alone?* and *Who died?* ran rampant, but expressing weakness was not a wise idea when it came to my family.

EG favored me to some extent, with long, straight black hair, slender build, and a mind like a steel trap. Unlike me, she wore her hair in bangs that hid her Irish-green eyes, although EG might be the only one of us who is pure American. I smothered an unexpected urge to hug her, except EG wouldn't have understood a genuine demonstration of love. We'd been raised to be detached citizens of the world. We air-kissed but never hugged.

From beneath the long fringe, EG regarded me incredulously. "Lost a few IQ points since last we met?" she asked, proving my point. She dragged in a wheeled Pullman nearly as big as she was. "The Hungarian Princess gave me her credit card to buy schoolbooks, and whoops, I guess I accidentally booked a plane ticket instead. You know, if you rented that empty apartment upstairs, we wouldn't have to share the coal cellar."

My family was used to EG's ability to answer questions before they're asked and solve problems before we know we have them. Unfortunately, the rest of the world found it a little disconcerting. Our mother, Magda—referred to as the Hungarian Princess for her fairy tales about our background—once had a boyfriend who invented the Evil Genius sobriquet after EG nailed him as a gambling addict just before he ran off with Magda's last divorce settlement. EG's real name is Elizabeth Georgiana.

“I didn’t know another apartment was available or that I needed a new one,” I said, letting her roll her own bag. “Did anyone come with you?”

There hadn’t been anyone on the sidewalk. I checked. Brought up as we had been, we learned to take precautions—and not necessarily against bad guys. Lost nannies, unpaid taxi drivers, even a camel could have waited on my doorstep.

“Nick will be here shortly.” Sidestepping my question, she shoved her bag down the stairs and let it explode on the antique Persian carpet I’d spent a month’s wages on at a flea market. It was the genuine thing, centuries old, frayed, worn, and I’d had high hopes of one day having a real home to put it in. I may as well have hoped the carpet would fly.

As promised, EG’s suitcase explosion produced an inflatable mattress and air pump along with her horde of books, two pairs of shorts, a silk robe that looked like a cast-off of our mother’s, and some T-shirts.

“I figured you’d need my help when Nick got here,” EG continued, gathering up her books and neatly arranging them in a stack beside the textbooks on my computer table. The textbooks were left over from an assignment that was as yet unfinished—mainly because my client had disappeared. At least he’d had the decency to pay his bill in advance.

I surveyed the clutter rearranging my neat cave. Her books were old hardcovers with faded writing that I’d probably have to explore to make certain none of them said something like *Sorcery Made Easy*.

“Nick hasn’t the attention span to find me,” I told her, although it came out more question than statement.

EG, like me, had led a nomadic life, never knowing whether we’d be stationed in mud huts or palaces from one day to the next. Loosely speaking, our mother was part of the government diplomatic core, a foreign correspondent, and/or a camp follower, depending on what man she was with that year. All of us were well versed in the cheapest way to travel to Marakesh. Still, that a nine-year-old had taken the time and found the resources to locate me when my mother had not made me very, very uneasy.

I gathered up EG’s clothes and heaved them back in the suitcase that would have to serve as her dresser. “Nick disapproves of my lifestyle,” I told her. Or lack thereof. As a VA, I stayed safely inside four walls. I communicated with fascinating people who lived exciting lives,

without the necessity of bandaging bleeding torsos or chasing baboons out of the kitchen—services my family had been known to require. “I can’t imagine why Nick would want to find me.”

“Because his latest lover stole his car and ran off with his hair stylist, and he’s depressed and has nowhere else to go.” EG plopped her skinny, jeans-encased rear in my computer chair and began accessing her e-mail. All in black, she looked like a miniature me. I even recognized her avoidance technique. She was hiding something. My insides knotted as I imagined all the disasters my brilliant half-siblings could incur.

Magda had named us after royalty. I assume Magda was on a Russian kick when she named her two eldest. I’m Anastasia. Nicholas is four years younger than me. Nick was named after the late czar, rather appropriately as it turned out. He possesses the royal *savoir-faire* Prince Charles lacks.

I didn’t ask how EG knew he was on the way here. It’s a waste of time asking. She just knew and the sooner one accepted it, the easier it was to move forward.

