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Steam-bread Blues

A Bavarian crime thriller

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Sweet Bun Blues—Chapters 1 & 2 1

by Rita Falk

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Chapter 1

DIE YOU SOW! is painted on the side of Höpfl's house. Annoying. And not only for Höpfl.

Because if you have to work when the goddamned telephone rings at God knows what hour on Monday morning, well, that totally sucks. Especially before breakfast.

And Höpfl's on the line. Höpfl lives here just outside the village. He's the principal at the vocational middle school, and he wants me to come over now.

Right now.

And because naturally it's my responsibility, I'm already basically on my way.

So, sadly, two breakfast rolls with marmalade and bacon and eggs that Grandma fries up for me will have to suffice. There isn't any time for quark with fruit.

"What about the quark?" Grandma calls after me as I'm just about out the door. Creamy, rich Bavarian quark is not something I normally pass up. But because Grandma hasn't been able to hear anything for years now, I just point to the clock and then to my gun, and she gets it.

I can read the words even from the street as I drive up the small rise to Höpfl's house in the patrol car.

Someone has painted DIE YOU SOW! there in giant letters across the roughcast wall of his house. Big and red and dripping like tears down a cheek. Höpfl is already running out to meet me, pointing up at the message as though I can't make it out myself.

"There! You see, Eberhofer?"

He's soaked in sweat and agitated, and all of his blood is evidently backed up inside his skull. He plasters an insanely long strand of hair across his high forehead, adhering it in place with sweat. Apart from the sweat, however, everything about him is tip-top. Shirt tip-top, pants tip-top, shoes tip-top. Of course the stupid sweat ruins the entire picture, obviously. You can turn up dressed in nothing but Lagerfeld, but if you sweat like a pig, you're done.

He fumbles a handful of loose pills out of his pants pocket and throws them back into the abyss of his mouth. With an experienced jerk of the head, he then swallows them all at once—no water.

"Valerian," he mumbles, groping for the little plastic bag he stores them in. He holds the perspiration-painted pills under my nose inviting me to sniff, but I shake my head. I shudder at the thought.

"What do they want of me?" he asks, fiddling a handkerchief out of another pocket and dabbing it on his face.

"Who are 'they'?"

"Yeah, I don't know! All I know is, whoever they are, they wrote this."

"Maybe they didn't even mean you?"

"Now wait just a second. It's on my wall. Whom could they mean if not me?"

No idea. He's probably right.

"Someone doesn't like you, apparently," I say pensively, taking a topnotch photo of the lettering. He sighs.

"Stand in front of it for a moment, Mr. Höpfl," I say, and he situates himself right in front of the wall.

Topnotch photo. "And now with a friendlier expression, if it's not too much trouble," I say, and he smiles.

Wonderful.

“Do you have any suspects in mind?”

He shakes his head.

“One of your students, maybe? Because, let’s admit, principal isn’t necessarily the most popular job. Especially among students.”

“Yeah, but as a police officer I’m sure you have more than just friends as well. Am I right?”

“But it doesn’t say ‘die you sow’ on the wall of my house.”

He nods.

“And what are you going to do now?” he asks.

“Yeah, nothing.”

“What, ‘nothing’?”

“Well, perhaps I should initiate a major manhunt for a suspected graffiti artist?” I suggest, laughing. “Maybe with SWAT support and a helicopter team for backup?” I head back to the car. “I need to get going, in any case. After all, you’re not the only person who needs the police, eh?”

Of course, I’m exaggerating now just a bit with regard to police-related activities. Because, let’s be honest, all hell is not exactly breaking loose here in this glorified village of Niederkaltenkirchen in backward, rural Bavaria. In a place like this, some graffiti action on a wall can well be the high point of an entire workweek. That’s not always the case, naturally. Once, we actually had a seriously awesome quadruple murder. Topnotch case. A whole family was massacred. And over nothing but a piece of land. The whole thing was totally shady. But I solved the case. Well . . . all right. Not just me, alone. Rudi Birkenberg was part of it. Great teamwork, really. But on the other hand, you can’t expect a constant stream of quadruple homicides in a village of only a thousand people. Yeah, how long can a village this size hold out? Do the math—figure four folks die each time, with at least one person landing in jail. Which is why people should be content with less-than-stellar performance in wall-graffiti cases, eh?

