

"A gripping caper and a haunting indictment of the madness of nationalism, illuminated by brilliant use of language: magnificent." — *The Guardian* (England)



KISMET

A KAYANKAYA THRILLER

JAKOB ARJOUNI

TRANSLATED BY ANTHEA BELL

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MELVILLE INTERNATIONAL CRIME

“Jakob Arjouni’s downbeat detective Kemel Kayankaya has proved as enigmatic as Columbo, as erudite as Marlowe and occasionally, as crazed as Hammett’s Continental Op... Arjouni forges both a gripping caper and a haunting indictment of the madness of nationalism, illuminated by brilliant use of language: magnificent.”

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Jakob Arjouni
A Kayankaya Mystery

Translated from the
German by Anthea Bell



MELVILLE INTERNATIONAL CRIME



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Contents

Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Slibulsky and I were crammed into the china cupboard, emptied for the purpose, of a small Brazilian restaurant on the outskirts of the Frankfurt railway station district, waiting for a couple of racketeers to show up demanding protection money.

The cupboard was about one metre twenty wide and seventy centimetres deep. Neither Slibulsky nor I would be giving the clothing industry cause for concern about the sales of their XL sizes. Furthermore, we were wearing bulletproof vests, and when it came to the crunch we hoped at least to get a pistol and a shotgun into position where we wouldn't shoot ourselves in the foot or blast our own heads off. I could just imagine the racketeers entering the restaurant, hearing pitiful cries in the corner after a while, and opening the cupboard door to find two total idiots squashed inside, arms and legs flailing helplessly. And I pictured Romario's face at this sight. Romario was the owner and manager of the Saudade, and he had appealed to me for help.

I'd known Romario since his first gastronomic venture running a snack bar in Sachsenhausen. Until now he'd only been an acquaintance. I was glad to know him when I was skint and he stood me dinner. I wasn't so glad when I was in funds and met him in a bar and he came to sit at the same table, and we had to talk about something or other just because we knew each other. So if this evening's operation came into the category of a favor done for a friend, then it was mainly because Romario hadn't offered me any payment and I couldn't really ask for any either.

Just after midnight. We'd stationed ourselves here half an hour ago, and for about the last twenty minutes my legs had been going to sleep. It was unusually warm for early May. Daytime temperatures were up to twenty-seven degrees, and by night they didn't fall below fifteen. Which did not keep Romario from turning his central heating up to maximum – from force of habit and because complaining about the German weather was, in a way, one of his last links with Brazil. He'd lived in Frankfurt for the last twenty years, he went to the Côte d'Azur on holiday, and I didn't know if overcooked sweet-and-sour chicken and tough pork chops with canned peas were typical specialities of Brazil, but you couldn't really wish them on his native land. Anyway, the whole city might be going around in T-shirts, his customers might be dying of heatstroke, but Romario insisted that it was always cold in Germany and the sun always shone in Brazil – whether he was in a generally bad or a generally good mood.

So I wasn't going to make any money out of this, I couldn't feel my legs any more, the temperature inside the cupboard was approaching jungle heat, and from time to time I heard this barely audible hissing.

'Slibulsky?'

'Hm?' Brief, unemotional. The sweet he was sucking clicked against his teeth.

'What did you have for supper?'

'Supper? What do you mean? Can't remember.'

'You don't remember what was on the plate in front of you a few hours ago?'

He cleared his throat, the way other people might give a little whistle or roll their eyes.

indicating that they'll try to answer your question in friendly tones, but naturally it doesn't for a moment interest them.

'Let's see ... oh yes, I know. Cheese. *Handkäse*. That was it. Gina went shopping this morning and ...'

'*Handkäse* with onions.' And you can't get much smellier than *Handkäse* anyway.

'Of course with onions. You don't eat cheese with strawberries, do you?'

I put a good deal of effort into giving him as contemptuous a glance as I could in the dim light of the cupboard.

'Didn't I tell you we'd be spending some time together in this hole?'

'Yup, I believe you did mention it. Although I remembered the cupboard as kind of larger.'

'Oh yes? Like how large? I mean, how big does a cupboard have to be for two people, one of whom has just been stuffing himself with onions, to breathe easily inside it?'

In what little light filtered through the keyhole and some cracks in the sides of the cupboard, I saw Slibulsky make a face. 'I thought we were here to scare off some sort of Mafia characters? With our guns and bulletproof vests, like the good guys we are. But maybe Miss Kayankaya fancies running a hairdressing salon instead of a detective agency?'

What did I say to that? Best ignore it. I told him, 'I've got sweat running down my face and into my mouth, I have a feeling your stink is condensing, and I don't reckon the good guys have to put up with other people farting.'

Slibulsky chuckled.

Cursing quietly, I bent to look through the keyhole. I could see Romario's bandaged arm on the other side of it. He was sitting at the bar doing something with a calculator and a notepad, as if cashing up for the evening after closing the restaurant. In fact he was too nervous to add up so much as the price of a couple of beers. They'd paid him their first visit a week ago: two strikingly well-dressed young men not much older than twenty-five, waving pistols and a note saying: *This is a polite request for your monthly donation of 6,000 DM to the Army of Reason, payable on the first of each month. Thanking you in advance.* They didn't say a word, they just smiled – at least until Romario had read the note, handed it back, and, believing, not least in view of the sheer size of the sum, that he was dealing with a couple of novices said, 'Sorry, I don't see how I can go along with your request.'

Whereupon they stopped smiling, shoved the barrels of their pistols into his belly, crumpled up the note, stuffed it into Romario's mouth and forced him to chew and swallow it. Then they wrote *Back the day after tomorrow* on the bar in black felt pen, and went away.

In spite of this little demonstration, Romario didn't really take the matter seriously. He'd been running his place here near the railway station too long to panic the first time a couple of young tearaways tried extortion. As everyone knows, the big protection rackets, the ones you have to take seriously, have a whole crowd of small-time con men following in their wake, thinking they might as well give it a try. Like when you're sixteen you say hey, why not just take a look and see if that bike over there is padlocked.

