

**ONE
WAY
TICKET**

PETER SARDA

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Prologue

Lars felt the giant shadow before he saw it looming behind him in the bulletproof glass.

“Game time is over,” the giant said.

Lars spun around and looked up into two steel eyes embedded in a beefy skull under a single eyebrow. “What the fuck?” he said. Hasani’s enforcer didn’t normally work indoors.

“He wants to see you.”

Lars smelled garlic. “Let me cash in my chips.” He turned back to the window. The cashier was nowhere to be seen.

“Now,” the giant said.

Lars shifted his weight, keeping his phone hand out of view. His thumb felt around desperately for the SOS button. Holding it down for three seconds activated a GPS alert. *Officer in trouble.*

“Let’s go,” the giant said.

The button vibrated confirmation.

Lars nodded and put the phone away. Then he pivoted, took a half-step, and put his full weight into the kick.

The giant’s eyes went wide. He went down clutching his groin.

At the blackjack table, bettors looked at them with open mouths. The *chef de table* was frozen mid-motion, a card in his hand.

Lars slammed into the emergency exit and flew down the steps, using the railing like a sled, bumping into walls at each turn. A herd of buffalos pounded the stairways above his head. Round and round they went. Third floor, second floor, first floor, lobby.

As Lars crashed out of the stairwell, he saw a guard at the front

desk talking into his sleeve and staring right at him. Lars flashed his P6 and cleared the turnstile in one fluid motion. Then he blasted through the double glass doors and raced to his Harley. It took him two frantic attempts to jump-start the beast. As it fishtailed out onto the street, he felt rain in his hair.

He made a hard right through a red at Alsterglaciis. A double-articulated bus packed with commuters skidded sideways across the intersection. Up ahead was a sea of cars on Kennedybrücke.

A black van crashed through the brush of Gustav Mahler Park and accelerated into his path, its battering ram nearly grazing his right leg.

Lars gunned the chopper onto the frontage road below the bridge and through the underpass. He made a hard left onto Lombardbrücke, somehow bouncing onto the sidewalk without hitting the steel railing.

Needles of rain pelted his face as he weaved in and out of bike paths and around posts. The Alster River flew by on his right, and he kept pace with the InterCity train to his left. A kid waved at him from one of the windows.

Halfway across the bridge, the headlights were gone from his mirror. He almost laughed. Oversized black vans with snatch teams didn't fit on sidewalks.

He slowed the chopper as the path curved into a wooded area. Wet oak leaves slapped his face as broken cement rattled his spine. The chopper made a looping left at Ferdinandstor and followed the path under a second low bridge. The InterCity screeched above.

A wall of light blinded Lars. He screamed as the railing shattered his knee, flipping the chopper sideways and slamming him into an I-beam. He clawed rusty iron on his way down.

The headlights backed up through the moving spokes of his front wheel. As the van gurgled away, everything went black.

■ ■ ■

Lars woke up to a nightmare. He was buried under tons of black oily water, trying to reach the surface. He screamed and screamed, but nothing came out.

“Goddamn it, Lars, wake up!” someone said from far away. A beefy hand slapped his face.

Lars screamed bubbles at the familiar voice. It was Motz! He got the SOS.

“Lars! Don’t you die on me!”

Die? Nobody was going to die, Lars thought. Except maybe Hasani. His badass buddy Motz would rip the Albanian apart at the joints. Lars laughed more bubbles.

“You’re back!” Motz yelled. “You scared the shit out of me, you bastard.”

“Ma—” Lars said.

“Yeah, it’s me, partner,” Motz said. “We’ll get you out of here.”

Lars shook himself free of the mask. “Mar-mal!” he screamed. Hasani’s real shipment was coming from Mazar-i-Sharif.

“What?” Motz yelled back.

Lars coughed up something thick and warm.

“Stay with me, Lars!”

“An—” He couldn’t get it all the way out.

“Save your breath, Lars!”

“An-ton!” Lars screamed, spitting out all that slimy warmth. His teeth began to chatter. Damn, was it cold out there.

“Antonov?”