As I walk through the door at home at lunchtime: a totally topnotch *nightmare*. No odors of savory food in the entryway, no hissing or sizzling in pans, no clattering of dishes.

Nothing at all.

Instead, the acrid stench of disinfectant and two people in full-body hazmat suits. Grandma and Papa, both wearing floral aprons over their overalls with bandanas tied around their necks to cover their mouths, rubber gloves pulled up to their elbows.

“For God’s sake! What happened?” I ask as images of a meltdown at the nearby Isar I Nuclear Power Plant race through my brain.

“Leopold’s coming this weekend,” Papa says through a cloud of Lysol.

“Yeah, and?”

“And he’s bringing the girls!”

I should explain briefly, first, that Leopold is my brother (of which I’m really not proud) and, second, that he’s become a father. And when Papa talks about the “girls” (plural), he’s not wrong. Because Leopold’s future wife—she’ll actually be his third—just recently became of age, though she still looks much younger. When he brought her over the first time, I asked him directly if she was still in junior high. She’s from Thailand, incidentally, and is basically a souvenir from his last vacation.

The second girl then is their daughter, who’s just ten weeks old and is constantly wrapped in bolts of cloth. Her name is Uschi, after her grandmother. But since that’s the name of my deceased mother, I prefer to call her Sushi. Sushi suits her perfectly because she’s a tiny Asian roll-up, too. So, just to review: Papa says Leopold is bringing the girls.

“And that’s why you two are sterilizing everything?”

“Yeah, of course! Don’t you know how sensitive such a young child is? Especially a half-breed? The immune system has no idea what it should respond to—Asian or European germs,” Papa helpfully continues. “Highly dangerous, I’m telling you.”

I step over to the range and peek in the pots on top. Empty.

“Yeah, Franz. There’s nothing to eat today,” Grandma says, pulling one of her rubber gloves off with her teeth and cramming it into her apron pocket. She fiddles a five-euro bill out and presses it into my hand.

“Now, listen. Go over to Simmerl’s and buy yourself a couple of nice Leberkäs sandwiches. We need to get back to work now,” she says, “because, well, such a little baby is sensitive. Especially when it’s a half-breed!” Grandma evidently missed Papa making the same comment. Maybe we should get cracking on that hearing aid for her.

“Aha,” I say stepping out into the yard and finding Ludwig there, who looks like he’s about to snuff it, all high on pure Lysol. Seeing me, he wags his tail, and we get on our way.

“Give me a couple warm ones,” I say as I enter the butcher shop to order my Leberkäs sandwiches on bread rolls. The butcher is Simon, but he goes by Simmerl. Because in Bavaria you always add *erl* onto everyone’s name. I don’t know why. And Simmerl knows exactly what I want.

“Three or four?” he asks, opening the hot case.

“Two,” I say, taking hold around my middle of the winter ham that has accumulated there in recent weeks. The scent of Leberkäs — Bavarian meatloaf made from very finely ground beef and pork — quickly finds its way right into my nostrils. My mouth waters.

“Four,” I relent. “Make it four, Simmerl!”

The butcher slices four thick, pink slices and nestles each between the halved bread rolls.

Mustard on top—Händlmaier’s sweet Bavarian mustard, of course. Done.

“Say, Simmerl. Do you know that Höpfl guy? Your kid Max goes to his school, right?” I ask, precisely halfway between the first and second sandwiches.

“That Höpfl asshole? Yeah, I know him. Pretty well, even, I’d say. We’ve got a sort of direct line to his office,” Simmerl says.

Interesting.

“Direct line? What do you mean?”

“Yeah, because we’re in constant communication, Höpfl and me.”

“You’re that close?”

“Close is one way to put it,” Simmerl says and then he falls silent. You have to pull every word out of him with forceps.

“Dammit, don’t make me pull every word out of you with forceps,” I say. Lord, I could kneel before Simmerl’s Leberkäs.

“He’s just an incredible asshole, Höpfl is. Complains about practically everything—really everything—that Max does. Or doesn’t do.”

“Max is that much a devil? Yeah, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Simmerl was extremely popular among the teachers in his day too. We both smirked.

“Yeah, so what does Höpfl complain about all the time then?” I ask, precisely halfway between the second and third warm ones.

“Yeah, crap. Just pure nonsense. Forgotten homework, for example. Pulling a girl’s hair. Pulling hair—you see what I mean?”

