



**Sybille Ruge**

**Davenport 160 x 90**

Thriller

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I first met my father at his funeral. He'd been dead to me his entire life anyway. I still don't know why. My mother had only mentioned his name for the first time six weeks earlier, shortly before she died, and after I buried her ashes at sea, I wanted to draw a line under the whole family thing. By thirty-five you were meant to have got all that stuff sorted somehow, I thought. Work was going through a bit of a lull, so I decided to go looking for the man who'd given me an X chromosome.

Compared to my other jobs, closing the file on myself seemed like it would be child's play. The very first connection I found between my birthplace and the name of my biological father led me to his brother, who made it clear from square one of our telephone conversation that my father didn't have much time left. He didn't think a hospital visit was a good idea.

Seven days later we were standing in front of some granite slabs from China, and my new uncle was showing me my father's final resting place.

Afterwards we went to a nearby beer garden at a romantic castle in Spessart Park. Scorching April sun on white plastic chairs.

I was in heels, and my feet blistered just from walking through the cemetery. Hard to know what this particular situation called for, really. I'd worn the shoes when they gave me my mother's urn. But this time the black patent leather was getting dusty in the gravel. My black tank top and sweatpants had been carefully selected. Crucially, they were cheap. Black for an orphan. Tourists were staring. The men at my arse, the women at my Chanel backpack.

My new uncle gazed at the plastic table for what felt like an infinitely long time. He had no words and I had no questions, and before us was the irreversible past. Side by side we

sank dully into wordlessness, until eventually we began a shambling kind of conversation, repeating ourselves over and over between long pauses. The artificiality of the situation was overwhelming.

My uncle took an envelope out of his leather jacket. Inside was a yellowed photograph. In the photograph was my mother, clad in white, and a man with whom I had no ties at all.

I burrowed through the rolodex of appropriate emotions in my head, but none of them were any use. Mostly I wanted to get up and leave. If somebody dies on a Friday, said my new uncle, there'll be more bodies to come. There are bodies to come every day of the week, I thought. Two funerals in quick succession and a wasted afternoon hanging around for a boiler man who never showed – my life was already going down the tubes.

My uncle enquired about my foreign-sounding name.

Slanski.

The name I'd acquired through marriage.

It was an interlude during my student days. A tax-avoidance scheme. Health insurance for the abortion. Plus about ninety-five percent of it was believing you should hit the government where it hurts.

I've avoided anything that remotely resembles a contract ever since. I only make agreements I can back out of at a moment's notice.

The name I kept so as not to screw up the layout on my website.

My new uncle took a camera out of his pocket and handed it to the stranger next to us.

We shuffled into a pose in front of the castle. Cack-handed, like everything German. World of Warcraft. As you were. Slivers of a forbidden past rattling around in my head. Holding the rictus smile of a geisha, I made myself photo-collage ready.

Turning on the waterworks. Yeah, that would have been an appropriate response. Putting on my sunglasses, I glanced upwards. Birds flew in formation in the sky. I was surrounded by one of Germany's carefully preserved areas of forest and wetland.

The idyllic scenery, or maybe my lack of interest in family history, kept me glancing endlessly at the castle clock. I didn't fancy staying much longer, under any circumstances.

I'd arranged things at uni so that I could skate by without spending too much time there – so that I left space for a world without the others. Then two months before getting my master's in sociology, I dropped out. I wasn't particularly interested in a regular job working for middle-management.

Nor did I fancy turning into one of those intellectual twats whose only job is to provide a theoretical framework for commercialism and profit. I wanted peace and quiet. You've got

to make a living with what God has given you. For me, that was a knack for finishing unfinished business.

At my office, I had freedom.

I had clients who handed me a fee over my desk, who paid my travel expenses and who I could ditch if they got on my nerves. The office spared me from ‘the collective’. If I have anything to thank my mother for, it’s my terrifying self-possession, a cool with which I can mask the subtlest of vibrations. In my line of work, that helps.

