

Café Berger, Hamburg

"Tell me, Andree, you don't really work at Siemens in the IT department, as you always say, do you?" Manuela Hülshoff looked the 46-year-old, stocky man with the shaggy full beard and thick horn-rimmed glasses straight in the eye.

He raised his eyebrows.

"What makes you think that? Of course I do!"

They sat across from each other at a window table in Café Berger. Every time Andree met his former classmate, the secret love of his youth, he felt weak in the knees. Even after all these years.

"You are a miserable liar, my dear. I saw through you long ago, believe me."

The journalist, his age, shook her shoulder-length dark hair and winked at him. She still had those green eyes, as mysterious as they were radiant, and that air of warm tenderness which Andree fell in love with thirty years ago. He could never show her that, of course. He was well aware, even then as a teenager, that he was anything but attractive. On top of that, an oddball, a nerd, a geek, one who was not interested in football, not in parties, just his books, his soldering irons and computers.

"What else do you think I do? Fitness trainer at McFit?"

Manuela laughed.

To Andree, that sounded like music.

Their coffee cups were empty by now, and he motioned to the waitress to bring two more.

"No way," she chuckled, "but I have this theory. Every time I get stuck with a piece of research and ask you for help, you drop everything and hotfoot it over to meet me. Usually here at Berger. And often within an hour, no matter when I call you. That, my dear, doesn't sound like a nine-to-five at Siemens to me. And another thing ..." she raised her index finger to give the following a special meaning, "a virtuoso like you would certainly not be working for Siemens. That would be casting pearls before swine."

Andree scratched his chin.

"First of all, I work on a project basis, and mainly from my home office. And what have you got against Siemens, anyway? It's a huge corporation. Pays well, and they get me to head up some very interesting and varied projects."

Manuela shook her head.

"I've got nothing against Siemens, but with your skills you wouldn't just be developing control modules, you'd be an important key figure with the police in the fight against organized crime, or with the military counterintelligence service, or even the secret service for counterespionage, something like that."

Now it was Andree who laughed, and he took pains to make it sound genuine. But his longtime girlfriend rubbed her index finger across both nostrils in turn, the

way Vicky used to do in the animated series of the same name: "Admit it!"

"Look at me!" said Andree, curving his hands around his fat belly, "Me in the police? Me a fighter against criminals? Forget it! That would definitely not be my thing. Siemens really suits me fine."

Manuela smiled. She put her hand on his arm.

"It's okay, Andree, I was just kidding. I called you because I need your help again."

"All right, go ahead!"

Manuela propped her elbows on the tabletop and leaned forward. Then she whispered, "This time it's not research, but I think I'm in danger myself."

"Are you on to something dangerous?"

"No, but my brother was surprised by burglars in his home in Leipzig over the weekend. They tied him up, and his wife and children. There were several men, they started searching the whole house."

She fell silent and looked around nervously. For a long time, her eyes surveyed the parking lot outside the window where they sat.

"They kept hitting him and yelling at him to tell them where the papers were. But he wouldn't say, just moaned between blows and kicks that he had copies of them on a data carrier anyway and had deposited it in a safe place. So the originals would be of no use to them, because his middleman would then immediately go public with this information. Little brother simply has nerves of steel."

She was already enjoying Andree's undivided attention. "That didn't stop them from turning half the house upside down until they finally found what they were looking for. Those documents that my brother had acquired weeks ago in an antiquarian bookshop in Görlitz. They were in the bottom of one of those mixed boxes of sundry items. The antiquarian had been offered them years before by a Polish judicial officer and bought them from him. So after triumphantly holding up this bundle of papers, the men disappeared as quickly as they had appeared."

"Holy shit!" Andree leaned back in his chair.

He smoothed his unruly beard with his thumb and forefinger before straightening again, leaning close to Manuela's face and whispering, "What's this got to do with you now? What are these papers, and what do you know about them?"

"Goddamn it, Andree! *I'm* that middleman my brother threatened them with! Just before all this happened, he sent me the data carrier with instructions to hide it in a good place and go public with it if anything happened to him."

"How would these men know it was you?"

"Andree! Come *on!* I'm his sister - and a journalist to boot. I'm the one they'd look to first, right? And in fact, I got an anonymous call this morning telling me to hand over the data carrier or something would happen to me, too."

"Have you opened it? What are these papers?"

"That's just the problem. I can't read it, and I didn't dare bring it here for fear of being mugged. That's where you come in. If anyone can read the data, you can. I don't have the technical knowhow."

"What kind of data carrier is it?"

But at that moment, the color drained from his girlfriend's face, and she stared past Andree out the window, eyes wide and mouth agape.

"Shit, they want me. That's exactly what the caller threatened. Run!"

With that, she grabbed her handbag and ran past the cake counter and through the swinging door into the kitchen. Andree looked over his shoulder and saw five Dark Devils rockers kickstanding their motorbikes and charging toward the café entrance.

He jumped up and ran as fast as he could after Manuela. The kitchen was long and narrow, with the vendor entrance at the other end. Just as he ran through the swing door, he saw his girlfriend flee outside. He rushed after her. But he soon ran out of breath. With a body weight of 250 pounds and no stamina, running away from five young rockers was hopeless. As soon as he got to the rear exit and into the alley, he crashed into one of the garbage cans standing there and fell to the ground. He saw three more rockers appear at the end of the street blocking Manuela's way. She stopped and looked around anxiously. Then two strong hands grabbed him by the shoulders, pulled him up and pressed his back against the brickwork.

He looked into an angular, tattooed face.

"I'm sorry about Berlin, Andree!" shouted Manuela from the end of the alley. The tattooed man grinned and took a swing.

A moment later, Andree's head exploded.

Everything went black.