Simmerl dramatically shakes his head, a snide smile on his face. “Crap nobody’s interested in. Back in the day, you’d have gotten a thorough bawling-out or taken one to the back of the head, and then off with you. Nowadays, educators take themselves so fucking seriously, and I can’t believe how strong their drive is to communicate all the time.”

“Unbelievable,” I say, nodding.

“When Max first started, that Höpfl asshole still shopped here. A pound of steak tartare usually. But once all his whining started, I started always spitting in his meat. He never noticed because I did it fresh each time out back in the slaughterhouse. Now he only buys at Niederer’s in town, in Landshut. But Niederer and I both studied to become master butchers at the same time, back in the day. So now he spits in Höpfl’s tartare too. On behalf of me, so to speak. Yeah, we master butchers have to stick together.”

He wipes a cloth over the counter and looks me in the eye. “What are you asking about Höpfl for?”

“‘Die you sow’ is painted on the wall of Höpfl’s house. Right on the roughcast.”

Simmerl smirks. Satisfied. Very satisfied, actually. “Someone’s got balls. Respect!” he says.

Chapter 2

A couple of days later, Leopold’s little family rolls in as announced. Grandma’s been cooking as though a whole company were returning fresh from the POW camp in Russia. Papa’s excited, and he keeps lingering at the window so as not to miss the grand arrival. Then they’ll come striding into our combined living room and kitchen with pomp and circumstance. Leopold will push his tiny wife through the front door first; he’ll follow with the brat in his arm.

Chest out—brimming with pride.

If you keep in mind he’s nothing more than a second-rate bookseller whose wives keep leaving him, it’s a pretty ridiculous scene. But Leopold will resort to any means necessary when it comes to impressing Papa. A panzer-wide trail of slime starts at Leopold and will always lead directly to Papa. Always has. And now on top of it all, he’s come up with a grandchild—bull’s-eye, I’d say.

Logically, then, we’ll all have to circle around and marvel at the young specimens of domestic bliss. Leopold expects this. Papa expects it too; he’s at least as proud, after all. This all occurs in English so as not to exclude the young mother, who doesn’t speak a word of German—let alone Bavarian. Well, all right. Maybe all of that is a little exaggerated.

“Wery nice,” Papa says in English.

“It iss a wery nice baby,” I say in English.

The mother is pleased, and Leopold is pleased in turn. Grandma announces dinner is ready, and the young father generously passes his bundle off to its mother. He’s the first at the table and immediately starts jamming food into his greedy maw.

“Goot, eh? Tastes goot, Panida?” he says in English.

Lookee there! Leopold is practically bilingual. Panida is his future wife’s name, incidentally. She nods.

“Are you actually divorced from Roxana already?” I ask. Roxana is his incumbent wife.

“No,” he says, heaping a few more slices of roast beef onto his plate.

“So when do you two good-looking kids here plan on getting married?” I ask.

“As soon as I’m divorced.”

Makes sense.

The actual kid starts bawling. She’s hungry. Panida puts down her fork and unbuttons her blouse. She unpeels her youthful breast and attaches the kid to it. She starts to eat noisily, and Papa mentally gouges his

eyes out. Me too, actually—but seeing how stupid Papa’s face looks, I pull myself together. Pull myself together and concentrate with extraordinary focus on my plate.

“The sautéed kohlrabi is wonderful,” I say. Papa slowly turns his face toward me and absentmindedly nods. “Panida can’t eat kohlrabi at all, eh Panida? Because she gets gas, you see. And then Uschi gets gas, too,” Leopold says, looking compassionately at the two before slinging a tremendous heap of vegetables into the abyss between his jaws.

Grandma stands up to fetch a pillow. She then places it under the elbow of the nursing mother. Things are a lot better that way. Grandma earns grateful looks. Even from Leopold. Papa still has no idea where to keep his eyes.

Later over coffee, there’s some of Grandma’s topnotch strawberry torte and, inevitably, the Beatles. Papa has been polishing his old LPs and dusting off the turntable all afternoon. If you keep in mind that he knows every single Beatles song forward and back by heart, saying something like “wery nice” is pathetically inadequate, of course. But whatever.

“Oh, it’s so nice, Papa. Coffee, dessert—and the Beatles!” Leopold says, the slimy bastard, leaning back all cozy. “I haven’t heard them in a long time.”

Papa smiles blissfully.

Leopold smiles blissfully.

I’m going to need to puke over here.

