

Friday 10:05

El Schenkenberg parked her lilac Mini in front of the traditional Alpine hotel in the middle of Austrian nowhere-land. Wooden, carved shutters adorned the windows, red geraniums lined the balcony. Surrounding the village and the valley, rocky white-capped mountains stood guard, holding El prisoner.

She took the GPS off her mount on the windshield and slid it into the top pocket of her backpack. Stepping outside, she smelled the crisp morning air heavy with the scent of pines. She pulled on her hiking boots and shoved the sneakers into the bulging pack then patted the Mini on the roof. "I'll be back, Chico. I hope."

Shivering and still wondering how she could let her assistant talk her into this, she stepped into the lobby of Gasthof Krone. A young woman behind the reception desk greeted her with a smile. "Good morning."

Martin Sander, the tall, broad-shouldered guy she'd seen in the climbing video online stood bent over a piece of paper, tapping the blunt end of a pencil on it. He looked in his late thirties. His slightly too long, dark-blond hair and a week-old beard gave him a scruffy but adventurous look. He certainly didn't need an image adviser.

"Hi, I'm here for the tour," El announced.

He looked up. Bright blue eyes fixed her, unblinking as a snake's. It took effort to pull her gaze from his eyes. She registered the wide, amused smile. He obviously knew the hypnotic effect of his gaze. Only she didn't like to be

ensnared.

"You must be El Schenkenberg."

"I am."

They shook hands.

"Martin Sander, your guide for the next five days." He broke into a wide smile. "Hope you don't mind placing your life in my capable hands?"

El raised her eyebrows but didn't grant him a response. The thought that she'd have to rely on him for the next five days didn't do anything to ease her apprehension.

He continued. "Unusual name, El. I was wondering..."

"Wondering what?" Twenty seconds and he already annoyed the hell out of her.

"Nothing." He seemed to hide a smirk while drawing a check mark on the paper. "You've got forty minutes for a last luxurious breakfast before we set out." His eyes quickly scanned her, foot to nose, but without a leer. "Do I know you?"

I hope not, she thought. "I don't think so."

"How did you find out about Adventure Treks?"

"I found one of your flyers on my windshield at an Autobahn rest stop. Usually, I just throw crap like that away." This time something went horribly wrong.

His gaze intensified. "Huh, at a rest stop? Interesting." He smiled.

Why the heck did that make him smile? It couldn't possibly matter where she found the stupid flyer. El shrugged. Time to take control of the situation.

"Where's the coffee?"

He pointed down a corridor. "First door on the left, corner table at the back of the room. With you, we're complete. I'll join you in a minute."

She found the restaurant and scanned the four faces while approaching the table. A woman was sitting too close to a man about the same age, late thirties, she guessed. Clearly a couple. Plus a young fellow, who looked more uncertain than El felt, and a man in his forties, who appeared totally at ease. Attractive, wearing his outdoor attire as if it were part of his body.

"Hi, I'm El."

The looker smiled at her and pulled out the chair next to him. "Hello. I'm David. Have a seat, dig in. Might be the last proper meal for a while."

The young man's eyes didn't really focus on her. He mumbled his name was Moritz, but everyone called him Ritz. His dark hair reached to his shoulders. His face looked flushed. The lanky frame made her want to feed him. A faint scar on the cheek gave him a dangerous air.

The couple introduced themselves as Sabine and Bernd. No wedding bands. Married man with his mistress or just a couple who didn't believe in marriage? They certainly had an air of secrecy. Why should she care?

She scanned the table. Bread rolls in a basket, croissants on a plate, cheese, ham, Nutella, jam, butter and boiled eggs. If this was a luxurious breakfast, what awaited them the next few days?

She took even breaths as if she were about to negotiate a major loan for her company then smiled at her fellow hikers. Unlike her, all of them seemed happy to be here and eager to set out.

How did she end up in this trap?

17 Days Earlier

The red snake of rear lights slithered through the fading light of dusk. Traffic always clogged up around Munich. Someone should blast away that cancerous growth, Martin Sander thought. The speedometer needle wavered just below 100 km/h. Night fell during the crawl around the Moloch. A football game played on the radio. He didn't care much for either team but the reporter's struggle to comment on a boring match amused him.

He was in no hurry to get anywhere. Only a rarely used apartment and a microwaved meal awaited him. Still, he felt trapped on the crowded Autobahn. When he saw a clear stretch ahead, he gripped the leather-covered steering wheel of his new BMW X3, pulled up close to the car in front and signaled left. The vehicle hopped out of his way. He switched from radio to CD player. *Highway to Hell* blared from the speakers. Yes! He shifted down and felt the power of the engine press him into the seat. How could anyone possibly push for a speed limit on the Autobahn?

