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BETON ROUGE

Written by **Simone Buchholz**
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BETON ROUGE

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DOG EAT DOG WORLD

The rain creates walls in the night. Falling from the sky, they are like mirrors, reflecting and warping the blue light from the police car.

Everything spins.

The street emerges from the darkness and loses itself between the harbour lights, and there – right in the middle, just where it suddenly drops downhill – is where it happened: a cyclist.

She's lying, twisted, on the asphalt, her strawberry-blonde hair forming a delicate pool around her head. Her pale dress is awash with blood; the blood seems to be flowing from her side, staining the concrete red. There's a black shoe – some kind of ballet flat – on her right foot and no skin at all on her left. The bike's lying a few feet away on a grass verge, as if it's been ditched.

The woman isn't moving; only her ribcage twitches desperately, as if to rise and fall, but then it doesn't move at all. Her body is trying to take in air from somewhere.

Two paramedics are leaning over and talking to her, but it doesn't look as though they're getting through. It doesn't look as though anything's getting through any more. Death is about to give her a ride.

Two police officers are cordoning off the accident site, shadows dancing on their faces. Now and then, a car comes past and drives slowly around her. The people in the cars don't want to look too closely.

The paramedics do things to their paramedic cases; then they close them, stand up.

That must be it, then.

So, thinks God, looking industrious, that's that. He picks up his

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well-chewed pencil, crosses the cyclist off, and wonders whose life he could play football with next.

I think: I'm not on duty. I'm just on my way to the nearest pub.

But as I'm here.

'Hello,' I say.

What else was I supposed to say?

'Move along, please,' says the more solid of the two policemen. He's pulled his cap right down over his face; raindrops are glittering on his black moustache. The other has his back to me and is on his phone.

'I certainly can,' I say, 'or I can stay and take care of a few things.' I hold out my hand. 'Chastity Riley, public prosecutor.'

'Ah, OK.'

He takes my hand but doesn't shake it. I feel as though he's holding it. Because that's what you do at times like this, when someone's just died – because a tiny bit of all of us dies along with them and so everything's a bit shaky. The big policeman and I seem suddenly involved in a relationship of mutual uncertainty.

'Dirk Kammann,' he says. 'Davidwache Station. My colleague's on the phone to our CID.'

'OK,' I say.

'OK,' he says, letting go of my hand.

'Hit-and-run?' I ask.

'Looks like it. She hardly drove over her own belly.'

I nod, he nods; we stop talking but stand side by side a while longer. When the dark-blue saloon draws up with the CID guys from the Davidwache, I say goodbye and go, but I look back round before turning the corner. There's a grey veil over the brightly lit scene, and it's not the rain; for once it's not even the persistent rain that falls in my head. This isn't my personal charcoal grey; it's a universal one.

I call Klatsche and tell him that there's nothing doing tonight. That I don't feel like the pub.

Then I go home, sit by the window and stare into the night.

The moon looks like it feels sick.

SPECIALIST IN DARK HOLES

Haze lies over the city; last night's rain left it behind. It's too warm, almost twenty degrees this morning, even though it's late September.

I stand on my balcony and drink coffee with this laundry room all around me. The cranes on the horizon have vanished – the thick air's eaten them up. The shrieking of the harbour gulls sounds unusually clear, and almost too close, as if they might put aside their friendliness any minute and start pecking at someone's forehead – maybe mine.

It's just after nine. I ought to go to work.

Go on, then.

I put my coffee – half-gone-cold, half-got-lost – down in the kitchen, take a thin leather jacket from the coat hook, just in case, and set off.

Breathing this haze, which seems to soak up the big-city smog like a sponge, is a bit like smoking. I also light a cigarette – double poisoning is more reliable. I've smoked far too little in the last few days; that needs to change, and so does everything else.

On my third drag, my mobile rings; I answer reluctantly: 'Riley.'

'Good morning, Ms Riley. Kolb here.'

The attorney general. She likes me. And she doesn't like me. It's hit-and-miss. You never quite know.

'Dr Kolb, good morning. What's up?'

'I've got something for you.'

I keep walking through the cloud that's fallen from heaven and find myself thinking about last night's accident. Or, to be precise, I can't stop thinking about last night's accident.

'A hit-and-run?' I ask.

'No. Why do you say that?'

'Just wondered,' I say, drag on my cigarette again and throw it away. Sometimes I'm included in current stuff, sometimes not. I wonder what she wants.

'Where are you now?' she asks.