To outsiders, it might sound as if my family is totally weird, but look at the statistics. Most families end in divorce these days. Single-parent homes are the rule, not the exception. It’s just that in our family, we’re all overachievers, and we had our exceptional mother to thank for that. Had we actually possessed the wealth of royalty—or at least the American equivalent—we would have been lauded as the next generation of Kennedys, capable of running the country or corporate boardrooms. Instead, Magda expressed her ambition and overcompensated with powerful men and numerous offspring.

I was already hyperventilating, imagining the disasters that would divert EG and Nick to my doorstep. Having my most lucrative client disappear leaving a mysterious e-mail message about *envelopes, poison, top hats, and pow* was as much insanity as I was willing to tolerate.

“Look, this area crawls with drug dealers. It isn’t safe for either of you,” I said, as if EG needed to be told what she no doubt already knew. “What did her Highness do to set you off?”

Pecking away at my keyboard, EG hit the *Send* button and probably notified the entire planet of my whereabouts. “I’m out for summer vacation, and she wants to visit the ski slopes of Switzerland with the sheik. Since we’re temporarily homeless. . .”

She didn’t have to finish. I knew the routine by heart. Our mother loved to live like the

royalty she claimed to be, but the crown jewels were long since pawned, and nannies could only be paid by men with better-paying positions than Magda's. Not that we ever knew precisely what her position was. I gave up asking long ago.

"Set up your bed," I agreed in resignation, once more returning to the role of family doormat. I didn't want to talk to Magda, but even I realized I'd have to let her know EG was safe. "The cupboard is bare. I have to run to the grocery if you're staying."

EG shrugged and waved me off.

None of this was really the kid's fault. The schism had always been between my mother and me. I believed in homes, security, and routines. Magda was a staunch advocate of chaos.

In rusty caretaking mode, I tugged on my running shoes, grabbed my shoulder bag, and jogged up the stairs and out the tall front door, making mental grocery lists.

Another sister would have felt guilty for leaving a nine-year-old in a run-down apartment house riddled with druggies and psychotics. I was confident EG would have erected an elaborate security system and conned, coerced, or otherwise convinced an alarm company to arm it before I returned. That wasn't just EG's genius. It's what our family's lifestyle had trained us to do. We are the future—prepared for any event from nuclear holocaust to Martian invasion. Of course, the commonplace, like going to the supermarket or living in houses, eluded the rest of my family. That had always been my job.

I longed to pound out my frustration on the punching bag at my favorite gym down the street, but I didn't trust EG alone in my apartment *that* long. A good run would have to suffice.

#

EG breathed a sigh of relief now that she was inside the apartment. Ana might huff and puff, but everyone in the family knew she was the safe haven they could rely on. It had been a little scary when Ana had dropped out of sight, but the *Oracle* had been extremely helpful in locating her after EG had quizzed a search engine.

She didn't know who Oracle was, but the instant she'd explained her problem, his e-mails had given her Ana's screen name. Their computer geek brother, Tudor, had helped trace it. Nick had instructed her on the best methods of transportation since she'd never been in the States before, although she had an American passport because her parents were born here.

The last time EG had seen Ana, she'd been only four or five, but she distinctly remembered

the visit. Magda had dumped several of the younger kids at the Italian villa where Ana had moved after she'd declared her independence and run off with her new computer. At the time, Magda had signed on for some African junket as a newspaper correspondent. Or spy, but no one ever said that aloud. Whatever, she'd needed a nest to leave her cuckoos in.

Magda had left a nanny to help Ana out, but the nanny had a tendency to smoke pot in her off hours, which seemed to be 24/7. Ana had come home to find the kitchen stove on fire and the stoned nanny admiring the blaze.

Grinning, EG recalled the image of her petite sister as heroine that she'd cherished over the years. Four years ago, Ana had been growing out her bangs. She'd pulled the odd lengths of her shorter hair back by little butterfly barrettes that marched across her scalp in single-file lines. She'd been barefoot and in some gauzy ankle-length skirt, looking no older than a teenager. Walking into the kitchen, Ana had morphed from caretaking sister to berserker in two seconds flat. She'd competently slammed a cover over the flaming pan, grabbed the stoned nanny by the arm, and with a nonchalance that had left EG open-mouthed, flipped the nanny off the balcony into the patio umbrellas and shrubbery below.

She'd then taken them all out for Italian ices while the smoke cleared.

Of course, the nanny had threatened criminal action, and Ana had been evicted from her apartment for almost setting the building on fire. She hadn't blamed anyone for the episode. She'd just efficiently packed them all up and found a new home until Magda returned, and Ana had disappeared for good.