I toyed unobtrusively with my phone. Time to put an end to our little chat. I had a client meeting. At the end of the day, there’s nothing that can’t be excused with a client meeting. In the world of work-for-hire, letting down a client is high treason. This particular one was some lady with a funny accent who’d started to rub me the wrong way before we even got off the phone – but now all of a sudden she was priority number one. She hadn’t given a name. She’d wanted to discuss the matter in person. Her diction, strained and artificial, placed her in the better social circles. My target audience exactly. If their credit is good enough, I don’t need names. They’re trying to ruin me, she’d said. Her story had sounded false, her clipped sentences made my stomach turn, but a deal’s a deal. All my clients have a quirk of some sort. I can’t wait, she’d said. I think you can help me. The inflection of her voice was eccentric. Possibly a traumatic brain injury, I thought. She hadn’t seemed all that promising.

I eyed the advert for bockwurst next to the dry cake with disgust. The landscape behind me wasn’t going anywhere. I wanted to put my sadness behind me. I wanted to come to terms with the muddle.

At this point my uncle placed onto the sticky table a small yellow case made of faux leather, which my father had carried with him till the day he died. A souvenir from his bedside. It contained three things.

A grubby voucher for use of a Sanifair toilet, redeemable at any motorway service station, toilet or shopping centre, value seventy cents.

A diving certificate issued by the German navy.

A photo of a ship called the *Kingfisher*.

These three things now belonged to me.

We ate chocolate ice cream and did our best not to get too closely acquainted, although we demonstrated the expected familial warmth. I agreed to visits that would never take place. I hated family sagas, and this wasn’t going to be one of them.

Then, at long last, I got on the train. The ‘landscape’ rushed past me. Nature. Ha! As far as I’m concerned, there’s nothing more beautiful than a solid concrete road through the forest.

The man across from me had been watching me for ten minutes. Then he asked if I worked in the media. Another person living up to statistical expectations. Three minutes. In Germany, you’ll be asked about your job inside three minutes.

As a rule, however, my job isn’t something I discuss. I simply put down my card.

A phone number on the front, two words on the back.

### *RECEIVABLES MANAGEMENT*

I have an unerring eye for lucrative assignments. I don’t do free quotes. I arbitrate. When you’re looking for people who owe money, you don’t generally assume anyone involved will be honest.

The relationship between price and commodity – that’s security. My exchange value is expressed in cash.

Online research. Video surveillance. Insurance fraud. I do the lot. The conversations with the debtors. Greed, tricks, lies. Sometimes they’ll declare bankruptcy then start up the business again through a relative. My clients don’t have time to wait out the ‘period of good conduct’.

I cut it short for them.

I’ve found that when the debt collectors come knocking, nobody’s a big man anymore. Most of the time, the illicit cash is in the glove compartment or in plastic bags on the back seat.

I’m the one who talks to the debtors. If things look dicey, I take one of the lads from the club with me. Most of them have previous, which is why people take the threat seriously. Mirko looks like a brick shithouse, and he is a brick shithouse. He gives nothing away. His face is entirely without softness. He survived the war in Kosovo – why would he be scared of Germany? On my jobs I need faces that don’t crack when the going gets dangerous.

I spout a few intimidating lines, paint dire consequences. Mirko says nothing. We’re a good team. I’ve got used to looking for the car keys while he sits on the sofa with the debtor in question. Sometimes the cash is in a bag of peas in the freezer. I speak decent legalese, but with Mirko I can save myself the bullshit. The requirements for this job are few. You need nerves of steel, a certain unscrupulousness as pertains to fees, and a certificate of good standing from the tax office.

The aircon on the train had broken.

Instantly, the railway staff in the dining car downed tools. I could kiss goodbye to that Coke. The air in the carriage was becoming increasingly thick.

I opened the yellow case. The certificate had belonged to someone with plans. My mother had disposed of him, like all her temporary relationships. She'd been a strikingly gorgeous business-class flight attendant who bed-hopped her way all across the globe.

We were constantly on the move. I had to start school in a new language three times.