'On my way to the office.'

'On foot?'

'As ever.'

'In that case, could you please turn right, as unbureaucratically as possible, and head for the harbour?' she says. 'Outside Mohn & Wolff there's a man in a cage, right by the main entrance. The people from the local station are trying to get him out.'

I stop. 'A man in a cage?'

'That's all I know,' she says, and she sounds impatient. 'It's still very fresh. Inspector Stepanovic from SCO 44 called me – presumably they're taking the case. He's on his way, but he's stuck in traffic so he'll be a while. In the meantime, go and take a look, please; it could be a matter of public interest, which could get political.'

I nod and hang up, forgetting, as I so often do, that you can't hear a nod down the phone. But Dr Kolb isn't the kind of person who cares about niceties. Perhaps that's one of the main things we have in common.

A man in a cage outside Hamburg's biggest magazine publisher. For the moment, it sounds more like really weird guerrilla marketing than anything 'political'. 'Political' can only mean one of two things:

1. Something's happened and people might take to the barricades, so the mayor's busy getting his best troops together.
2. We don't know if there's anything funny about this, so we're keeping things quiet for the moment, but in public we want it to look like we're being totally transparent and totally on it and generally the total dog's bollocks.

In scenario one, I don't figure – I'm not one of the mayor's best people, I'm one of his best-hidden people. So it boils down to scenario two – in which Riley, specialist in dark holes, gets let out of her own dark hole.

I'm intrigued that someone from Serious Crime Office 44 is on the way. I'm still not sure exactly what their area is. But they're some kind of hardcore guys, I know that. So much for we're totally on it and totally awesome.

We'll see about that.

I step on it and break into a run, heading for the Bismarck monument.

SPAT ON

The cage is made of black metal. It has thick, extremely robust-looking bars, and it's not particularly big. Just large enough for a grown man to fit inside if you fold him in half first. The man is about forty, maybe even forty-five, it's hard to say for sure. He's very thin and in pretty good shape, and his features are perfectly formed. His dark hair is cut short at the back and sides, but just a fraction over-long on top; strands fall onto his face. Combed back, the style demands a suit. But at the moment, the man is naked and injured and so far out of his senses that it's hard for my mind to sustain the businesslike image of the guy that it's built up without my even thinking about it. He has welts on his wrists and ankles, as if he's spent quite a while tied up. His whole body is covered with livid bruises and scratches. And, as if I'm looking at a bloody, weeping painting, somehow I get a sense of something very much like despair – but I can't say where the despair is coming from: from the man who's been stuffed in the cage like a rabid animal, or from the person who's done it. What I'm looking at seems to depict a complete absence of voluntary action.

I have to take a deep breath, and then another and another, before I can move a few steps closer.

It looks as though the naked man's consciousness is now working its way, bit by bit, to the surface. His eyes are closed and he's slowly moving his head to and fro while one of the two uniformed policemen tortures the padlock on the cage with a bolt cutter – it's obviously putting up quite a fight. It's a pretty impressive padlock – it's about the size of a small loaf of bread and it looks a couple of hundred

years old. The cage has been placed right outside the main entrance to the building. If you want to go through the revolving glass door, you have to pass the cage. Seen from the harbour, the massive glass façade resembles a gigantic cruise ship; now it's reflecting the sun, which is pushing through the clouds in perfect time with the man in the cage coming round.

A sprinkling of onlookers stands round the cage. Some are smoking, and judging by their coolness and unobtrusively elegant clothes, a few are journalists. OK, they're running a bit late, but they can't just walk past this confusing arrangement on their way to work. The majority look more like tourists – part of the horde that the harbour disgorges every morning. They're wearing little rucksacks, cropped trousers and practical jackets. It always strikes me that tourists in Hamburg look completely different from tourists in Munich or Berlin, where it wouldn't occur to anybody to stick a sou'wester on their head. Some even have those mad, modern walking sticks. Perhaps they think Hamburg is already on the North Sea, although that's a good thirty to fifty years off yet. It freaks me out that some people plan so far in advance, even if it's only for one holiday. I prefer to take things as they come.

'Morning,' I say, coming to stand beside the two policemen.

'Morning, Ms Riley,' says the one standing up, who either wants to leave the other guy to get on with it or is simply above such a task. We must have met, seeing as he knows my name this early in the morning. He's definitely in his late fifties, has a mighty belly, and there are grey curls on the back of his neck, curling under his uniform cap. The name on his police jacket reads 'Flotow'. Ah, I remember: Station 16, on Lerchenstrasse.