Romario threw up the note he'd swallowed, knocked two nails into the side of the bar and hung his pistol on them. When they came back they'd see how a real man dealt with such outrageous demands. But they didn't come in the evening, as he had expected, and Romario wasn't behind the bar. It was morning, and he was in the kitchen putting meat in a marinade with oil and seasonings when they suddenly turned up. Still smiling, and with another note

Your monthly donation to the Army of Reason is now due. Many thanks for your commitment to this good cause.

When Romario, with the pistols pointing at him and his hands in the marinade, said he didn't have six thousand marks, just how much profit a month did they think a little place like this made, he might as well close down right away if he paid up, they twisted his arm behind his back, tied him to the radiator, and nipped his thumb off with a pair of pliers. The cleaning lady found Romario lying unconscious in a pool of blood. His thumb was on the bar with the words *Back on Thursday* written beside it.

This was Thursday, and the bandage round Romario's arm looked bright white against the wood-panelled wall. They'd sewn his thumb back on at the hospital. The doctor hadn't been able to say whether he was likely to keep it, and how much use it would still be if he did. Romario's explanation that he'd done it chopping onions was received with scepticism, but I had stopped the hospital reporting the incident to the police. Now and then Romario glanced at the china cupboard as if to make sure that we hadn't disappeared through some crack in it. Whenever he did that I knocked my Beretta quietly against the door to reassure him. Cutting off his thumb was a brutal business and I was sorry about it, no question. I didn't want to stop and work out whether I was particularly sorry because, but for that injury, a flat-rate payment plus expenses might at least not have been beyond the bounds of possibility.

The hissing sound came again.

'Slibulsky, you're an arsehole!'

'And you're a fucking queen.'

I sighed. 'If I was, I expect I'd have hired this cupboard on purpose to be shut up with you and your fragrant aroma.'

'Oh yeah? The things you know about ... is that the way a man starts thinking when he's gone without a girlfriend so long?'

'Oh, Slibulsky.'

'And don't say "Oh, Slibulsky" every time I mention it. If you ask me ...'

'Quiet!'

A car had drawn up outside. The engine was switched off; doors slammed. Soon afterwards two feet climbed the steps, stopped briefly, then there was a knock. Romario rose from the bar stool and went to open the door. I took the safety catch off my pistol. In so far as it was possible in the cupboard, Slibulsky got on his marks as if to run the hundred metres, ready to leap out with his shotgun levelled. Through a second hole in the cupboard, one we had bored on purpose, I saw two young men in cream linen suits coming into the bar in silence. Both had pale, cleans-haven faces and thick fair hair with short back and sides. At first sight they looked as German as the young men on the German Mail advertising posters, so the obvious deduction that they never said a word because they didn't know any words in German seemed to have been wrong.

One of them handed Romario a note. Romario read it and waved them over to the bar. Black automatics gleamed in their hands. We'd hoped they would leave the pistols in their holsters – now Slibulsky and I would have to delay our appearance until Romario was out of the firing line. Romario knew that.

'Would you like a drink?' I heard him ask, his voice trembling slightly. I saw them both shake their heads. One pointed with emphasis to the note in Romario's hand.

‘Sure, right away. I’d just like to know whether this monthly donation will really settle everything?’

They nodded.

‘And if ... well, suppose there’s other organisations asking for, er, donations ... I mean, does this payment mean you give me some kind of protection?’

They nodded again and raised their pistols, smiling.

‘Fine, so where do I reach you if I need you?’

One pointed the barrel of his pistol at his ear and his eyes, which probably meant: we know what goes on in this city, no need to call us, we’ll call you.

Where did these characters come from? I knew German, Turkish, Italian, Albanian, Russian and Chinese racketeers who extorted protection money – but speechless racketeers were something new.

‘Okay,’ said Romario, ‘then let’s see about ...’

‘Then let’s see about’ was our signal. While Romario flung himself to the floor behind the bar with a single movement, and then crawled towards the kitchen door, Slibulsky and I burst out of the cupboard shouting, ‘Hands up and drop your guns!’

However, they did neither, and if I hadn’t got hold of bulletproof vests for us, that would have been the last mild spring night we ever saw. They fired at once. I felt the bullets hit my chest, threw myself to one side and fired back. We’d agreed in advance to aim at their heads if it came to a shoot-out; after all, we weren’t the only ones who could lay hands on bulletproof vests. I hit one of them under the chin. Blood spurted over his cream suit, he dropped his gun and clutched his neck with both hands as if trying to strangle himself. He swayed briefly, fell backwards and hit the floor. Slibulsky blasted the other man’s forehead away with his shotgun. The wooden panelling was peppered with a hail of shot. While the man who had lost his forehead was still falling I got behind the bar and switched off all the lights.

In the dark I called, ‘Romario!’

‘Here,’ came a voice from the kitchen.

‘Slibulsky?’

‘Oh, shit!’

I went to the window, peered past the curtain at the street and the buildings opposite. No pedestrians, no lights coming on, all quiet. There was stertorous breathing behind me, no very loud.

I snapped my lighter on and bent over the man who was still clutching his neck. Blood was running through his fingers. His large, pale eyes looked at me, bewildered.

‘Who sent you?’ He didn’t react.

‘I can call a doctor or not, as the case may be. I want your boss’s name!’

But he couldn’t hear me any more. His hands dropped from his neck, his head fell to one side, and he made one last choking, gurgling sound. Then there was nothing to be heard but the hiss of my lighter. The flame cast a yellow light on the dead man’s face. It was made up or anyway powdered, that’s why it had looked so pale just now. The skin was darker on the ears and the ragged remains of his throat. I closed his eyes. A young, pretty face with long lashes and full lips. I let the lighter go out and stared into the darkness. It wasn’t the first corpse I’d seen, or the first time I’d been in a gunfight with fatal consequences either – but

this was the first human being I'd killed with my own hands.