In Switzerland I spoke Russian at home. That was because of the oligarch. The only one of them who deserved to be called dad. But that story came to an end when my mother turned up at the Hotel Swiss Diamond swimming pool one afternoon to find Dad pumping away on top of the au-pair girl.

To this day I call my stepfather Djeduschka Moros – Father Frost. Lovable yet unapproachable. And I'm his Sonitschka.

Sonitschka!

To my biological father I was a number on a piece of paper: a number with a minus sign in front of it. The minimum legal amount.

Now I'd been orphaned twice.

Hysterically yellow fields of rapeseed were whizzing by outside the window. The waitress from the dining car was sat at a table, moaning about the government.

The bin was jammed. I tugged it open and chucked the sticky case. Grimy yellow PVC.

I kept the loo voucher and the photo of the ship, but only because the name 'KINGFISHER' fascinated me.

I never liked the ocean. In Paris my mother had signed me up to the Police Sports Association for swimming so that she could go shopping undisturbed. I didn't like swimming either. In the end, it only prolongs the final struggle.

After the Swiss boarding school I didn't know where to go, so I moved to the country I had never seen but which had issued my passport. The country with the ugly language and the well-constructed roads.

I started boxing to maintain my 'Nazi' physique, as the trainer kept joking. Eighteen square feet and instinct. Within a year the ring had cost me a tooth, and when I asked the dentist to replace it with gold, he gave me a look.

The gold tooth instilled respect in my fellow boxers. It flashes as I'm putting in my mouthguard.

The club is in a dilapidated building on the edge of town. Not exactly something out of *Men's Health*. None of the romance of *Fight Club*. No wellness centre full of middle-aged women.

All it has is a dripping shower that runs cold. The lockers don't lock and the changing room reeks, a heavy blend of rancid oil, sweaty feet and the smell you get when you open a tin of sausage meat.

I abided by their code of honour and I've been reaping the benefits ever since. The most important of these is trust. I trust those guys way more than the businessmen I see at the office. I'm suspicious on principle of determined expressions underpinned by carefully chosen glasses and military-style haircuts. The faces of victors. False confessions.

Like with A.

Two hundred miles an hour. German technology is intoxicating, even if the WiFi never works, there are delays every other minute, and the stupid patterns on the seats are always dirty.

A., on my screen.

But I think of myself as a single-celled organism in a juddering limbo where no one speaks. Time plummets on. Its unit of measurement is cash. Its end result is distance. And distance was what I needed more than anything else in the world. Back when A. came to see me.

I'd just had Lucky build a website for me. We'd kept in touch ever since he flunked out of our boarding school. I don't believe in 'networking'. Networking is just an underhand term for freeloaded and exploiting casual acquaintances. Networkers are like the homeless guys who ask how you're doing then hold out a cup. People who want maximum benefit for minimum effort, from a free place to sleep to free information. No – Lucky and I were close.

I owe him for some seriously brilliant SEO.

Receivables management.

We arrange everything for you! Simple onboarding. In-house lawyers. Legal advice.

The website was nicely laid out. I had taken the blue and the modest typeface from an ad I saw for an engineering company. Of course, my site appeals to a better-paying clientele.

It contains all the obligatory keywords designed to engender a sense of security. It allays all their concerns.

Prevention, optimisation, communication, analysis, efficiency. Crucially, I have avoided the cheap-sounding word *reputable*.

The site had barely been up for a week when I got my first inquiry. It sounded promising.

They came to my office one dazzlingly bright morning to lay out the facts of the case. I had on a grey trouser suit like the one worn by my customer account manager at the bank. Back then I couldn't think of a more nondescript outfit to do business in. The suit erased all individual detail. Sex appeal, intellect, humour, personality, point of view. It was neutral ground.