The needle rose to 150, 170, 180. Then he had to brake again. Martin

swore with frustration. Hopeless. A rest stop sign flashed by. Okay, time for a break. Maybe the traffic would ease up later. He crossed over to the right lane, cutting a car off, and onto the exit ramp before the driver could even honk. Just in time, he braked hard, let the car roll past the gas station and parked close to the restaurant.

Too late he realized the five spots were reserved for women. So far he'd only seen that in parking garages, the level closest to the exit marked as 'Women only'. He grinned. What a great invention. If he were a rapists or flasher, he'd exactly know where to find and molest timid women traveling alone. He pushed the key back into the ignition then decided against moving the X3 to the regular lot. This could be fun.

Martin stepped from his air-conditioned car and sniffed the humid night air. Earth mixed with exhaust topped by a whiff of cooking grease. What a welcome back to civilization. He sauntered into the fast food restaurant and bought a cafe latte. Sipping the hot brew, he strolled back outside into the warm July night. He sat on the tree trunk fencing off a deserted tiny playground-right under the sign *Frauenparkplätze*. Invading a space reserved for women, he conjured up images in his mind: An enraged matron attacking him with an umbrella. A young woman, startled, screaming 'pervert' at him. Then what? He might have to run for his life.

No luck, though. No lone woman pulled into one of the designated spots while he savored his coffee.

Oh well, on the weekend he'd start a new tour and play master and commander of a group of arrogant marketing pricks. And they'd all have to

depend on his skills to survive in the wilderness. He loved company outings. The dynamics and rivalries between these suckers made his life look picture perfect. Something unforeseen always happened and those were the moments he relished: crisis, panic, danger.

Martin gulped down the rest of his coffee and stood. He froze in the lights of an approaching Mini. It pulled in next to his X3 and looked even more dwarfed. He chuckled at the ridiculous lilac race car paint job.

The lights went out and the engine died. The female driver glanced at him-or maybe the sign-and Martin watched, waited for her to hesitate and regard him with suspicion. Maybe even fear...

She grabbed something from the passenger seat and pushed open the door. The interior lights flashed on and illuminated a head of brown curls. When she stepped out, he saw the three centimeter heel of her left shoe followed by a slender but muscular leg in silky black tights. Or stockings? She wore a black business outfit, the skirt stopping just above her knees, the open jacket revealing a multicolored blouse. Classy. Possibly a few years older than he was. Late thirties?

Martin's gaze flicked to her serene face, showing the hint of a smile. Still no sign she'd noticed him lurking just three meters away. That's what city life did to people. They faded. He hated to move among crowds, masses of self-absorbed minds, eyes never making contact.

A trace of perfume wafted over. Lemon grass?

She shut the door, shook her hair out of her face, slung her bag over her shoulder and strolled toward him-or rather the restaurant. So close. He could

touch her if he wanted to.

She stopped.

Martin scratched his stubbly cheek. She granted him no attention, not even a sideways glance. Instead, she fumbled in her bag, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and stuck one between her painted lips.

She lingered in the 'women only' parking spaces, ignoring him-a lone, unfamiliar male gawking at her within an arm's reach. If Martin were a woman, he'd be digging for his pepper spray.

Then she looked straight at him, frowning. "You got a lighter? I can't find mine."

"Sorry. I don't smoke." No longer feeling like the invisible man, he grinned.

She shrugged and broke eye contact. With a sigh she put the cigarette back in the pack and strode toward the brightly lit restaurant. Totally unfazed.

Impressed and disappointed, he stared after her until she disappeared from his view. Martin crushed the empty paper cup in his hand and tossed it into a trash bin. With his hands in his pockets, he strolled toward the X3 then stopped and looked over his shoulder. Boy, he'd love to take her on a tour. Plenty of possibilities to teach her a few things. To open her eyes.

Grinning, he climbed into his SUV. The stack of flyers he'd picked up from the print shop this morning had tumbled to the floor. He put them back onto the passenger seat then took one out. *Adventure Treks* in fiery letters above a mountaineer reaching the peak. And below: *Survival Training - Team Building*.

Why not try? A couple of days in the mountains with her...

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El walked into the shop next to the restaurant and bought a lighter. What was the world coming to when guys didn't carry fire anymore just in case a woman needed a light?