Lars smiled and let go. Motz got it. Hasani was shipping under a Russian flag. They would catch him red-handed this time.

Delicious warmth filled Lars’ mouth. No more of that chattering bullshit, he thought.

“Lars!” Motz yelled. “Stay with me! You hear me, Lars? I mean it, Goddamn it! Lars, you fucking stay with me!”

Lars chewed the thick warmth. Twenty bites before you swallow, like Grandpa Hanson always said.

Motz was drifting up and away. Lars wondered what he was doing up there in all that water. When Motz opened his mouth, he made a *woah-woah-woah* sound. Then he was just a swaying light that got further and further away. Then he was gone.

A warm wave brushed Lars' cheek with a gentle *whoosh*. He snuggled into the delicious dream. He was almost home.

ONE

Undercover

The InterCity Express veered left with a protracted sparking screech. Ritter flexed his gun hand, but the tingling didn't let go.

Outside the double-paned window, needles of sunlight bounced off yellow cranes reaching into purple sky above HafenCity. Concrete penthouses for plastic people. Behind that were the green slate roofs, ornate orange bricks, and shimmering mirrored windows of the Speicherstadt, the old warehouse district. The postcard picture put his teeth on edge.

Coming up on the right were squat brick warehouses covered with gang-like graffiti. Now that was more like it. Three punks in baggy black shorts and lace-up boots were teeing off next to beach chairs and a short case of Astra on the flat roof. It was the kind of thing the *Amis* used to do on Bagram Air Base.

Something banged the back of Ritter's seat. His hand went to his hip. Then his mind caught up. His H&K was in the duffel bag in the overhead compartment. Turning, he saw an overly tan retiree struggling with two oversized burgundy suitcases, both marked with yellow ribbons. The square-shaped wife with the "blonde" buzzcut looked on disdainfully.

The other passengers were on their feet, grabbing identical trolley bags from overhead compartments and clogging the aisle with zero regard for one another. The kind of self-righteous civilians who condemned police brutality under *any* circumstance. *The law is the law*, they would say sternly over their red wine, then move on to the weather.

None would approve of the short trigger reset on Ritter's

ambidextrous Heckler & Koch SFP9-SF. Unless, of course, a two-time kiddie rapist named Mathias Lemke had kidnapped their seven-year-old and put him in an underground box with a short oxygen supply. Then it would be: *Do whatever it takes, Herr Kriminalhauptkommissar. Just bring our little boy back home safe and sound.*

The train went dark for a moment in the shadows of sooty brick buildings and even less friendly black-and-white graffiti signed by “Oz.” Ritter leaned back in his seat. That fucker sure got around. A few years back, the notorious sprayer contracted AIDS. Since then, his messages got a lot darker. Life-saving medication hadn’t improved his mood.

Up ahead was a nineteenth-century structure that looked like a smaller version of the Frankfurt central station. It had one hump instead of three. Heavy steel beams bent to support the frosted glass roof high above. Somehow, they managed to look baroque. Except for the “PHILIPS” sign in the paned windows spanning the tracks.

After the train pulled to a bumpy stop, the passengers shuffled toward the doors like sludge. Two minutes later, the stale air was swept away by a fresh breeze from outside. A muffled loudspeaker on the platform reminded travelers not to leave their luggage unattended. Anything to give registered voters a false sense of security, while guys like Ritter did the dirty work in the shadows.

Ritter waited for the grizzled old guy with the filthy backpack to load up empty plastic bottles and drag it to the next car. Then he grabbed his bag and headed for the door.

On the platform, thousands of voices echoed against the dome-like roof, filling the hall with a cold, comfortable din. The station was wall-to-wall humanity, like Frankfurt four hours earlier.

Ritter went with the flow to the wide cement stairway. In the shadows underneath, two young thieves closed in on a

businessman dozing on a wooden bench. They pocketed his wallet and phone before he snorted awake. You snooze, you lose, asshole.

The stairway went sideways for a moment with an electric *zap-zap*. Ritter held onto the rail until the ground righted itself. The dizzy spell never lasted long, but it was hard to get used to. It always came out of nowhere, like a sucker punch.