EG wanted to be Ana when she grew up.

Even in her adoration, EG knew she was imposing on her sister's limited goodwill. But Ana was the only hero she knew.

She desperately needed a hero right now.

With a click of the keys, EG switched the computer to the MSNBC website to check the latest headlines and tried not to cry when she read the top story.

#

I couldn't say if it was instinct or luck that caused me to take the long route to the grocery. With my size, I look like a victim, but in my first few months of living in downtown Atlanta, I'd firmly corrected that impression. I now had an unspoken pact with the local street thugs—they

disappeared when they saw me coming, and I didn't send their mamas photos of what they'd been doing. Life was good.

Besides, I didn't expect trouble on a steamy August afternoon. Most people had the sense to stay indoors until night cooled the city streets. I was grappling with my frustration with my feckless mother and still contemplating stopping to kickbox a few rounds to work it off, when the jeering young punks on the street corner ahead of me raised all my protective antennae. Without EG's warning of Nick's potential arrival, I might have turned down a side street and avoided a confrontation.

On second thought, given my need to punch something, probably not. I might be a doormat for my family, but I have an attitude twice my size as a result.

"I trust you're stopping a purse snatcher," I called loudly enough to be heard over the taunts.

Most people would think one diminutive white female in baggy black T-shirt and capris from Goodwill wouldn't be heard or listened to in a fight involving hulking adolescents in a salute to the street's ethnic diversity, and they might be right. That's why I carried a cap gun in my purse that sounded like a rocket launcher.

I pulled the trigger.

The thugs with enough brains left to connect noise with danger jumped three feet off the ground. The ones familiar with my dirty fighting glanced over their shoulders, grimaced, and melted down an alleyway, leaving the last baggy-pants combatant and his victim revealed.

"Greetings, Ana!" Nick shouted—well, *gaily*. He really was a cheerful fellow, even when provoked by hoodlums with no fashion sense. "Would you be so kind as to explain to this bloke that I need to keep my necklace?"

Nick's father is a British lord. That didn't give him an excuse to adopt a posh accent since he mostly grew up with the rest of us, with only an occasional interim in one of those expensive all-male Brit public schools. Still, he sounded good. I'd missed that barmy accent.

Grinning in appreciation at recognizing Nick and the show that would follow, I crossed my arms over my insignificant chest, cap pistol prominently displayed, and waited for the last wiseass to wise up and depart.

Apparently on a coke downhill slide, the thug popped his blade and glared menacingly at me. "Cute, real cute," he sneered.

“I know.” I smiled big and fluttered my lashes and Nick almost cracked up. In the decades of protecting my family in foreign lands, I’d learned that coolness in the face of bullies showed them we were as crazy as they were. Took them aback and gave me time to figure out an escape. “Take my brother’s necklace, and he turns mean.”

The thug laughed and turned his back on me. Big mistake, but one I had counted on. As did Nick.

He’d learned a new move or two since we’d learned basic judo from a master. A little *tae kwan do* was my guess. Whatever. Nick hit first, showing off by swinging agilely to kick the punk with an upper thrust of his heel. Going for the balls is usually a bad option—the target is too small. But Nick knew what he was doing. We’d had lots of practice, after all.

The guy bent in two to protect his valuables, bringing him down to my level. I bopped him on his do-rag with the cap pistol, and he toppled, howling.

My therapists tell me I may have a few repressed anger issues. I’m cool with that.

Nick stepped on his attacker’s wrist and captured the knife, flipping it closed and slipping it into his pocket in one smooth move.

A crowd of young punks watched from across the street. If this had been some gang initiation, our victim was lucky he failed. Maybe he’d live to grow up and be a lawyer. If it wasn’t an initiation, we were about to be set upon.

“Just like old times,” I murmured, spinning around to jog toward the apartment with Nick on my trail. At least he’d been bright enough to leave his luggage elsewhere.

“And you’re looking more like Magda with every passing year,” he agreed in his own oblique way. “What is that you’re wearing? Pajamas? Why don’t you wear something to flaunt what you have instead of hiding behind that abysmal disguise?”

“What, and repeat Magda’s mistakes?” I asked in incredulity, reaching for my keys as we approached the apartment door. “I don’t need the attention, thank you very much.”

“Some things never change,” he agreed with good humor. “Do you ever intend to grow up and quit competing with her?”