She got in line for coffee. A double-shot might give her the needed kick. A woman in her fifties handed over the latte with a warm smile. Not the most common sight with German service staff. El thanked her and strode outside, where she took a sip, set down the paper cup on a high table and fumbled for a cigarette. She lit up and inhaled with satisfaction. She blew out the smoke, which hovered in the still air. One had to be grateful for the little pleasures.

What a day. Thank goodness it was over. El looked into the starry sky. She could make out Mars with its orange glow. A cloud partly obscured Orion. She grabbed the coffee and ambled toward Chico.

She enjoyed the nicotine buzz though her throat and lungs started to complain. Usually she limited herself to five cigarettes. Today she'd gone through half a pack already. You didn't strike a half-a-million euro deal with a sleazy debauchee and still watch your nicotine level.

Smoking and sipping coffee, she leaned against the driver's door and rolled her head to stretch the tense muscles in her neck and shoulders. First thing in the morning, she had to send Meister an e-mail, pinning him down, reeling in the contract.

The wannabe rake would certainly try to lure her back into his lair for more personal meetings. Fifteen years her senior, he still thought he could mix business with pleasure-his pleasure.

She sighed and took another drag. Her inbox would be filled with e-mails after just one day out of the office. Catching up would take her the major part of tomorrow. Maybe she'd leave early on Friday.

What for? Another dull weekend. Ugh. Sunday was her birthday. No hope of her employees forgetting with Jenny around. She would make a fuss on Monday and probably come up with some horrible present. Yoga lessons last year, a meditative cookbook including CD the year before. El shivered.

Why would anyone want to celebrate their forty-fourth birthday? Another year and she'd be pushing fifty. She should have booked that wellness weekend Friday through Monday and sent Franz to negotiate with Meister.

But of course, she was too much of a control freak to relax with massages and fango packs and...Stop torturing yourself. Can't delegate? Deal with it and stop whining.

El shivered despite the mild temperatures. She crushed her cigarette in an ashtray and returned to the car. She decided to watch a movie when she got home. Something mind-numbing, uplifting. One of her favorites. Maybe Fried Green Tomatoes or Thelma & Louise. A fitting end to a crazy day.

She eased behind the wheel then saw a flash of red under the windshield wiper. That was a first, people distributing flyers at an Autobahn rest stop. She stood and plucked it. Survival tours, team building? What an irony.

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From his dark car, Martin watched the woman circle the playground, obviously deep in thought. She fascinated him. Her surroundings didn't seem to

matter at all. Puffs of smoke curled into the air. Finally, she finished her round and stubbed out the cigarette.

He sat up straighter. Would she take the bait? She reached her car, threw in her bag, eased in then stepped out again and took the flyer. She studied it for a moment. Yes! She slipped it in her jacket pocket. Are we going to play, babe? I hope so. With growing excitement, he watched her ease behind the wheel.

Sitting completely still, he wanted to become invisible. Now was not the moment to be noticed. He waited until the headlights flashed on and she pulled out of the parking spot.

Martin turned the key in the ignition, eyes fixed on the mirror. He saw her rear lights disappearing down the asphalt toward the Autobahn entrance. Switching on the lights, he followed at a distance. The lilac Mini would be easy to keep in sight.

A considerate driver, she carefully eased over to the left lane, slowly accelerating. Easy, he thought. She sped up, taking him by surprise. Martin fell further behind than he intended. Waiting for a large enough gap, he drummed his fingers on the wheel. Finally! He squeezed in between two cars and pulled up close to the one in front of him. His gaze dropped to the dashboard. Only 160 km/h! "C'mon, Grandma. Move it."

He signaled left. Nope, the polite approach didn't work. He inched closer and flashed the high beams. The driver swerved out of his way. Martin shifted down and slammed on the gas pedal. Where was she? Damn! He raced past the row of snails on the right lane, bullied another car out of his way, then he

saw the rear lights of the Mini ahead.

Martin caught up, still keeping a reasonable distance. The number plate matched. He smiled. All right, let's see how you like this. The Mini was passing two trucks. Perfect. Nowhere to go. Martin closed in and flashed the high beams. Can you still ignore me? The Mini kept its speed. No swerve. Nothing. As if Martin didn't exist. He pulled up closer.

The brake lights of the Mini flashed. Too close! Martin slammed on the brakes. The Mini sped off. The bitch must have just tipped on the brake to set off the lights. He laughed. A honk behind. In the rear-view mirror he saw a Mercedes trying to nudge him out of the way. Martin swerved onto the right lane, his heart still hammering.

The adrenaline subsided. Martin grinned. C'mon babe, sign up for the tour and let's play some more.