The first time it happened, he found himself on his hands and knees, panting like a dog on the cold cement of a crowded S-Bahn station. The Bundeswehr doctors called it “cervical vertebra syndrome,” probably caused by that helicopter accident in Kandahar. The *Amis* called it “whiplash.” Commuters just thought he was drunk.

This was nothing in comparison. It didn’t even knock him down. He hitched the duffel bag over his shoulder and headed up the stairs.

The ground floor reeked of buttered popcorn and reefer. Arcade music was playing nearby. He walked through a wide, windy doorway, past the inevitable pale junkies clustered on the U-Bahn stairwell, and over to the front taxi in the long line at the curb. He opened the back door, threw his bag onto the seat, and said, “Alsterdorf.”

The fortyish driver looked like a failed sociology grad student. He put the cream-colored Mercedes in gear without a word. A heated political debate was blaring on the radio. It sounded local.

Next to the driver was a pint-sized rag called *MOPO*. As in *Hamburger Morgenpost*. Its screaming headline: “Whores vs. Yuppies!” A tasseled brown-and-white FC St. Pauli flag swung from the mirror, in open violation of traffic regulations.

Ritter leaned over the front seat. “Who’s winning?” he said.

The driver punched it through a stale yellow. “What’s that?”

“The whores or the yuppies?” Ritter motioned to the newspaper.

“Oh, that,” the driver said. “Don’t get me started. Fucking Christian Democrats want to gentrify St. Pauli! Tear down Herbertstrasse and build one of those business parks. You believe that shit? Nothing is sacred in this town.” He looked in the rearview. “Where you from?”

“Frankfurt,” Ritter said, all innocent civilian. “Is Herbertstrasse near the Reeperbahn?” Like he wanted tips about the red-light district. Or “Davidwache,” the smallest—and busiest—police precinct in Hamburg.

“The Herbert is the heart of St. Pauli! The *Sozis* will show those fascist bankers!” The driver slapped the wheel for emphasis. The flag fluttered approval.

Ritter gave the rage addict what he wanted. “Social Democrats run this town?”

The driver turned around completely. “Goddamn right! Mertens is going to turn the Herbert into a national monument. That’ll stop those real estate sharks.”

“Mertens? Who’s that?” Ritter kept one eye on the right blinker of the bus looming on their left. The side was covered with a semi-transparent advertisement for a zoo. The passenger nearest him was a giraffe.

“The Innensenator, but he’s okay,” the driver assured him, shooting ahead of the bus, which then veered into the lane behind them.

“That the top cop?” Ritter said, settling back in his seat. The driver looked like somebody who donned a black mask and threw Molotov cocktails at riot cops on May Day. He wondered how the antifa type would square the circle.

“Yeah, but he’s a *Sozi*,” the driver said, like that made Mertens some kind of double agent. “The senate votes at the end of the week. Then we’ll see who owns the streets.”

“That we will,” Ritter said. Wherever you were in the world, the locals always knew what time it was. All you had to do was ask.

After checking into Best Western under his own name, Ritter changed into sweats and went down to the basement for his Green Beret exercises. No equipment, just fifteen minutes of running in place, mid-air toe touches, and off-ground clap pushups to make up for the train ride. The only other guy in the room was a heart attack candidate on a treadmill engrossed in an overhead TV special called “Herbertstrasse: The New Silicon Alley?” Clever.

After a cold shower upstairs, Ritter was a new man. He grabbed a *MOPO* from the front desk and hit the street. Outside, he stood with all the hardworking losers on the sidewalk. The red light turned green, and the herd stepped onto the street. Ritter held his ground. It was more instinct than anything, like when walking point in Hindu Kush. Civilians didn’t get it. *You listen to your gut, you might stay alive.*

Out of nowhere, an unmarked brown Opel station wagon shot past his nose, driving on the wrong side with flashing front lights but no siren, and nearly took out a dozen cursing pedestrians. At the nearby intersection, it slid to a stop, only to lurch forward a meter at a time. Ritter smiled. The two plainclothes inside weren’t afraid to bend a few corners hunting bad guys.

