

Enrique Allmers was on his way to the *La Vela* restaurant when the young woman barreled into him. He hadn't heard her coming. She'd come through the archway that connected the fish market with the Buttstraße, just as Enrique strolled past and their paths crossed. She collided with him at full speed, knocking down and then tumbling onto the man who had so suddenly and unexpectedly appeared in front of her. As they both got to their feet, Enrique realized why he hadn't heard the woman coming. She wasn't wearing any shoes.

She was barefoot.

In a split-second he took in the important details--something he was used to doing: early to mid-twenties, shoulder-length dark hair, knee-length, dark dress. Uninjured but exhausted, and with a terrified expression on her face.

But before he could say anything, he heard the sound of running footsteps, also coming from the Buttstraße and getting louder. He also realized that it was two pairs of feet, their sturdy shoes rapidly approaching on the cobblestone street.

The young woman looked briefly in the direction she'd been heading, but it was instantly

obvious that she'd given up any idea of continuing her escape. Instead, she took hold of Enrique's arm and shielded herself with his body.

Suddenly, the men appeared.

Enrique Allmers knew these types. Large, broad-shouldered, with short-cropped hair and oily, round heads. Expensive black suits, black vests, black ties. Wireless and cellphone earplugs. The holsters under their jackets were remarkably slim, but they certainly didn't escape his notice. His eye was well-trained for such details. He was also not surprised that neither of them were out of breath. They were in very good shape.

Enrique felt the trembling of the small hands clinging to him.

"Hit the road," the pursuer on the right growled at him.

"What's wrong?" Enrique whispered to the woman who cowered behind his back, but there was no answer. Instead, the second man spoke up:

"Are you deaf? Beat it!"

With a quick and experienced grip of his left hand, he gently loosened the fingers of the woman who was still clinging to his upper arm. Then he left her standing there and took a step toward the men.

"I'm sure you can see that it would be impossible for me to simply leave now," he said in a calm and relaxed voice. The two of them at first looked puzzled, then they moved toward him. Slowly, the space between the pair increased, presenting Enrique with two distinct targets. He observed with relief, however, that neither one of them made a move to draw their guns from their shoulder holsters. They were clearly convinced that intimidation--or, if necessary, a quick shove or a fist to the gut--would surely convince him to clear out.

But they were deceiving themselves.

As they closed in on him, he dashed into the gap that they'd left between themselves. Then they did precisely what he'd expected them to do. They turned to face him.

Enrique Allmers took advantage of it. He caught the one on the right with a haymaker to the temple that caused him to totter. He looked as though he was about to drop to the pavement like a wet sack, so Enrique immediately grabbed him under the arms and held him upright, using him as a shield.

He quickly reached into the jacket of the now-unconscious man, pulled the weapon from its holster and pointed it, under the arm of his victim,

at the other man. The whole thing took less than three seconds, so the second man had had no time to react. Instead, he stood there, slowly raised his arms, and said:

"Don't fuck with us! You don't know who you're dealing with."

Enrique Allmers motioned with the barrel of his gun in the direction of the man's jacket--and the weapon that it concealed. He pulled it out gently with his thumb and forefinger, placed it on the pavement and shoved with his foot so that it slid over to Enrique.

At that moment he felt the life returning to the body of the man he was holding. He pushed him away, bent down and grabbed the second gun and pointed them at both of his opponents. The one picked up and supported his still-dazed partner, and then they disappeared down the street from which they'd come.

Enrique looked around. Everywhere passersby had taken cover behind cars, on the other side of the large fountain, or in doorways, and watched the scene play out. The young woman in the dark dress looked at him with wide eyes, unable to move. He stuck the two guns into his waistband, grabbed her hand and pulled her away with him.

"Come on!" He whispered to her and ran.

He ran with her to where his Mitsubishi Pajero was parked, opened the passenger door and helped her in, then got behind the wheel and took off.

"So?" He said, the woman next to him as he drove through Altona toward St. Pauli.

"Who were those guys?"

The young woman sat huddled in the passenger seat with her face buried in her hands. She didn't answer him.

"My name's Rique," he tried again. "Actually, it's Enrique. My mother is Spanish, but I like Rique better. What's your name?"

The woman continued sobbing, holding her hands to her face and wiping away the tears. But she didn't respond to his questions.

"Hey!" Rique nudged her. She started, looked at him with big eyes and pressed herself into the passenger door.

"For God's sake, girl! Relax. You're safe. I won't hurt you. I'm one of the good guys." Rique turned into the Helgoländerstreet. He lived in a spacious penthouse on the shoreline of Alster Lake, and intended to hide her there for the time being.

"That is, if you consider a police detective to be a good guy," he added quietly.

He suspected that she was one of those unfortunate girls and women smuggled into Germany with the promise of a waitressing job. No sooner did they arrive than they got a rude awakening. Their passports were taken from them, they were imprisoned in their rooms, and then forced into prostitution. *Possibly, he thought, she doesn't speak German and isn't answering me because she doesn't understand me.* Rique spoke to her again, rattling off in English the names of countries she might have come from:

"Croatia? Serbia? Romania? Russia? Ukraine?"