“Although I do have to say that Panida is a good baker too,” he continues, taking a forkful of torte. He talks with his mouth full, which is unappetizing. “She’s a good cook, too. She’s really become a great housewife since she’s been in Germany—really great, honestly.”

“Yeah, she’s still young. They’re much easier to break in,” I say in German.

Papa raises an eyebrow and glares at me. Warning!

“No,” Leopold says, moving a clump of strawberries from one cheek into the other. “Not at all. But you can’t imagine how nice it’s been with Panida. Thai women . . . Thai women are just really totally different. Much more affectionate and such. And more modest. Not like emancipated women. A dream.”

He rests his arm around his dream woman and blathers out some scraps of English for her.

“I actually don’t know much about Thai women,” I say. “The only thing I have any recollection of is that a couple of years ago a Thai woman bit off her husband’s cock in the middle of the night. Without any warning. Or was that a Vietnamese woman . . . ?”

I need to get that off my chest. Even if it makes Leopold cough and shoot out bits of his strawberry clumps back onto his plate.

“Franz!” Papa yells.

He skips the eyebrow thing this time because it doesn’t get him anywhere.

I stand up.

“Wonderful,” I tell Grandma. I bend down and give her a peck on the cheek. “Your food was wonderful, Grandma.”

She’s delighted.

Then I head out to my pigsty and get Ludwig. There are two things in my life I wouldn’t give up for any price. First, my converted pigsty—my refuge, my kingdom, my oasis of peace and hot sex orgies. OK, fine. Maybe no orgies. But, dammit, now and again the mail still gets sent, if you know what I mean! But the pigsty was a ton of work, you won’t believe. See, I started the conversion after Papa gave up pig farming for age-related reasons, and after I moved back here from Munich for disciplinary reasons. I converted the old pigsty into a

residential structure. I'm still not quite finished. But you can live in it great already. And it spares from me having to be in the constant presence of my family. And the Beatles. And that alone is worth it.

The second essential thing in my pathetic existence is Ludwig. My best friend. My faithful companion. And my fitness trainer. An hour-long walk every day. Keeps you fit. No two ways about it. So I grab Ludwig and we get going. We need an hour eighteen minutes for our regular circuit, which is absolutely average. Our personal best time is an hour sixteen, although that happened just once.

When I come home, Leopold is already gone along with his Asian pearl. But the kid is still here.

Papa has a weird expression on his face from what apparently just happened, but I still have to ask, "Hey, did they forget the kid?"

"Um, those two had to go out. And Uschi is staying with us for a little while today, eh Ushi?" Papa says.

"For how long exactly?" I inquire.

"What do you care? She's with me over here. Not out there with you."

"Yeah, she'd be slightly out of place," I say.

Then I go to the bassinet where the little bundle is lying, and I look in. Her Asian eyes aren't as Asian-y anymore as when she was born. More almond-shaped. It's nice. Her hair is wavy and more like coffee and cream, unlike her mother's, which is straight and dark as pumpernickel bread. Wery nice. But the nose! The nose, it has to be said, has nothing small about it. It's more the typical Eberhofer schnoz. Maybe not as bad as Leopold's or mine, but still.

"She's beautiful, our Ushi, eh?" Papa says, now much more conciliatory.

"Actually, yes," I say.

"Yes, good. Just the nose. A real Eberhofer schnoz, or?" he says, grinning with pride.

"You reap what you sow. Leopold would have to know that. And when are those two coming back, you say?"

"It won't be too late. Uschi needs the breast after all," Papa says, looking down and cooding at his granddaughter.

"Are you glad she got Mama's name?" I ask.

"Yeah. Leopold couldn't have given me a greater joy," Papa says softly.

Yeah, that was clear.

Then there's a knock at the door and Liesl Mosshammer storms in. She greets Papa in Bavarian, saying "Servus, Eberhofer," pushes him aside, and then races through the room. She throws me a "Servus, Franz" too and then sinks her whole upper body into the bassinet.

"Is this the new Eberhofer?" she wants to know.

"Eberhofette, if anything," Papa says.

"A girl? Not too bad. Main thing is the child's healthy, I always say," Liesl sings. Then she reports she ran into Leopold and Panida in the village and thus learned about their little hatchling back up here. And of course she had to come and see right away. Because as far as curiosity goes, Liesl is basically the unrivaled champion of the village busybodies.