Sure as shit, the driver craned his neck until he saw what he was chasing on a parallel street. The Opel lurched forward to the next intersection, where it did a smoking brodie and disappeared. Ritter was smiling so hard it hurt. The light had turned red again. He waved off a honking metallic gold Porsche SUV.

Two blocks later, Ritter’s nose led him to a restaurant serving fresh seafood next to a canal. It looked like a former boat dock. The place was packed under the huge umbrellas. They didn’t call Hamburg natives “fish-heads” for nothing.

Storm clouds hung over the canals like one big flying saucer. Underneath was purple sky streaked through with orange.

The combination made the restaurant look like a living painting.

Ritter was searching for a free table when a pretty girl in a black ankle-length apron appeared at his side. Light freckles were sprayed across a slightly bent nose under wild locks of blonde hair. She looked nineteen going on forty. Her name tag said “Jenny.”

Ritter felt something wake up in his pants.

“Right this way, sir,” Jenny said, leading him down the two steps to the redwood dock. Her purple eyes were dancing as he sat down on a woven chair. She didn’t hand him the leather-bound menu she was holding against her breasts. “You look like a man who knows what he wants.”

Ritter laughed at that. The whole evening had become glossy above the shimmering water.

A rowing team streamed by soundlessly, their coxswain at ease.

“Fish would be good,” Ritter said.

The waitress bit her lip playfully. “Would you care to be more specific? Or should I guess?”

Ritter held her look. “I think we both know the answer to that, Jenny.”

She blushed slightly but recovered quickly. “May I bring you something to drink with that?”

“Water,” he said.

She gave him that look again. “Shaken or stirred?”

This was too easy, he thought. “What do *you* think?”

“Shaken it is.” She hesitated.

“Is there a problem?” he said. It was possible she had bitten off more than she could chew, but he doubted it.

Jenny was frowning now. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“I’m not?” Ritter had taken great trouble to lose his Frankfurt accent two decades before. Most people thought he was from Hannover, home to High German. Jenny, on the other hand, had a tinny harbor accent that was one hundred percent Hamburg.

He wouldn't be surprised if she spoke Low German at home.

"No." Jenny sounded sure of herself. "You look like you've seen everything."

Ritter suppressed a laugh. "Why do you say that?"

"The crinkles around your eyes," she said, like she had just figured it out. "And you're, you're so well put together."

Well, now. That was specific enough to indicate serious physical interest. "Thank you."

"There's something mysterious about you, like a secret agent man."

Ritter felt his face go blank.

"Oops," Jenny said.

"Just don't tell anyone. Or I'll have to kill you."

Jenny gave him a look that could have raised the dead. "Is that a promise?"

"Yes," Ritter said. "When do you get off?"

She showed him sharp teeth. "Anytime you say, sir."

Sir.

"This is just my day job," she confided. "My night job is Down Under."

Ritter stared at her name tag again. This had better not cost him money.

A heavy shadow crossed overhead. He felt what could have been a raindrop.

"Gotcha!" she said triumphantly. "Down Under is an Aussie bar."

And you just showed your hand, he thought. "You working tonight?"

"Not anymore," she said.

Ritter felt a real raindrop. Then another. "We'd better find some cover," he said.

Jenny didn't disagree.

Their footsteps on the wooden deck were echoed by rapid-fire *pitter-patter* on the big umbrellas.

Fool for Love

Laura threw the navy-blue duty cap onto the matching canvas shirt in the sports bag. Both had knife-edge creases. The red seal of Hamburg rested on a twelve-pointed gold star riveted to the crown of the cap. The patch pocket underneath said “POLIZEI.” The blinking blue lights embedded in the belt were against regulations. As were the missing sleeves and knee-high boots with twenty-centimeter spikes.

Ever since getting paroled from Hahnöfersand, Laura had worked in The Cage. Businessmen from as far as Munich drove up to St. Pauli to see a “policewoman” and female “suspect” locked in deadly—and intimate—combat behind bars. The draw was live sex. Real penetration with real nightsticks.

Laura zipped up the bag and looked at the clock. Veronica was working late again. That was getting to be a habit. No wonder she was so stressed.