No reaction. The woman didn't even look at him. She'd calmed down a bit by now, but she simply stared out the passenger window and seemed totally paralyzed.

Rique gave up.

Once home, he parked in the underground garage of the four-story building, helped the woman out of the car and took her up the elevator to his penthouse. It covered the entire fourth floor, and included an equally large roof terrace, which had a phenomenal view of Alster Lake.

The young woman looked around, clearly impressed. In fact, the apartment consisted of only about 200 square meters. The only furnishings

were a dining table with six chairs, a pull-out sofa with a floor lamp, a large flat-screen TV and a small bookcase. The rest of the room was filled with mats, fitness equipment of all kinds, and a large punching bag. There were four doors visible. Behind them were Rique's bedroom, study, kitchen and bathroom. The whole atmosphere was bright and cheerful, because of the large windows flooding the penthouse with daylight.

Rique closed the front door and motioned for her to have a seat at the table. Then he went into his bedroom and locked the two confiscated guns in his safe. Back in the main room, he opened the bathroom door and gestured to her.

"If you have to use the bathroom..."

The woman looked at him, but shook her head. *The first direct response*, he thought. Well, it was a start.

"Something to drink?" he asked, but this time she just looked at him and didn't respond. Rique crooked his index finger and lifted an imaginary coffee cup to his lips, as she looked at him quizzically.

Again, she shook her head.

*Okay, so she doesn't understand German. Then it'll have to be pantomime.*

He picked up the phone next to the sofa, sat at the table and called his office.

"Andree, listen! I've rescued a young woman from a couple of goons at the fish market. Probably a forced-prostitution victim from Eastern Europe who managed to escape. She doesn't understand German and she isn't saying anything."

While Rique was explaining to his colleague what had happened, the young woman stood up and walked over to one of the large windows. From there, she could look down on the street.

"At this point, I'm assuming she doesn't want any contact with the police; she's probably afraid of being reported and deported. I'll keep trying to get something out of her. Could you put a list together of the cathouses we know about in the area around the fish market and the Buttstraße?"

By *cathouses* he meant of course the illegal or semi-legal brothels, usually in the back rooms of cellar bars or in private homes. The proprietors of these places served up these unfortunate women on a daily basis as "fresh meat" for their clients.

Suddenly, the woman clapped her hands to attract his attention. Then she pointed excitedly out the window where she stood.

"What is it?" Rique asked quietly, looking at her. "Andree, how long do you need for the list? I'll come over as soon as I'm finished here." He spoke into the phone, but his eyes stayed fixed on her.

Then he hung up and went over to the woman, who was waiting anxiously for him. Rique looked out the window and down to the street to where she was pointing.

Two long, silver Mercedes sedans were parked on the opposite side of the street. Eight men in black suits were getting out of the cars. Four took up strategic positions nearby. The other four strode toward the entrance to the apartment building. Rique had no doubt whatsoever that they had the means to gain entry.

"How the hell...?" he swore, and grabbed her arm. She grimaced. He let her go, and she scratched at the spot where he'd gripped her. Rique took her arm again and looked closely at it. He discovered a fresh puncture wound, and he could feel an object under the skin, a little smaller than a pea.

*A GPS transmitter, damn it!*

Now the woman realized why this spot on her arm had itched and caused her pain. She looked Rique in the eye, both curious and alert, waiting to see what he would do now. He grabbed her hand

and guided her to the spiral staircase that led to the roof terrace.

Once there, they ran to the eastern side, and Rique climbed over the plexiglass barrier. It was about a two-meter drop to the roof of the neighboring house. Rique jumped, landing safely and springing immediately to his feet. He turned, looked up and gestured to the woman to do the same, and that he would catch her. She hesitated a moment, but then jumped. As he caught her, he had to take a step backward to keep from falling over, but he held her tightly. Her hair smelled of apple-scented shampoo. He turned, took her by the hand again and crossed this roof. Then he jumped down again to the next roof. She followed him quickly, and he caught her again. This last jump got them to the roof of a garage, and from there it was just a short jump down to a small patch of lawn. The garage was located in a side street, invisible from the front of his apartment house.

Rique pulled a set of keys from his pocket and opened the garage door with a remote control on the key ring. His office was located in the small, flat building attached to the garage. They climbed into in a VW Golf, left the garage and drove north.

He pressed the speed dial on the touchscreen in the center console, and Andree quickly answered. He explained the situation and let him know with a few quick code-words where he was headed. Then he hung up.

Meanwhile, in front of the apartment house, one of the black-suited men in the silver sedans checked a small monitor, pressed the speaker-button on the steering wheel and announced calmly, "They've escaped, and they're driving pretty fast in a northward direction. Abort the mission. Return to headquarters!"