I felt his chest. Like us, he was indeed wearing a bulletproof vest. So the only place to shoot without killing would have been his legs. If he'd realised in time that he couldn't wound his opponent's chest, would he have spared *my* head? And do injured legs stop a man from shooting in a life-and-death situation?

A strip of faint yellow light fell into the room. When I turned my head Romario was standing beside me. The light came from a street lamp outside the kitchen window. Romario was hugging himself with his unbandaged arm as if he were freezing. Lips pressed tight, he looked at the body.

I cleared my throat. 'Er ...' And added, for something to say, 'It all happened so fast.'

He kept looking down. 'If that Army of Reason thing really exists, whatever's behind it then this,' he said, jerking his chin in the direction of the body, 'this means I'm finished in Frankfurt.'

'Mm,' I said noncommittally, getting up and lighting a cigarette. We stood in the dim light like that for a while, listening to the noises in the street. Cars drove past, further away a tram rattled along.

I asked, 'Got any large plastic bin liners?'

'In the kitchen.'

I trod out my cigarette. 'Okay. While Slibulsky and I get rid of the bodies you clean the place up, put a notice on the door saying *Gone On Holiday*, and go home. And tomorrow get out on the first train or flight.'

'Get out? Where to?'

'How should I know? Mallorca? Call me and give me a number where I can reach you. In two or three weeks' time I ought to have found out who's running this racket and whether they're after you.'

'Tell me one reason why they wouldn't be after me.'

'Well, they're certainly extorting money from other people too, so they ought to be suspecting all their victims for a time.' Oh yes, a long time; about one or two days, I should think. By then at the latest they'd have tracked Romario down, and they'd beat everything they wanted to know out of him – Slibulsky's name and mine included.

I saw Romario's outline as he turned away, while his unbandaged arm gestured dismissively in my direction. I guessed what he was thinking: a pity he hadn't asked someone else for help, someone who worked for money and got a bonus if he succeeded, and for that reason alone would have fixed things to the satisfaction of all, no dead bodies, no need for Romario to close down his business. The problem with friends doing you a favour, is that if they fail then the fact that they came on the cheap just proves how incapable they were anyway.

Apart from that, if Romario was thinking what I thought he was thinking, he wasn't far wrong. Yes, sure, I'd gone out and got bulletproof vests, I'd persuaded Slibulsky to join us, I'd discussed the showdown in advance with both of them. But really I'd been annoyed all along for feeling that unwritten laws obliged me to help Romario, and for agreeing to meet him all four days ago instead of making some excuse, say flu. In other words, at this moment with one body to my left, another to my right and my feet in a pool of blood, I realised that I didn't like Romario. I didn't like him at all. He let other people suffocate in the dry air of his

central heating because he couldn't cope with having been born at some time in some place another part of the world, he was a terrible cook, he thought he was helping me out by inviting me to eat the leftovers now and then – which was true, and that made it all the worse. But it was about ten minutes too late to do anything about this realisation of mine. I was involved now. Even if Romario ran for it, never to be seen again, there were plenty of people in town who'd wonder about his sudden disappearance, and sooner or later it would get around that I'd been seen with him rather often these last few days. Maybe these Mafia characters couldn't talk, but they could hear and they could probably do their sums too, and if they put two and two together they weren't likely to think I'd come here for a game of dice. And Mafia outfits aren't exactly famous for letting you kill their men with impunity.

All things considered, then, our operation had been a total fiasco. In addition, now I had a guilty conscience. Not only did I not like Romario, I really had done him out of his job, his home and his city in one fell swoop. And that when he'd lost his thumb only five days before

'Er, Romario ...'

'What?' a voice barked behind me. Next moment neon tubes flared on, and cold light from the kitchen fell into the dining-room. Sticky patches of red were spreading over the floor and walls around the corpses, which had now stopped bleeding. The red patches were scattered about like exploded paint-bombs. Slibulsky was sitting on a table, cradling his shotgun in his arm like a baby, dangling his legs and staring ahead of him, nauseated.

I turned to the kitchen door. 'How could I have known they'd shoot straight away?'

Romario's head briefly appeared in the doorway. 'It's your job to know these things. Whether you can do your job is another question!'

Oh, for God's sake! A couple of smart remarks, that was all we needed! Apart from the fact that it wouldn't have been entirely inappropriate for him to ask if Slibulsky and I were a right. After all, it was a miracle we'd got out of this intact. Not to mention any feelings we might have about the dead men and how upset we were. I mean, they weren't just a burst water pipe, and not simply because they did much more damage.

I reached behind the bar, picked up a bottle of schnapps and took a large gulp. Then I bent over the corpses and searched their suits. A silver lighter, a small bottle of mouthwash, two phone cards, half a packet of Dunhills, a nail file, five hundred and seventy marks plus a few coins, three condoms, car keys and two pairs of sunglasses. No ID or driving licences, nothing to give me a clue. I pocketed it all and was about to see what make their clothes were when I found a mobile phone on one of the corpses, tucked into his belt. It was as small and almost as flat as half a postcard. You flipped it open, three fine grooves above and below indicated the receiving and speaking areas, and you keyed in the numbers on a glowing blue touch-pad. I found out how to switch to *receive* if the mobile rang and put it in my breast pocket.

Romario brought in a stack of folded grey bin liners and a roll of sticky tape. Slibulsky and I packed the corpses into them. Both of us in silence, both trying not to feel anything much. The central heating was still full on, and our hands, damp with sweat, kept slipping off the plastic sacks and the dead men's limbs.

When we'd finished I went out and looked around for the BMW that went with the car keys. It was black and new and had a Frankfurt registration. I got into it, felt under the seat, opened the glove compartment, looked behind the sun visors, but apart from empty energy drink bottles, some blackcurrant-flavour sweets, tissues and a big box of powder the car was

empty. I noted the registration number, opened the boot and went back into the Saudade.

By now Romario and Slibulsky were scrubbing the floor and walls. Romario glanced up at me, and judging by the look in his eyes he wouldn't have minded if the blood he was scrubbing away had been mine.