'We met at Lerchenstrasse,' I say.

'Yeah,' he says. 'Switched six months ago. Station 14, Caffamacherreihe.' He shoves his hands in his trouser pockets in that passive-aggressive way beloved of fattish, older, not particularly tall men, and looks reproachfully at me. 'I'd had it up to here with the red-light scene in the Kiez.'

As if the Kiez were my responsibility. When it's more like the Kiez is responsible for me.

Sergeant Flotow turns back to his colleague, who's still sweating and cursing over the lock. 'Get a move on, Hoschi. The poor bloke'll wake up soon, and then he'll start screaming at us too.'

Hoschi grunts, and I imagine that it means something like 'get on with it yourself, dickhead', but, unfortunately for Hoschi, the four pale-blue stars on Sergeant Flotow's epaulets make it abundantly clear who's in charge here – and whose job it is to kindly get on with wrestling with the bloody lock.

'Officer Lienen,' says Flotow, pointing at his colleague on the pavement.

'Morning Mr Lienen,' I say, kneeling down beside him.

He's nearly got the lock.

'You've nearly got the lock,' I say, trying to look encouraging. Unfortunately, encouraging looks aren't part of my skillset, so the result is a kind of tic that nobody understands.

Lienen looks at me, his eyes narrowed to slits. His expression conveys such violent contempt for his boss that I think: Hoschi, you and I should go for a beer, preferably right now.

'Exhibiting a person in a cage,' I say. 'That's properly sick.'

'You should have seen what was going on here when we arrived,' says Lienen, shaking his head in a way that's half annoyed and half confused.

'What was going on?'

The padlock gives – *crack* – way and falls apart. Lienen stands up. He holds the bolt cutter like a baseball bat.

'Well,' says Flotow, 'people weren't exactly acting civilised.'

Lienen pushes back his cap and wipes the sweat from his brow.

'Meaning?' I ask.

'They were doing something very unpleasant,' says Flotow.

Aha. Doing something very unpleasant. Do I really have to winkle every detail out of him? I more or less plant myself in front of Flotow.

'Don't make me winkle every detail out of you,' I say. 'What was the situation in the moment you arrived? And what is it now?'

He sucks his teeth, nods in an oh-so-it's-like-that kind of way, straightens his trousers without taking his hands out of his pockets, which leaves them pulled up much too high, then rocks to and fro on his toes and looks at me like I'm a badly brought-up child. I look back as truculently as possible, and because he can't decide on the spot which of us is stronger, he decides not to let it come to that.

'The woman at reception rang us,' he says. 'That was about half past eight. She said something about an unpleasant crowd of people outside the building. And that she thought someone was in danger. But she wouldn't be more precise, not even when pressed.'

Lienen kneels in front of the cage again and tries to cover the naked man with one of those gold thermal blankets.

'And then?' I ask.

'We set off,' says Flotow.

He still has his hands in his trouser pockets, and he's still trying to run me aground.

But he thinks better of it.

'There were about fifty people,' he says. 'They were just standing there. And some of them – I literally had to look twice because I couldn't believe it – they were spitting at the cage. When we pulled up in the patrol car, they went into the building.'

You were lucky, old man.

'It was dead quiet,' says Lienen, 'and they were spitting. It was creepy.' He doesn't look at me – keeps his eyes on the man in the golden cape. 'I've never seen anything like it. It felt like it could escalate at any minute. They looked like predators, just before they fall on their prey. They weren't even taking photos, and people take photos of everything these days. They really were just standing there, spitting, and working the poor bloke over with their eyes.'

'Were you able to get their details?' I ask.

'A few of them,' says Lienen. 'But there were too many, and they hurried away and vanished inside.' He nods towards the glass façade.

'The place is massive. And there were only two of us. The CID guys are here now, in the foyer, still trying to pin a few people down.'

He twitches the foil blanket straight. The things are so damn slippery that a bit of the person the foil's meant to be protecting is always left sticking out.

'And somebody had to call an ambulance first,' he says.

'True,' I say. 'Where's it got to, anyway?'

The man in the cage is starting to move. He puts his left hand to his face and tries to support himself on his right. The gold foil slips. Lienen speaks softly to him.

'Call them again, please,' I say to Flotow, then I kneel in front of the cage next to Lienen.

The man opens his eyes and glances enquiringly at us: Am I dead?