Laura went into the kitchen and turned down the heat on the ground beef. The scent of chili filled the air. She walked past the mute TV onto the balcony and fired up a Marlboro Red. Exhaling a healthy lungful into the silver moon, she slapped shut the Zippo and shivered in her thin T-shirt. The things we do for love.

Down below, a black Mini Cooper swept into an impossibly small parking spot at the base of the bridge. The lights went out and the door swung open, followed by two luscious legs.

Butterflies fluttered in Laura’s stomach. She ground out the butt on the railing and dropped it into an old pickle jar.

Back inside, she mixed the Tanqueray and Schweppes.

Out the corner of her eye, she saw the title shot for *The King of St. Pauli*. She put a wedge of lime on each glass and made a face at the plasma TV. It measured 101 centimeters. The high definition made it easy to see the dozens of hairs in Willi Kaiser's nose.



Walking up the stone steps of the white Victorian, Veronica looked away from the muscle car below and shifted the position of her shoulder bag. The twine handles of the oversized Versace shopping bag dug into the fingers of her other hand. The long-necked vase kept shifting position, causing the ball inside to bang around. She could already feel her sciatic nerve acting up.

Laura greeted her at the door with a nicotine kiss and a G&T, strong like she liked it, with a twist of lime.

"Sorry I'm so late," Veronica said, sucking on the straw and sneaking a look at the hall clock. "That ship captain from Bangkok took forever."

The pint-sized commander of the massive *Asia Dawn* container ship was one regular she didn't mind talking about. Foreign nationals were out of Laura's shakedown range. Still, Veronica didn't dare mention his name. Captain Meephuk. She never would have heard the end of that.

Laura let out a nasty laugh. "The monkey cage guy?"

"That's the one." Veronica let the leather bag down softly onto the marble-topped side table and continued to the living room, where she set down her burden with a muffled thump on the white shag carpet. She shook her carrying hand.

"Long as he tipped heavily," Laura said.

"Oh, yeah." Veronica allowed herself a half-smile. "He paid and paid and paid."

They laughed at the old joke together.

Veronica used the armrest to lower herself onto the couch,

careful to keep her back straight. As she rubbed circulation back into her hand, she noticed that the flat-screen TV on the far wall was on, but the sound was all the way down. Maybe Laura took her recent speech about the homeowners' association complaints to heart after all.

"What's in the bag?" Laura was pointing to the neck of the vase.

"It's a gift," Veronica said, leaning to her left and discreetly massaging her upper buttock with a thumb knuckle.

"For me?" Laura said excitedly.

"No, silly, for me. From the ship captain."

"Oh," Laura said, sticking out her lower lip.

Veronica saw her disappointment. There was only one way to fix that. "I thought you'd like it."

Laura looked at her uncertainly. "You thought I'd like something from that little perv?"

"Look at it," Veronica said. Her knuckles finally found the *piriformis* muscle. *Aaahhh*.

Laura did as she was told. "It looks like a big-ass bong!"

"Take it out," Veronica said with half-closed eyes. The kneading was producing good pain.

Laura lifted the vase by the neck. "Damn, this thing is *hea-vy!*" The big end got caught on the twine handles, so she kicked the bag away with a loud *whack!* It almost took out Veronica's Murano glass collection.

Veronica's eyes popped open in alarm. Nothing on the windowsill was broken, but the unicorn from Venice was shaking on its hind legs.

The ball started rolling around again. It sounded like a small roulette wheel. Laura shook the vase. "What the hell is *that?*" she said, turning it upside down and peering into the hole. The big end of the vase made the chandeliers above the coffee table tinkle.

"Careful!" Veronica said.

“Sorry, Cap’n!” Laura flipped the vase back down. It made a not-so-muffled thump when it hit the carpet. “What is it?” she said.

“What is what?” Veronica said, irritated.

“This thing!” Laura slapped the open end of the vase with her palm loudly.

Veronica tried to control her temper. “Keep your hands off it and I’ll tell you.”

Laura took one monster step back from the vase. “Look, Ma, no hands!”