I went into the kitchen and looked for something to help us carry the bodies to the car as unobtrusively as possible. I found a huge double-handled aluminium pan. It was over a metre in diameter and about the same depth. You could cook a whole pig in it, or several hundredweight of vegetables, or anything else that would feed a medium-sized village for a day.

'What are you doing with that?' asked Romario as I dragged this monster into the dining room.

'It's never a good idea to load sacks two metres long into a car boot at one in the morning. A pan full of potatoes, on the other hand ...'

'Are you crazy? I'll never find another pan like that!'

'You'll get it back.'

'You don't think I can ever make soup in it again after this, do you?'

'You think the customers will be able to taste them?'

His eyes widened, and for a moment it looked as if he was going to throw his floorcloths at my face.

'Yes, I do! *I'll* be able to taste them! Every time I use the pan I'll be thinking ...'

'Hey, hang on!' Slibulsky looked up from his bucket and broke his silence for the first time since the gunfight. 'What's all this about your pan?'

Romario turned to him, and his expression softened. I'd been noticing for some time that he was trying to make Slibulsky his ally against me.

'Yes, exactly! What *is* all this? It's my special soup pan for festive occasions!' he exclaimed obviously in the belief that for a civilised man like Slibulsky that would close the subject.

'Oh yes? And what festive occasion do you want to keep it clean for? Your funeral?' asked Slibulsky.

'Or your arrest?' I suggested, leaving the pan beside the grey plastic sausage shapes. Taking no more notice of Romario, we squeezed up the first of the bodies – they were still warm – and rammed it into the aluminium pan, treading it down.

'Did you notice their faces? They were powdered white,' said Slibulsky.

I nodded. 'As if they'd been rehearsing how to be dead.'

After we had looked to make sure the street was empty, we dragged the pan, which now weighed about eighty kilos, to the BMW. We heaved it up and tipped it over the open boot but nothing happened. The man was stuck. We held the pan in the air with one hand and one shoulder each, tugging at the plastic with our other hands. The bin liner tore, and something slimy trickled over my hand.

'I'm going to throw up any moment,' gasped Slibulsky.

I heard a crack. Slibulsky had broken something in the corpse, and it finally gave way. The man landed in the boot with a dull thud. We looked at each other's red, sweating faces and gasped for air. I wiped my hand on my trousers.

When our breathing had calmed down a little I said, 'Sorry. I really thought we'd only have to put on a tough guy act.'

Slibulsky flicked a damp bit of something off his T-shirt. 'I only hope Tango Man doesn't try pinning it all on us.'

'Pinning it on ...?'

'Well, in theory he could go to the police and say gangsters started shooting his place up. He knows you slightly as a guest, he could say, but he had no idea of your Mafia connections.'

'Slibulsky, I'm a private detective!'

He stopped, looked incredulous, then uttered a sound between a laugh and a cough. 'Have your neighbours said a friendly *hi* to you very often recently? You have a Turkish name, Turkish parents, and since starting this job you've infuriated every second cop in town. You don't think a silly little nameplate on your door will stop them for a second if they have a chance of arresting you as an Anatolian terrorist baron, do you?'

'It's not just a plate on the door. I've got a licence too.'

This was weak, admittedly, and Slibulsky didn't even take the trouble to answer it. In fact he was pointing out a possibility that hadn't for a moment crossed my mind before.

On the way back I said, 'He's Brazilian. The tango comes from Argentina.'

'So what? You knew who I meant, right?'

He was correct there too.

Tango Man was sitting on a chair, feet up on the table, and seemed to have put back several glasses of liquor to calm his nerves while we were outside. 'Tango Man' fitted him perfectly: a long, tough-looking face with small, quick-moving eyes, a sharp nose and a cleft in his chin; mid-length hair, black and shining like lacquer, brushed well back and moving when he moved as if it grew from a single root; a body that was big and broad anyway, but looked even bigger and broader in a T-shirt and trousers that might once have fitted him in a schoolyard in Rio; and his obvious conviction that no one's ever too tall to wear shoes with five-centimetre heels.

Those eyes, not so quick-moving now, stared at us. We could see how he had to strain his lips to bring out any sound at all. Had he perhaps been putting back not glasses but whole bottles of liquor to calm his nerves? What and how much did you have to drink in just under twenty minutes to reach a state where you couldn't articulate? There was an empty glass beside him. I looked behind the bar, where I found an empty bottle. He hadn't eaten anything that evening, what with all the agitation, and normally he stuck to fruit juice.

'Hey, Romario, this is all a bit much for you, right?' I went over and put my hand on his shoulder. He looked up at me and gave me a long glance which, I suspected, was meant to express pain, but was only glazed and blurred. Then he silently raised his bandaged arm, looked at it and nodded at it, as if to say: what the pair of us go through together! He looked up at me again, reproachfully this time, until his face suddenly twitched and tears ran down his cheeks. As he wept a kind of whinny escaped him. I kneaded his shoulder, said something like, 'It'll all work out,' and looked around for Slibulsky to come to my aid. But he only shrugged and set about fitting the second corpse into the pan. The whinny finally became sobs, the sobs turned to gulps, the tears abated, I gave Romario a handkerchief and he blew his nose.

'I ... the restaurant's like a girlfriend to me, see ... and the way you'd give a girl jeweller

and clothes, I bought it wood and tiles and tablecloths. To make it look pretty, see?’

‘Yes, sure,’ I said, wondering what kinds of presents, judging by the chipboard, fake marble tiles and check polyester tablecloths in this place, he gave his girlfriends.

‘I promise you’ll soon be able to come back here.’ As I said that, the pushing and shoving behind me stopped for a moment, and I sensed Slibulsky’s eyes on my back. Of course, it was more realistic to expect that the Saudade would be blown up some time in the next few weeks, and Romario would have to start all over again with kebabs and canned beans somewhere far away.

‘Sorry about just now,’ said Romario. ‘You’re right, how could you have known they’d start shooting straight away? But I was in shock ...’ He looked at me out of eyes that were still moist, and I nodded understandingly. It was just after one, according to my watch. ‘So if you really could fix it, Kemal, I’d be eternally grateful!’ He tried a smile. ‘And you’d have free meals for life!’