A. turned up with his lawyer in tow. Unlike the lawyer, he wore no tie and had a cheap watch, making the balance of power even more obvious. I took an immediate liking to the innocent anxiety behind his arrogant face. Both men were tall, and greeted me with the nonchalance of British cadets. Powerful bodies afforded even greater protection by their bank balances. A. gave me his card, which was embossed with his title. His lawyer wore an emerald ring made of gold on his little finger, and he too had an aristocratic name. It felt like he was trying to compensate for the awkwardness of A.'s gestures by exaggerating his masculinity. He placed his hand, which sported an absurd signet ring, onto the table.

At the sight of my empty office, both seemed lost for words. It had taken me hours to set it up. Design isn't really my thing. I'd spent weeks shifting the few items of furniture from left to right in my head, rearranging them again and again. I'm satisfied with the result. Two chairs for the clients. A desk made of steel. My office is a mixture of monastic cell and pre-trial detention centre.

The only decoration is a fake diploma on the wall. A marketing ploy. The walnut frame had previously contained a portrait of my mother. She'd given me the picture when I left secondary school. She was so beautiful it hurt. The Biedermeier frame adds a certain something. The portrait I filed away in a folder marked 'miscellaneous'.

A. and his companion fidgeted, undecided, then began to talk about the weather. All my clients seem agitated when they're in my office. They sit there on the other side of the desk like rabbits transfixed by a snake. They don't want to be eaten. But nor do they fight. They leave the dirty work to other people. Clinging to the hope of seeing their money once more, they're too ashamed to look you in the eye. They've got a problem that needs fixing, one they've failed to fix themselves. They pay me well for anonymity. But most of all, they want it to be over and done with.

My day rates are high, people's stories long – monologues in which someone else is always to blame, in which the speaker often doesn't quite grasp what he's saying.

They're long past the point where they can still keep their facts straight. People tend to wait until the knot is hopelessly tangled, and all you can really do is cut it. As emotions take

hold and they run out of ideas, they make an appointment. They force me to think about the tangle too, to extract the case from the muddle. I have to piece their story together myself.

I set out a bottle of mineral water and a tube of fizzy tablets and told them to help themselves. This prompted another flurry of small talk. Yet the waffle about vitamin-boosting tablets and the price of mineral water and dehydration-induced cramp was far from casual, and they didn't seem particularly bothered that I wasn't joining in.

I sat there in silence.

After the mandatory few minutes of polite chitchat, they began to outline the real reason for their visit, weighing every word carefully, testing me to see how shrewdly I could fill in the deliberate blanks. They made simple things complicated and passed over embarrassing details, but long story short – they were fucked.

I was just starting to get bored when they finally revealed the misappropriated sum in question.

2.5 million euros.

I said nothing.

Their chief financial officer, they told me, had broken the law. He'd already been sacked but it didn't look like he was going to be charged with anything. As they spoke, increasingly they kept coming back to the shortfall rather than the moral angle. Probably the type of guys who didn't trust anybody because they didn't trust themselves. The way they talked, it sounded like the police had thrown in the towel. I was the last card in their hand, that much was clear to me. The 'consultants' they'd called in had advised them to stop fussing and simply forget about the missing money. All the leads pointed straight to Russia. No one will touch this case with a barge pole, they'd been told. Then they'd seen the five languages listed on my website.

I continued listening to their bullshit. It was obvious to me the police had never really got involved. They'd have taken their Europol buddies out for a drink, sure, and they'd have made travelling more difficult for the CFO, except for the odd holiday in wine country. As for Russia, I knew the region would make no difference to whether we recovered the money. Retrieving missing cash is about as easy as reanimating a patient with no reflexes.

I said nothing.

A., whose life clearly revolved around the accumulation of capital, promised me a ten-percent commission if I succeeded. He must have thought it relatively unlikely he'd see the money again, and so had decided to be generous.

I said nothing.



A. was becoming increasingly unsettled. He began touching his forehead and holding his earlobe, like he was checking a kid for a temperature. Stuffing both hands into his jacket pockets, he finally suggested a fixed fee – on top of everything else, as he put it. The sum was so meagre it wouldn't even cover my travel expenses, but he tried to justify his stinginess with a grin and a cliché: *no pain no gain*.