Veronica waited a few seconds for her pulse to settle down.

“So?” Laura said.

“It’s a monkey trap,” Veronica said finally.

Laura stepped forward, bent over at a ninety-degree angle, and peered into the narrow neck with one eye shut. “How the hell do monkeys fit into *that*?” Her voice seemed to be affected by her squinting.

Despite her anger, Veronica had to laugh. That was Laura to a T. “They don’t,” she said. “The hunters put a ball inside.”

“So that’s what’s making all that racket!” Laura grabbed the neck again.

“Laura!” Veronica said.

“But the hole is too small!” Laura demonstrated by jabbing her bird finger in and out of the hole.

“They glue the bottom on after they put the ball inside,” Veronica said. She knew because she had asked Captain Meephuk the same question.

Laura jumped onto her stomach, catching herself with both hands, and examined the base. “You’re right!” she said, her voice muffled by the carpet. “I can see the seam!” Then she pushed herself up onto her knees. “How does it work?”

“Monkeys put their hands inside to get the ball,” Veronica said. “But when they grab it, they can’t get their hands out.”

“They got skinny-ass hands,” Laura said, flexing her own.

“Yes, they do,” Veronica said. “But when they form a fist, they can’t pull their hands back out.”

Laura scrambled to her feet, grabbed air a couple of times, and looked at her fist. Then she held it over the hole. “Oh, I get it!”

“They can’t let go of the ball,” Veronica said. “Their own greed captures them.” Like you, she thought.

Laura flexed her fist some more. “Cool!” Then she stopped, a funny look on her face. “Whadda they do with the monkeys?”

Veronica smiled into her empty eyes. “Eat their brains.”

Laura let that sink in and then pumped her fist. “Yeah, baby! That is *so* cool! Monkey brain tacos!” She laughed and threw herself onto the couch next to Veronica.

Veronica sat up quickly. To cover herself, she took a long draw on her G&T. “This really hits the spot.”

“*You* really hit the spot,” Laura said with *that* look in her eye.

Veronica ignored the pass. If it were up to Laura, they would do their live show every night, like they used to.

Black-and-white clips of Willi Kaiser showed on HHTV. Veronica wanted to turn up the volume, but Laura needed quality time when she first came home.

“It’s thirty in the shade,” Laura said.

Oh, boy, here we go, Veronica thought. Ibiza again. She tried not to let her impatience show. “You ought to be the weatherman on HHTV!”

“Tell me you don’t wish we were there right now,” Laura said.

Veronica bit her tongue.

Laura walked over to the mantle and touched the framed photo. The two of them were glowing under twin palm trees. A perfect sunset enveloped them in orange light.

On the other side of the room, HHTV showed Willi and his fifth wife entering a courtroom under a blitz of lights.

■ ■ ■

Veronica pushed back her plate. “That was great! There’s nothing like a home-cooked meal.” The tacos were perfect for this time of year. Her tongue was still burning from the chili sauce. Laura was a regular pyromaniac, even if she couldn’t spell it.

“Bet you say that to all the girls,” Laura said.

Veronica didn’t hear her at first. She had thirty-seven emails on her phone, but nothing from the university hospital.

“Don’t forget your yellow card tomorrow.” Laura sounded snippy.

Veronica looked up mid-scroll. “How many times do I have to tell you? I don’t have sex with clients!”

The last thing she wanted to think about was her monthly VD check at the gynecologist. Tomorrow of all days.

“Losing your license is a big—”

Veronica gave her a hard look.

Laura swallowed the rest of the sentence.

“Sorry,” Veronica said. “I just had a long day.”

“How about an after-dinner massage?”

■ ■ ■

“You’ve still got the magic fingers,” Veronica said. Laura always managed to trigger her *supraspinatus tendinitis*. Only a bubble bath would relieve the sharp pain.

“They can do a lot more than that,” Laura said.

Veronica felt a callused hand stray from her shoulder blade to her right breast. She shifted her weight just enough to make it go away. “My breasts are fine.”

“You can say that again.”

Veronica picked up the remote. HHTV was replaying the debate between Innensenator Mertens and Senator Althaus. “This is interesting,” she said. “I heard part of it in the car on the way home.”