“I’ve changed,” I declared. “I’m working on the important stuff inside and not the superficial stuff on the outside. I don’t need to compete with anyone.”

“Tell me another one, Dr. Faustus.”

He looked good today, as usual. We both have our mother's angled cheekbones, but Nick inherited her blond hair as well. I don't remember his father, but he apparently had a firm square jaw with a nice cleft that he passed on. And Nick got the height in the family as well. I figured him for movie star material, but he had absolutely no memory for words. He did, however, possess an aptitude for mathematics that served him well in Monte Carlo.

"I like to believe I'm on the side of the angels," I countered. "Cover my back."

"Turned chicken since last we met?" he taunted, scanning the street, while I undid the locks.

If I didn't know him so well, I'd take that as a reference to my refusal to compete with my mother, but Nick isn't that deep. He was referring to the punks behind us.

"Until today, I'd taught them to leave me alone. It would have been nice to keep it that way."

I let him into the foyer and secured the bolt behind us before taking the stairs down to my rooms.

Showing her training, EG had already made herself at home. She'd borrowed my extra set of sheets to make up her air mattress, tucked her suitcase under my cot, and was pigging down my raspberry yogurt.

"Hey, Eezhee." Nick slurred the initials into a Slovakian name. "It really is like old times, isn't it? How long have you been mooching off the czarina?"

I left them to catch up and did my usual introverted disappearance by retreating to my inner sanctum. My family hadn't been here for an hour, and already I was a marked target in the neighborhood. This was not an unusual development.

On my own, I might have fought the odds just to keep from moving again. I liked the old Victorian I'd made my home these last few years. Admittedly, my two-room coal cellar wasn't the most gracious home in the world, but it was mine, and I treasured the few possessions I'd collected. I liked my antique iron bedstead with the flowers painted on it, and the copper and black Persian rug with the moth holes. They were *mine*, and I'd worked hard to earn them.

But until I knew what to do about EG, I needed a safe house, and this wasn't a neighborhood for kids, especially one like EG who got in trouble by opening her mouth.

As usual when I had some hard thinking to do, I sat down at my laptop. Writing was a recommended anger management technique that I hadn't practiced enough. As soon as I poured my frustration into these pages, my brain started whirring.

The first thing I acknowledged was that we'd just made ourselves targets for every gang

member in the area. The humiliation of being beaten by a pip-squeak and a gay male model would incite the hoodlums like rabid gunslingers. They'd have to come after us just to prove they were still top dogs.

I'd been through this enough times to know it was fruitless hoping trouble would go away. Once the rabble discovered my family's eccentric propensities, we were hounded into either retaliation or escape. Not for the first time, I wished my family were normal with a huge house someplace safe and boring where we could live in peace.

I didn't follow that thought to its logical conclusion immediately, because in my family, it wasn't a logical conclusion. No, the next step of logic was to wonder again why EG and Nick had arrived on my doorstep on the same day and conclude that my first intuition had been right. Something was vastly wrong.

Had I kept typing, I might have reached the right solution sooner, but the realization that I'd been scammed drove me out of my seat and back to the front room again.

"All right, no more evasions." I waited in the doorway, hands on skinny hips, trying to look formidable. "I want a good explanation of why you're here."

Nick had the experience to look suitably innocent. EG didn't. She shoved a spoonful of my raspberry yogurt into her mouth to cover up, but I had two decades of practice over her. I snatched the cup away and pointed at the door.

"I get the whole story or I'll put you on the first train to D.C. and your dad if you don't spill." This last was directed at EG. Nick could take care of himself.

EG's lower lip trembled, and Nick sighed in resignation. Another woman would have felt guilty yelling at a crying kid, but I crossed my arms to hold in my gut-wrenching dismay and gazed at my half brother for explanation.

Nick shrugged. "Don't you ever read the newspapers?"

"Why? They only make me want to walk the street carrying a sign saying *Repent or the world shall end tomorrow.*" I hadn't buried myself in the basement just to avoid family. There was a whole world out there that I would avoid if I could. That way, I could live with the fantasy that the rest of the universe contained sane people, and it was only my piece of it that was nuts.

EG went to my computer, hit a few keys, and called up a news channel. There, in big bold letters I couldn't miss, was the headline: SENATOR TEX HAMMOND A SUSPECT IN

AIDE'S MURDER.

Tex was EG's dad.

Copyright 2011 by Patricia Rice