Now it was my turn to try a smile. ‘Well, great, Romario. Thanks a lot. But,’ I said, this time glancing at my watch as ostentatiously as possible, ‘we ought to get a move on. By tomorrow this place must be as clean as if nothing had happened.’ I pointed to the bullet holes in the wooden panelling. ‘You’ll have to fill those in with something and paint them over. Better make yourself a coffee and then see how far you can get with one arm.’

I didn’t want him to stop and think about his chances of getting safely out of this business. I wanted him to work until his other thumb was practically falling off too, and first thing tomorrow I’d put him on a plane with a bottle of schnapps. Once he’d left, it would be difficult for him to convince the police that he’d been a mere spectator. Particularly if I said otherwise, giving my word as a private detective, which I did think weighed just a little more than Slibulsky thought. I was in my mid-thirties and rather too old for snap judgements to that effect that I wasn’t either popular or taken seriously in my profession – even if we were only talking about the police.

‘Okay,’ said Romario. ‘I’ll do my best.’ Then he stood up, and he was on his way to the kitchen when he turned back again, pressed my arm with his sound hand and looked at me in a funny way. ‘Thanks very much, Kemal. You’re a real pal.’

Fortunately he was decent or drunk enough not to wait for an answer. He turned on his heel and staggered off with a few final sniffs. I watched him go, wondering if he believed what he said, or if he believed I believed what he said, or whether he simply thought that an extremely large amount of soft soap was advisable in an extremely tricky situation. You have to remember that Romario’s moods swung back and forth wildly, and it was far from certain how long he would do his best. The sooner he was on that plane the better.

‘Hey, real pal,’ said a voice behind me. ‘How about helping me pot up that other character now?’

Chapter 2

Ten years ago Slibulsky had been a small-time drugs dealer plying his trade between the station district and the smart set in the Westend quarter. He smuggled, cut, and sold whatever he could lay hands on that didn't mean instant death to his customers. Himself, he stuck to beer. On the side he was open to any kind of deal that in the worst-case scenario wouldn't get him more than five years in jail. We met in the course of one such deal. He helped me to break into Frankfurt police headquarters. A little later he was picked up with coke on him and served a year behind bars. I sent him parcels of World Cup football videos and beef sausage, and he thanked me with a box of clothes pegs he'd made himself. To this day that box stands in my kitchen, and I think every week or so how nice it would be to have a garden or a yard with a washing line in it.

Once he was out on parole, Slibulsky went to work as a bouncer for a brothel, then as a DJ in assorted discos on the outskirts of town, and finally as a bodyguard to a local politician. This man had nothing to fear from anyone, but he was campaigning on the slogan of *No Daily Violence On Our Streets – I'll Be the Enforcer*, and dragged Slibulsky around with him to election meetings as some kind of reverse evidence of the state of affairs he deplored. In that part of the city for which he was standing, criminality reached its height in the form of chewing-gum wrappers dropped on the pavement, and the worst violence seen on the street was done by barking poodles and grumpy senior citizens. The election was won and Slibulsky was fired. He went back to drug-dealing for a while, until three years ago he had an idea and started an ice-cream business. It used those little carts, mostly drawn by a bicycle and usually adorned with pennants in the colours of the Italian flag, that were familiar to us all as part of our childhood Sundays, going around ringing their bells – or at least that's how we remember it today. No idea if I ever ate ice cream from a cart like that as a boy, or even saw one, but now, when one of them came down the street or stopped outside the swimming pool, for a moment I was eight years old again. And because I wasn't the only one to feel like that, and because almost everyone who remembered or thought they remembered the carts was not able to afford the super-size seven-scoops cornet without making too much of a hole in his pocket-money budget, Slibulsky's business was a great success. Children bought his ices to relive the past. He had nine employees who worked for him seven days a week on commission while he sat in an office with cable TV, counted the money and watched Formula One racing. A few repairs now and then, the occasional employee who made off with the day's takings twice reported to the police for food poisoning – the rest of the time raking in a thousand marks, two thousand marks, Schumacher in pole position. By now he had earned enough for him and his girlfriend Gina to start looking for a house of their own with a warehouse and workshop, and then he'd be able to run the business more or less from the bedroom.

The fact that Slibulsky was helping me tonight, risking everything he'd built up in the last three years, and I don't mean just financially, was ... well, it was very impressive.

'Not that way!' He waved a hand. 'There's a disco there, a hundred metres further on the do regular breathalyser checks at night.'

We were on our way to the Taunus to bury the bodies somewhere in the forest. The me-

thought of coming up against a police road block and being asked for our papers brought me out in a sweat. Even if the Frankfurt police had awarded me their big Friendship Prize, even if the name 'Kayankaya' had been proverbial as the shorthand for an honest man who could always be believed, I'd have had all kinds of difficulties in explaining where the car came from, the contents of its boot, and the two spades from Slibulsky's garage on the back seat.

'Turn right up ahead there,' Slibulsky told me. 'And don't crawl along like that.'

'I'm driving at fifty. That's the speed limit.'

'Nobody sticks to the speed limit in a car that can do two hundred, not at two in the morning.'

I didn't reply to that, but I went on at the same speed. I'd rather end up in jail through stupidity than arrogance.

'And you could shake off any flashing blue light in this car.'

'Oh, for God's sake, Slibulsky!'

'Well, what is it?'

Yes, I was impressed by the way he was helping me, and the fact that he was doing it all. But for him I'd never have got through the night intact, let alone been able to fix things so that Romario had half a chance of getting off safe and sound – but I wished I was on my own just now. Over the years Slibulsky had become kind of like family to me. Sometimes a big brother who could give me advice and make me see reason, who backed me up or shielded me, depending on circumstances, and I had no secrets from him. But now and then he was a little brother driving me crazy with his quarrelsome obstinacy, getting in my way, and I wouldn't even want to give him the time of day for fear it might offer him a chance to poke his nose into my business.