"And, what else is new?" I ask Liesl as I inconspicuously sweep a sock under the couch with my foot.

"What else is new? Hmm, nothing. Except Höpfl has 'die you sow' painted on the wall of his house. Did you see that already, Franz?"

"Hey, that's an official investigation. I definitely can't mention a word about it to you," I say, pretending I need to hurry off. "I need to get going. I'm in a rush."

"Official investigation? Yeah, what are you investigating there, then?" she adds, but I'm already at the front door. Door closes, and I'm off.

Outside I find Leopold and wife returning to pick up the kid, thank God. Everything gets stowed in their car,

and a mass waving begins.

“Bye-bye!” everyone calls, and Papa walks along beside the car for a few strides. He’s limping a little. He’s been one-leggedly three-toed since his incisive altercation with a scythe last summer. That raised quite a clamor, I can’t even tell you. He saws off two of his toes, and then I’m supposed to go looking in the grass for them so they can be sewed back on. But it didn’t take, unfortunately. And since then, naturally I have been to blame for his stupid self-mutilation. I’m still getting his famous see- how-I-limp-now glares. So he waddles a few strides after the car in his well-worn jeans and waves.

“Bye-bye!” he yells in English.

“Bye-bye, we’ll call you!” Leopold yells back.

“Don’t call us; we’ll call you,” I yell back in English, also waving. Then they’re gone, and finally the quiet returns. At least for a few minutes. Then my dispatch phone rings.

A neighbor dispute close by. Despite the late hour and my incredible thirst, I pull myself together and drive over. Business is business. Even on Sunday, if need be. The scene is a duplex, and the person who just called is apparently standing on the second-floor balcony in his tighy-whities, flailing both arms around. Then I learn that a thermometer is the crux of the whole rumpus.

Unbelievable.

The ground-floor tenant mounted the aforesaid thermometer at the entryway to the building over the doorbell so as to keep current on the latest warming and cooling trends. Which compelled the second-floor tenant to take a glance now and again at said thermometer. Also to keep current on warming and cooling trends. This glancing can in turn be clearly seen by the owner of the thermometer from his bathroom window. And that bothers him. Because he bought the instrument with his own hard-earned money, and for the life of him he will not accept someone else enjoying the benefit of it, too. He should go and buy his own thermometer!

This has apparently been going on for weeks now. And today . . . today the tighy-whitey guy just shamelessly started staring at it again. For a pretty long time, in fact. Provocatively long, says the ground-floor tenant. And he’s had enough, he says. And if that asshole reads the temperature off that instrument, which he does not own, even one more time, he’s going to slit his throat. Those were his words.

Whereupon his adversary picked up the phone, thereby messing up my holy Sunday. And now we’re standing here. In front of the main entrance to the duplex. The three of us. Including the ground-floor tenant’s wife, who shows up wanting to add her mustard, as we say in Bavaria. But her husband won’t let her. He curses at her to be quiet. He apparently has her well under control.

“What exactly do you want from me now?” I then have to ask.

“Yeah, for him not to look at my thermometer anymore.”

A clear position.

“Would you please refrain from looking at his thermometer?” I ask the third-party gawker.

“No,” he says.

Aha.

“I offered to pay him for half of it, but he won’t have that.”

“Fifty eurocents! That’s the kicker!” the other starts yelling at me. “The thing cost a piddly one euro. But to him it’s not about the material value. It’s much more about the principle. But the moron doesn’t even get that!”

“I think that’s fair,” I say, urgently hoping they’ll come to their senses. “If each pays for half, then either can look at it.”



But no. No understanding. No coming to senses. Nada. Two pigheaded know-it-alls with their arms crossed. And on a Sunday after dinner!

I draw my weapon and release the thermometer from its obligations. Dust wafts out of the bullet hole. Neither dares to say anything now. I get back into the patrol car and drive back to my well-deserved night off. Actually I shouldn't go around trumpeting things like that. The shooting, I mean. All hell will break loose otherwise. My superiors think I'm a little trigger-happy already. Hence my transfer back home. Because, they thought, if I stayed much longer in Munich—Bavaria's lovely capital—I might accidentally mow someone down. And probably the wrong person. So, no, that's not good. And, so, back to Niederkaltenkirchen with you, eh? Yeah.

No, actually what I wanted to say is, there are some things you can solve only with a gun. Like just now. What would the alternative have been? A self-help group for thermometer-peeping Toms?