Bottom left, at the foot of the steps, a brown Mercedes races into my field of vision. The driver spins the tyres with a screech, then he stops, gets out, stretches somewhat awkwardly and climbs the steps just as fast as he drove up.

CAN'T YET QUITE BE CLASSIFED

'Ivo Stepanovic,' says my new colleague, holding out his hand. 'SCO 44.'

'Chastity Riley,' I say, looking up at him. 'Public prosecutor.' Wow, he's tall.

'Sorry – Cassidy?'

'Never mind.'

'Come on, tell me your name again. I didn't quite catch it.'

His expression is on the borderline between annoyed and interested. But also 'let's not start off like this, doll'.

'Call me Riley.'

'OK, Riley, you can call me Stepi.'

'Stepi?'

'Joke.' He purses his lips and wrinkles his brow, shoves his hands in his trouser pockets and looks around.

So this is him, the guy from the 44s, our funky specialist squad – the ladies and gentlemen of serious crime, although I've never heard of a woman working there. The 44s are concerned with jewel thefts and bank robberies, hostage situations and major league blackmail, and any kind of situation that can't yet quite be classified. Something new or particularly puzzling. Something like a naked man in a cage. Something like me, maybe.

Stepanovic is wearing a somewhat crumpled black shirt that isn't quite straining over his belly but might be soon, plus jeans and black ankle boots. His thick, greying hair is cut short; his nose looks as though it's been broken more like three times than twice; his dark designer stubble is clipped but very dense, his eyebrows have class,

his eyes gleam an indefinable shade – I'd guess at mud. Furrows traverse his skin, but they're in the right places: at the corners of his eyes, on his forehead – a few each side of his mouth. His handshake just now was a fraction short of vicelike. An almost good-looking and extremely opaque guy.

Right now, I don't quite know what to make of him.

But then I don't quite know what to make of most people for the first two or three years after we've met.

He blinks in the thin sunlight, takes a deep breath, turns his head once to the left and once to the right; I hear a crack, and he groans slightly. Had a long night, I'm guessing.

'So,' he says, 'shall we?'

If I'm not very much mistaken, I can hear the slightest hint of a Frankfurt accent, but I try not to take that seriously.

Stepanovic turns to the guys from the station; Officer Lienen has now helped the naked man in foil out of the cage. The man is leaning against a wall, half sitting, half lying, trying to open his eyes; and whenever he finally manages it, he's trying to keep them open. He can't do it. Lienen has crouched down beside him and is speaking quietly to him again. Stepanovic shakes hands with Flotow and nods carefully towards Lienen, as if to say, I don't want to interrupt; we'll say hello later.

Then he takes two, three big steps back and does something that I've often seen Faller and Calabretta do, but never with this intensity: he looks over the crime scene as if seeing it through a camera.

He starts with the long shot. His gaze rests on the scene for at least two minutes. Then he turns slowly on his own axis, presumably memorising the possible access, escape and transport routes. Finally, he gets to work on the details.

The cage.

The padlock.

The victim.

Zooms in very close on everything.

'I need photos,' he says to Flotow.

Who nods, officiously. 'Right away, boss.'

He seems all-round impressed and ready to kiss up.

Stepanovic raises his hands and plays it down: relax. He comes over to me.

'What kind of perverted stunt is this with the cage? Have you ever seen anything like it?'

I shake my head.

He joins in.

'Where'd it come from, I wonder?' he asks. 'The circus?'

'Definitely looks like something to do with animals,' I say.

'Weird,' he says. 'Could you briefly fill me in on what's happened so far?'

'I certainly can,' I say, 'but the other two were here first.'

'Oh,' he says, 'never mind that.' Waves his hand. 'They're busy. Can't be bothered with answering my questions just now. I'll get round a table with everyone later. If you can just bring me up to speed now, we'll go inside. I want to know what's going on in there.'

He looks over the outside of the building while I tell him what I know.

Meanwhile I look over his outsides.

So, I'm meant to work with this guy now.

Got it.

THE MAIN THING IS TO KEEP THE FRONT GARDEN IMMACULATE

Two women and two men from CID are standing in the foyer, which in some subliminal way manages to feel depressing. If the building looks like a ship from the outside, from the inside it looks like an engine room. Corridors and staircases lead off all over the place, the glass façade is reinforced by steel ribs, the ceiling hangs low and dark over our heads.