It was at this point I named my fixed fee and raised the commission to fifteen percent.

A.'s jaw dropped and he started arguing, feigning distress. He became almost passionate. He told me that we were at the very beginning of our business relationship, that he was just testing the waters, that other people weren't asking half that much, that merely being hired by such a well-known company as his would be good for my reputation, that he would give me a recommendation, that there might be other jobs in the pipeline.

I said nothing.

His lawyer brought up the Lawyers' Remuneration Act.

I pointed out that my website said nothing about me being a lawyer.

There was a tranquil pause.

A. was avoiding my gaze. His eyes locked onto the walnut frame on the wall. Suddenly it seemed to me that the nail was too big.

He got up and took a closer look, eyes widening with surprise when he saw the diploma. He was so amazed he even seemed to be reading the seals. He was probably one of those people who never reads a book and is obtusely admiring of intellectuals. Or maybe it wasn't the humanities degree but the name of the famous university or the first-class honours that impressed him. In any case, his eyes kept flitting from my legs to the diploma and back again.

I named my fee and percentage commission a second time.

A. was still arguing, but already more weakly. I didn't reply. I simply stood up and indicated silently that our meeting was over. Demonstratively I began to clear away the glasses and bits of paper.

At that they caved.

I pushed the forms giving me authority to act on his behalf across to A. I'd agonised for ages over the line at the top.

*RESOLVE GETS RESULTS. SLANSKI.*

The rest was to confirm that I would start work after my fee had been transferred, that the job would remain confidential, that I could work where I liked, and that communicating my results

did not oblige me to disclose my methods. In the event the contract was terminated, there would be no refund of the fixed fee.

A. read everything through carefully. It was obvious from his face that he understood I was prepared for a worst-case scenario. When the shit hits the fan, the person with the power to make decisions is the one in charge. And that person is definitely not the one who walks into my office. My contracts do not take into account the interests of all parties. I'm no pacifist. Afterward, his lawyer read it too, his face darkening with every line. Order amid the disorder, baby. After all, they hadn't come to me because the world was a nice place.

The lines of A.'s signature on the agreement were perfect. I liked it.

He shook my hand. His was soft and well-proportioned and it wouldn't let me go. As he grasped mine, he asked me what I did in my free time.

I sing in the church choir, I said.

He gave me a quizzical look. I almost smiled at him, but you're supposed to conclude business transactions on a serious note. So instead we stood there looking solemn.

A.'s lawyer gave a practised bow, clicking his heels together slightly. A., meanwhile, shook my hand for the second time. Then they left. I watched from the window as A. used his Ferrari to barge the car parked too closely behind him out of the way. I've always felt that only people who don't mind a scratch or two should drive that sort of ride. Then I called Djeduschka Moros.

Going to Moscow was like winning the lottery. I sauntered from Lenin to Chanel, buying a pineapple at Gourmet Nr.1 next to the Bolshoi along the way. At the Bolshoi I picked up the ticket under my name at the desk. I had to leave the pineapple in a locker – in case it turned out to be a bomb – and sat down in the plush box.

During the second act, Djeduschka Moros sat down next to me and whispered something into my ear. I told him he hadn't missed anything – the staging was crap. During the interval he told me that in Brezhnev's day his father had always sat in this box.

'Your grandfather was military top brass.'

I loved him. The way he dismissed all the iron constraints of biology. Sometimes I wondered if he was desperately trying to suppress the urge to sleep with me. He'd been supporting me financially without a murmur, ever since the Swiss boarding school.

After the opera, still carrying the pineapple, we set off for the Puschkino. His driver was already waiting in the S-Class outside the theatre. We sat in the back and raved about Russian literature. I told him about A. and gave him the documents. He understood. Vodka

with lemon, no ice, in understated glasses at the hotel bar. Around us I couldn't tell the call girls from the businesswomen. It was nice.

Early next morning, I left Moscow. In the Senator lounge at the airport, they were showing a black-and-white war movie with the sound off alongside a clip of Britney Spears.