'Let's bury these characters, clear up the bar and take Romario to the airport, OK? If we're in luck we may even get a bit of sleep afterwards. We can discuss everything else in the morning, right? Like how to drive a car.'

Slibulsky looked askance at me, and I could sense the retorts passing through his head. But then he just growled something to himself, put another sweet in his mouth and leaned over to the music system. When he pressed the *on* button it began shining and winking in umpteenth different colours like a little fairground. He pushed the only CD lying around into it. Some kind of techno gabba delivered in a poofter sing-song tone. Slibulsky let it play. At full volume. I couldn't make him out.

'Switch that crap off, Slibulsky!'

Head nodding forward and back, he shouted through the din, 'Wait a moment! Listen to this! It's not so bad!'

But I wasn't waiting. And since I was under fire from four bass loudspeakers, and with images of exploding faces in the back of my mind and two bodies in the boot, and the flashing lights of the music system in front of me, I felt for a moment that I was racing straight to hell, I didn't press the *off* button but took my foot off the accelerator and kicked the fairground to pieces.

'... Are you crazy?'

'You're the one who's crazy! "Listen to this!" I think I'm going nuts!'

For a while there was no sound but the quiet purring of the engine.

Finally Slibulsky cleared his throat and said coolly, 'It wasn't my idea to shoot a couple of

guys down and bury their bodies. But that's what's happened, we have it all there in our heads, and it won't go away just because we stick to the Highway Code. You don't want to talk about technical questions, like for instance how no cop with his VW banger could ever overtake us in this car, and you don't want a little music, however horrible, to give you something else to think about – but maybe I do. So for all I care you're a super-killer who shoots a man and then settles down for a nice little nap – speaking for myself, after all the death I'd like something a little livelier!

I didn't react. I stared straight ahead, gritting my teeth, and meticulously stuck to my fifty kph as if I could prove something that way. It was a fact that driving at such a slow speed on an empty, straight, well-surfaced road was a real strain on the nerves. I carefully stepped on the gas. When we were driving at eighty I'd reached the point where I could mutter, 'Sorry.'

Slibulsky shook his head. 'Oh, what the hell!' And after a pause, 'You know what would be a good idea now?'

'No, what?'

'A good screw.'

'What ...?'

'To take your mind off things,' said Slibulsky. 'As I always say. What you need is a steady girlfriend. And don't go saying, "Oh, Slibulsky," again. I bet if you had someone waiting for you at home you wouldn't be so ... so edgy.'

'Edgy? When we have a shoot-out behind us and two dead bodies in the boot!'

'Like I said, you need something to take your mind off it. And there's going to be more evenings when you need that too.'

'Oh, really?'

'I mean it, seriously.'

'Slibulsky! If you ask me, we've got plenty of other things to think about tonight, we can't leave my private life out of it.'

Slibulsky looked at me and scratched his ear. 'You always do.'

'I always do what?'

'Leave your private life out of it.'

I briefly turned my head and caught his challenging look.

I wondered what Gina thought of being described as a good screw to take his mind off things in the evening. If Slibulsky said things like that in front of her. And if she was listening. Gina didn't often listen when Slibulsky was talking. There had to be some reason why two people with such different routines had stuck together for over ten years, and still seemed relatively happy. Gina was an archaeologist, and paid almost no attention to anything that wasn't to do with ancient potsherds. Whether Slibulsky was in jail or making millions with his ice-cream carts, she was always flying off to assorted desert countries, digging in the sand and discussing the results at congresses all over the world. She sat over her microscope and dust samples at home, and when Slibulsky had visits from thugs whose bosses claimed there were old drug-dealing accounts still outstanding, Gina shut her door. Perhaps she actually didn't mind just being something to take his mind off things. Perhaps she saw Slibulsky in the same light. Perhaps Romeo and Juliet would have come to some such arrangement if they'd survived.

'In case you're really interested, I still have Deborah.'

‘Deborah? Don’t you mean Helga?’

‘She calls herself Deborah, so I call her Deborah too.’

‘But she’s a tart!’

‘So what?’

‘I meant something else.’

‘You said “a screw”.’

‘All the same, there’s a difference.’

‘Between a tart and a good screw to make up for things? Not much of one, if you ask me.’

‘Don’t start going on about true love.’

‘I wasn’t going to.’

‘Good.’

A little later we reached the spruce wood where we were planning to dispose of the bodies. I looked in the rear-view mirror to make sure there was no car behind us and no one could see us, turned off the road onto an unmade path, and drove on the sidelights. The path came to an end after about a hundred metres and branches slapped against the windscreen. When we got out we were surrounded by the smell of resin and earth. The ground was covered with a thick layer of spruce needles. No sign of forestry workers or people going for walks.

While Slibulsky took the spades off the back seat, he asked, ‘What are you going to do with the car?’

I ducked down under some branches, shining a flashlight as I looked for a suitable place to dig. ‘Leave it somewhere near the rail station, as bait. The thing’s worth so much, even a successful gangster would be glad to have it back. And perhaps someone will get behind the wheel and be idiot enough to lead me to his boss.’

‘Well, just in case you change your mind, we’d get a year’s earnings for that car.’

‘A year of whose earnings, yours or mine?’

‘Mine, of course. With yours you could just about buy the music system,’ he said, opening the boot. ‘In its present condition.’

‘Very funny,’ I muttered. Then I found a place. A large root stuck up above ground and could be pushed aside.

We spent the next forty minutes digging. Our faces were dripping with sweat, and blisters formed and broke on our hands. When the hole was wide and deep enough we pushed the bodies into it. We shovelled the earth back, trod it down, covered it with spruce needles, and finally I put the root back in place.

While Slibulsky reversed the car out of the wood, I tried covering up the tyre tracks as best I could. Back on the paved road, Slibulsky asked, ‘How exactly did you see that, about using the car as bait? Are you going to stand beside it the whole time?’

‘I’ll get Max to build in a transmitter with a signal that I can follow by radio.’