A cluster of black leather armchairs stands listlessly to the left of the entrance. Around twenty people are sitting in them; just by looking at them you can tell that they were asked to stay right there. None of them are relaxed; they're all as stiff as broccoli. The CID officers are writing things in their notebooks. Now and again, questions are being asked – more and more of them, with the police quizzing the journalists, which the journalists must feel is like an inside-out press conference. At any rate, their faces say: what *is* this shit?

It's amazing how similar the reporters and the detectives are, at least in terms of their clothes and attitude. The only fundamental difference between the two groups is their jackets: for the CID teams it's jeans and T-shirt with a tight leather jacket, while the gutter press opts for an ultra-reserved blazer or well-cut corduroy. I look down at myself, at the thin, brown leather jacket in my hand, which I seem to have been lugging around with me for about twenty years, and think, yet again, that I'd definitely have passed muster as a policewoman.

Stepanovic goes over to his colleagues, briefly introduces himself and points to me, then he nods and holds his right hand to his ear,

sign language for 'I'll call you'. His colleagues nod in return, but he's already turned his back on them. Three big strides bring him to me, and two more take him to the lady at reception.

'Stepanovic, Hamburg Serious Crime Office,' he says, holding his ID under her nose. 'And this is Ms Riley from the Public Prosecution Service.'

The little mouse of a receptionist is blonde, pretty, delicate and still a long way off thirty. Little bun at the nape of her neck; bright-green cotton cardigan around her shoulders. Not the kind of woman to lead the way. In three to four years, she'll be assistant to the editor-in-chief of a second-rate magazine, and the editor-in-chief will be a man. Shortly afterwards, she'll marry that man's deputy, move to the suburbs and have two children, who'll be even prettier than she is. By then, her husband will have become editor-in-chief of whatever magazine and everything in the front garden at home will be kept immaculate, and that's the main thing.

I always wonder how anyone can stand a life like that, where colouring over the lines is never, absolutely never, ever permitted. Or if maybe they actually like it like that. At the same time, I wonder why I was born holding a pencil that, when I use it, will only leave any kind of visible mark outside the margins.

Anyway: the mouse on reception was the one who called the police. And she has information for us.

'That's Tobias Rösch over there in that cage,' she says. She points her finger towards the entrance but doesn't look.

'He's out of the cage now,' I say.

'Well, thank God for that. I was starting to feel sorry for him, poor man.'

'Didn't you feel sorry for him at first?' I ask.

She leans a little closer to me and makes a face as if I ought to know what's coming next. 'Mr Rösch is head of HR,' she says quietly.

I suck my teeth and pull my head back a bit, as if to say: Oh, right, I see – an arsehole.

Head of HR is obviously not a role that'll make you popular in

a time of crisis. Right now, his main job will be implementing the board's proposed savings in the places they hurt the most. Meaning he's probably meant to be getting rid of as many staff as possible, as quickly and as cheaply as he can, and then replacing them with low-cost freelancers.

'I'd like to speak to the shop steward,' says Stepanovic.

And I think that I'd actually still like to know why the mouse didn't ring the police until around half past eight, by which point a pretty revolting state of affairs had developed round the cage. What time do the first people get here? Around eight? So why didn't anyone ring us right away and say that there was a person lying here?

We'll sort that out later. The CID will sort it out, says my inner guide to official channels. I have to learn to keep out sometimes.

The receptionist pouts and looks a bit miffed, clearly sensing that she might have palled up with us too soon, then favours us with the smile that she's paid to deliver, reaches for the phone and dials a number. She lets it ring. Then she hangs up.

'Mr Grabowski isn't answering. He must be out of his office somewhere.'

Hold that smile.

'We can easily wait for him in his office,' I say.

'I'm afraid I can't leave my desk to take you up,' she says, looking genuinely disappointed. I really wouldn't like to be the man who has to endure this emotional spin cycle.

'All the same,' I say.

'OK.'

Thin lips. All smiled out.

She pulls a slip of paper off a small pad, writes something on it, pushes it over the reception desk and makes her lips thinner still. On the paper it says: 'Robert Grabowski, D 107.'

'Will you find it?'

Governessy look.

Will we find it?

Beats me if we'll find it. Do we look like boy scouts? I mean, we've

never been here before and the place is as convoluted as the engine room on a cruise ship. How should we know if we'll find it? Part of me wants to give the receptionist a slap; the other part would rather shove her face in a pan of something sticky. I'm slowly running out of patience with uncooperative conversationalists this morning.

Stepanovic takes the note, pockets it, gives my elbow an unobtrusive tug and says, 'Come on, Riley. We'll find it. I'm a cop, aren't I?'