Mertens looked a lot different in a tailored suit. Nobody would

have guessed the top cop in Hamburg had monthly sessions with Mistress Veronica in the Black Room of Herbertstrasse. Not even Laura.

Veronica didn't let her mind go there. If she ever breathed a word, Laura and her old cellmate would blackmail the Innensenator into the poorhouse.

Laura stuck out her lower lip at the TV. "That's just politics."
"I wouldn't say that," Veronica said. "It affects us directly."

Laura was busy rubbing the excess oil on her own hard nipples.

"The Christian Democrats want to turn the Herbert into Silicon Alley," Veronica said. She hated to admit it, but it *was* a brilliant idea.

The rubbing stopped. "They want to turn it into a tit farm?"

Veronica didn't laugh. Laura wasn't the sharpest pencil in the box, but she drew straight lines. "No, silly, a high-tech business district, like in America. Althaus wants to gentrify the neighborhood."

Laura pulled her T-shirt back down. "Good luck with that. The only gents in St. Pauli are the johns."

Veronica's trigger point throbbed menacingly. Straight lines were overrated. "Times are changing. AIDS was bad enough, but the Internet is killing us. You remember those schoolgirls in Eppendorf?"

"Yeah," Laura said. "Their pimp is doing a dime in Santa Fu. What of it?"

"That's not my point." Veronica worked her shoulder, but that just made it worse. "Private houses are popping up like weeds. Deutsche Telekom will set up an e-commerce site for ten euros a month. You should hear Anita go on about profit margins. She makes the girls check their phones at the door."

"Thought you had some super-duper contract," Laura said. "Special conditions. Or you still a working girl like the rest of us?"

“I may be a specialist, but I still work hard! Who do you think pays for all this?” Veronica motioned around the restored apartment. Alone the heating lost in the high ceiling and out the high windows cost an arm and a leg. “How many dancers you know can afford a condo in Eppendorf?”

“I do my part,” Laura said. “Besides, I don’t care *where* I live. I just care *who* I live with.”

Veronica almost felt sorry for her. The poor girl really had it bad. “Let me put it this way,” she said, “if the Christian Democrats win, I’m out of the Herbert for good.”

“Oh!” Laura said. “Can we go to Ibiza?”

Laura’s childishness was misleading. You had to weigh your words carefully. She took them so literally—and held you to them. “One step at a time.”

“Yes!” Laura said, pumping her fist again.

■ ■ ■

The debate was almost over when Veronica’s lips were assaulted by another ashtray kiss.

Laura grabbed her bag and headed for the door. The creaky stairs in the hall didn’t make a peep.

Veronica could never figure out how she did it. Maybe all those B&Es were good for something.

Veronica put the crusty dishes under water. Below the kitchen window, the muscle car *vroomed!* to a start. With a slow gurgle, the headlights strafed the neighboring villas and burned rubber.

Veronica walked into the bathroom, leaned over the clawfoot tub, and twisted the ceramic knobs counterclockwise. When the water was hot to the touch, she dropped the plug and added scented bubble bath. The tiles steamed up around her. She began setting out the candles.

The soothing sound followed her to the kitchen, where she uncorked a bottle of Cabernet and poured her first glass.

Excitedly, she walked back to the side table in the hall and plucked the envelope from her shoulder bag. Her heart skipped every time she saw the cobalt blue UKE logo. Universitätsklinikum Hamburg-Eppendorf, the university hospital on the other side of Eppendorfer Park.

She set down her glass on the miniature neo-Roman column she'd picked up at that charming boutique on Rothenbaumchaussee. Her hands were shaking as she lit the candles. She laughed when the logo attracted some fluffy bubbles. She shook them off, slipped the envelope under the glass, and stripped quickly. She put one foot, then the other, into the steaming suds. She twisted the faucets shut and settled down into her spot. Then she reached for the envelope.

Taking her second sip of wine, she began reading.

Dear Veronica Lühmeyer,

We are pleased to inform you....

Veronica let out a squeal of delight. Sometimes dreams did come true.