‘And then what?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘What will you do then? March in, say: “Hey, I shot a couple of your gorillas, but if you let my mate go on running his bar we’ll say no more about it?”’

‘What are you talking about? Do you tell people: “Hey, buy my ice cream, there’s nothing in it but sugar and milk powder and sometimes a couple of salmonella bugs, but give me ten marks for a cornet and I’ll turn a blind eye?”’

Slibulsky made a face as if I were slow on the uptake. I lit a cigarette.

‘OK,’ he said, ‘you’ll be cleverer than that, but however clever you are this is a team that drives BMWs, wears Italian suits, and asks six thousand a month from the manager of this miserable little place serving warmed-up beans – about as much as all the furnishings are worth, if that. What I mean is, these guys don’t do things by halves. Maybe they’ll go crazy and overreach themselves, and then their outfit won’t last long, but while it does last there’s no compromising with them, no negotiating, nothing. Either you get rid of the rest of them or they’ll get rid of you.’

‘So what do you think I should do?’

‘Tell Tango Man to clear off and forget the whole thing. He’ll be up and running again soon. We don’t have to worry about a character who’s worried about his aluminium pan, not in the kind of situation we were in just now. And you’d better close your office for a few weeks and go to the country. Anywhere this bunch can’t find you and you’ll get a little colour in your cheeks.’

Before I could say anything, Slibulsky made a dismissive gesture. ‘That’s all right. About how much?’

I hesitated, knowing that I wasn’t going to accept what Slibulsky was offering, but I did the sums all the same. ‘Well ... I’m two months behind with the office rent, I haven’t paid the phone bill yet, and I owe someone three thousand marks.’

The someone was Slibulsky.

‘Right, I’ll give you seven thousand for the rent and the phone, you can have a holiday with what’s left. And just forget the three thousand ...’ Slibulsky paused, and then grinned broadly. ‘The guy you owe it to has enough anyway.’

To please Slibulsky I grinned too. My thoughts were somewhere else entirely. Refusing his money had nothing to do with pride or a sense of honour. I’d have taken twenty thousand without bothering too much, because there was no doubt about it, Slibulsky did have enough – or anyway as much as we both thought was enough. But I’d been fool enough to accept a job from Romario, and I’d mucked it up, and a lot of blood had been spilt and energy wasted for no good reason. If two men die and everything’s still the same as before, or worse, then something’s wrong. I had to make sense of it all, even if only by making sure that Romario could carry on acting the typical Brazilian at the Saudade in peace, complaining about the German weather and wearing an apron with parrots printed on it.

Or I could have put it to myself more simply: I wished I hadn’t shot anyone.

‘Thanks, Slibulsky, but as I see it Romario may be an idiot – well, he *is* an idiot – but it all turned out this way on his account, and I think someone ought to get something out of it. And I have to know who those two were. I can’t just shoot a man like that. I won’t forget it.’

Slibulsky looked straight ahead, driving the car gently along. I couldn’t see his expression in the faint orange light of the dashboard. We drove on to the next village in silence.

‘Look,’ he said at last, ‘It’s not a complete disaster because just once you really mucked up. They didn’t exactly leave us much room to manoeuvre. But do it if you must. Three things: keep my name to yourself, pay your rent with my money, and when we’ve taken Tango Man to the airport let’s go back to my place. We’ll have a bite to eat and you can sleep on the sofa.’

‘Stinking cheese?’

Slibulsky nodded. 'And there's a crate of beer in the fridge.'

When the skyscrapers of Frankfurt appeared ahead of us I slipped lower down in the passenger seat and enjoyed the sight of the lights of the management offices on the top floor shining next to the moon. Whatever I'm feeling like, every time I drive into Frankfurt my heart lifts for a moment at the look of the skyline. In the normal way it's probably just the image of such a concentrated, powerful place with those densely crowded tower buildings you can see miles away, giving a man who has his own little room somewhere among them a momentary illusion of being concentrated and powerful too. But this time those concrete pillars gave off another aura. As we drove past the Trade Fair Tower and I looked up at the façade that seemed to go on up and up into the sky, I felt a little calmer for the first time since the shoot-out. Was it my stupid subconscious whispering: a small-time character like you can't really do anything too terrible? Or was it just the sight of such a mighty building making me feel that the world has seen and survived worse things than two dead thugs who were extorting protection money? Anyway, it was something to do with the fact that the building belonged to my home town, and I had a friend in that home town with a place where I could spend the night and eat, and if some Mafia outfit from somewhere else got a bloody nose from us, it was their own fault!

So far, so locally patriotic. A few cops I knew would have been surprised. They might even have spoken to me politely for a change.

But it wasn't just the management floors lighting Frankfurt up tonight. As we drove past the station and I turned my head to ask Slibulsky if he knew whether there were any flights to the south at this time of night, I saw a red glow in the sky. Roughly in the direction of the Saudade. People sometimes like to say, after the event, that they knew something at a certain moment, although they really just mean they were afraid of it. All the same, I did know. And I felt I had only to reach out my arm and point a finger for Slibulsky to know too. Anyway, he opened his mouth and left it open for the rest of the drive, his gaze becoming more and more fixed. The closer we came to the Saudade the stronger the smell of burning was. When we finally turned into the road where the Brazilian flag had hung on one street corner for the last seven years, flakes of soot flew to meet us, and the blue lights of police cars were circling the place. The street was sealed off, curious onlookers were standing to right and left, and the Saudade was blazing fiercely.

We stopped the car at the road block and watched the fire-fighters running back and forth among ladders, hoses and pumps. Several jets of water were directed on the flames. The building, an old one with wooden floors and window frames, had four storeys, and the fire had reached the third. Meanwhile the blocks of flats to left and right had been cleared, and a bunch of sleepy children wrapped in blankets, unkempt men in dressing-gowns, and women with handbags and carrier bags were spilling out into the street. A tart was arguing with her client about payment for their unfinished business, and a drunk was offering the fire-fighters hurrying past him cans of beer out of a carrier as if he were in charge of a refreshment stop for marathon runners.

When the flames reached the fourth floor Slibulsky turned his head. 'Now what?' he asked.

I think I meant to shrug my shoulders, but I only succeeded in hunching them even further. Five hours ago we had set out, we'd had a quick drink in a bar, squeezed into Romario

cupboard, and all things considered we'd been in a pretty relaxed mood. A stupid job, yes, but not one you couldn't get done with the help of a spot of bad temper and a few moderately funny jokes. I mean, what were two racketeers come for their protection money who never opened their mouths? Come on, Slibulsky, we can do this standing on our heads, we just have to puff air in their faces and they'll leave Romario in peace ...

'... Do you think he got out?'

Slibulsky raised his eyebrows. 'Drunk as he was?'

I lit myself a cigarette. My hands were trembling. 'I don't think I feel well.'

'I told you, they don't do things by halves.'

'How could they find out what had happened so quickly?'

'Maybe there was a third man in the car.'

My mouth dropped open, and I goggled at Slibulsky as if he'd just conjured up a whole flock of pigeons or something. Of course! Why hadn't we thought of that before? And how come I myself hadn't worked it out?

'What do you think, have we been acting like idiots?'

'Look, we had a couple of dead bodies on our hands! And if there was a third man we wouldn't have made any difference.'

'But we could have taken Romario with us.'

'We ought to have got that tall bastard to pay them the six grand.'

That had been Slibulsky's view all along. Protection money to the Mafia was just taxation, he thought, only you got a better return for your money. He knew what it was all about. In his time as a bouncer for that brothel he'd also been responsible for getting the whores to pay up the few hundred marks they owed for round-the-clock guard and their mouldy rooms. He didn't like to talk about that, and the methods he sometimes had to use.

'But he didn't,' Slibulsky went on, 'and then this happened. He knew what tangling with characters like that could mean. Well, nothing we can do here now, and I guess we'd better go home.'

'But whoever started the fire is still around. He's not going to miss the show ...'

'So? You think he's standing around somewhere with a big cigarette lighter? Come on, we've had enough for one day.'

Slibulsky started the engine of the car and turned it. I didn't protest. We really had had enough.

After we'd gone round two corners the glow of the fire disappeared behind buildings and neon ads. As we crossed the bridge to Sachsenhausen the sky in the east turned blue. I thought of Romario's one-room flat in the Nordend district. Photographic wallpaper showing a palm-fringed Brazilian beach, plus a bed with a sagging mattress and dirty grey sheets. Slibulsky was on the wrong track if he thought Romario could have paid six thousand marks just like that. He had put all his money into the Saudade, his one true love. But apart from farmers and folk from small towns who wanted to round off a weekend visit to the red-light district of Frankfurt with an exotic supper, scroungers like me and a handful of Brazilian transvestites, hardly anyone had wanted to be witness to his love. From Monday to Thursday the place was empty. If Romario had a special soup pan for festive occasions the size of a rainwater butt, and had objected to its use as a receptacle for corpses, he'd only been putting on a desperate act. There were never any festive occasions at the Saudade, let alone enough

customers to put back as much soup as the pan held. And anyway the characters who got lost and found their way to the Saudade were not the kind to waste their capacity for liquid intake on soup. I wondered who would break down the door to Romario's flat, and hoped he'd changed the sheets recently.

After we had pushed a number of ice-cream carts in need of repairs out of Slibulsky's garage and into the yard, and got the BMW under cover, we went up to his flat. Slibulsky took the crate of beer out of the fridge, and we sat down by the living-room window with it. Neither of us felt like food any more, let alone the cheese – a yellow stinker which, if you had enough imagination, looked like a clump of calloused skin collected from mortuaries and kept moist and stored in gumboots for years. Outside it was getting light. We drank beer and watched the first rays of the sun falling on the rooftops. We were too exhausted to talk and too churned up inside to sleep. Only when the sun was shining in our faces and school-kids were shouting out in the street did Slibulsky rise to his feet, put a blanket on the sofa for me and wish me a sceptical, 'Good-night.' I waited for another beer to take effect, then levered myself up from my chair too, staggered across the room and fell on the sofa. I was still wondering what Gina would think if she found me here with my shoes on her sofa cushion and with their linen covers when my eyes closed, and it was about five seconds before I fell asleep. And about ten seconds before an alarm clock made my head burst. Tinkle tinkle tinkle tinkle, tinkle tinkle. Another ten seconds before I realized that the racketeer's mobile was ringing in my breast pocket. I pressed buttons at random, hoped the right one was among them, and cleared my throat. The right one *was* among them, and I heard a voice. At the same moment everything I'd tried to work out about the origin of the blackmailers over the last few hours was turned on its head by the Frankfurt accent.

'Hey, where's you lot, then? Here's me sitting around like a fool, can't come off duty, time I went to bed. You in the disco or what? If the boss hears ... where are you? Can't hear anything ...'

I tried clearing my throat again.

'You being funny? Tell me where you are, I'll tell you how long it'll take to get home. And if you don't I'm shutting up shop and going to bed, get it?'

'Yup.'

'Whaddya mean, "yup"?''

'Yup, I get it.'

I waited for him to go on grousing and with luck give me some idea where it was that his mates were supposed to come home to. But something about my answer must have sounded wrong, because all I heard was a sudden sharp intake of breath and then he ended the call. I stared at the mobile. A Hessian Mafia! No wonder the blackmailers had preferred not to talk. Who'd have taken them seriously?

I put the mobile back in my breast pocket and looked up at the ceiling. The night was actually ending on a note of relief. No language I didn't understand, no bosses I'd have to look for far afield. Just a cosy little connection probably thought up in the back room of a bar where they were putting back the local cider, the boss a meat importer or used-car dealer or the owner of some fairground booth, the rest of them unemployed scaffolders and drunkards who took the tickets in porn cinemas. 'Hey, how's about a little Mafia op?' And I imagined myself marching into the office with its rubber tree and chrome furniture and Pirelli calendar.

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