

F r a n A n n a f o r d

G O S O F T L Y , G O O D B Y E

**T h e S t a r n b e r g S e r i e s
B o o k 7**

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“No...please no.” She thumped her pillow, groaned, and turned over. Sybilla Frank had woken every hour, on the hour, between midnight and six o’clock, sometimes with her heart racing uncomfortably as she dipped in and out of a restless slumber. Now the digital clock alarm roused her from deep sleep. Sod’s law.

She opened her eyes, squinting at the enemy sitting on her night table. Subtly imbedded in a blue background were the letters and numerals spelling out the date. As if she didn’t know it was the tenth of February. ‘08:00’ pulsed gently. It was still almost dark outside. She leant over to shake awake the figure lying next to her but her hand met an empty space. She moved her arm. The bed was a king size. Perhaps he’s further over, on the edge. Her groping fingers slid over cold sheets. She frowned and rolled back to her own side, realising she had been unaware of his presence during the night. He usually snored at some point or smacked his lips.

She felt something land on her stomach and automatically clenched her muscles.

“Nika, that’s my bladder and it’s full.” The beautiful black oriental shorthair walked up her until she lay between her breasts and eyeballed her owner. “Thank you for at least waiting until the alarm went off.”

She was answered with a deep meow and hesitant purring. “I can’t, sweetie. I have to get up. Today is your mom’s most important rehearsal start ever. It could change our lives.” Her stomach dropped as the nerves hit her and the pressure on her bladder increased. She gently pushed the cat to one side and sat on the bed for a moment, before taking a deep breath and going into the bathroom. After flushing the toilet, she looked at herself in the full-length mirror on the bathroom door. Tall and lithe, her short, bobbed hair had the advantage of needing no more than a quick comb through to lie perfectly.

She was a natural light brunette with grey blue eyes, but her hair was coloured ash blonde leaving the roots fashionably dark. She and the film’s director, Juliette Simon, had decided on the look, with the full approval of Emma Stoiber, the author of the book on which the film was based. She continued to gaze at herself critically. Her breasts were only medium to small-sized but at least they were not just flat pancakes with a cherry on top. She brushed a finger over a nipple and it sprang to attention and sent a signal to her core. She and Thomas had not had sex for at least two weeks. He continued to paw her in public but discontinued it at home.

It reminded her of the empty bed, and, not bothering to put on a robe, she walked naked along the corridor and into the second bedroom, which they used as an office. Her husband was asleep with his head on his hands in front of a blank laptop screen. Well, that’s a cliché position. I thought people only did that in the movies. She went back into the bathroom, showered, and dressed.

The smell of coffee must have woken him because he came into the kitchen.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” It was hard to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

“Shit, I didn’t mean that to happen. I got so involved.”

“No problem. I must get going. Rehearsals begin today. You remember?”

“Of course, I do.” He snapped.

“Did you get a chapter finished?”

“More or less.” He sounded evasive. Thomas was writing a book about

lighting design.

They met during her first engagement when they both worked at a small theatre near Berlin. He was an electrician on the lighting crew. They began to sit together in the canteen in their breaks and then go out to a bar after performances. The sex was good. Better for Sybilla than with her previous two boyfriends. He gazed at her in adoration, wanting or rather demanding her full attention. It was flattering. He was a hunk. Women on the street looked at him appreciatively. She began to spend more and more time exclusively with him and less and less with the rest of the ensemble.

After two seasons, during the second of which they lived together, she auditioned and got a job in the ensemble of a larger theatre in Munich. For six months they tried to maintain a long-distance relationship, Sybilla becoming more and more aware it was slipping out of her reach. She wasn't interested in anyone else but she wasn't looking either. Until one day, Thomas stood on her doorstep with several large suitcases and boxes, announced he had quit his job and that he couldn't live without her, and please could they get married. They did.

There was a sliver of unease deep down in her subconscious but she had often been unhappy alone in Munich and he made her feel better. Loved and cocooned. Again, she gradually withdrew from associating with the rest of her colleagues, running home immediately after rehearsals and performances and seldom going for a drink in the canteen.

They found a slightly larger apartment to the east of the city centre. It was the nearest to her theatre they could afford on her salary alone. The living room and second bedroom at the front were on a loud, noisy and fume-ridden main road, but the kitchen and master bedroom looked onto a courtyard and were bearable. She could also park her old VW in the courtyard, a facility which was worth its weight in gold in Munich where on-street parking was limited and wildly expensive.

She tried unsuccessfully to get Thomas a job in her theatre. The chief electrician looked over his resume but showed little interest. He told Sybilla there were no vacancies. Thomas occasionally picked up work on conference gigs, and they managed financially.

She was just beginning to get small roles on TV when her agent excitedly told her about a film being shot in and around Munich. She auditioned for the director Juliette Simon, heard nothing for a month, and forgot about it, until the day she received a call back. This time, the producer was present. Dominique Thibault, a French-Canadian with a string of influential independent films to her name was an impressive figure with large designer glasses and long grey streaked hair. Sybilla immediately pegged her as lesbian. Juliette Simon was famously so.

She had been Germany's most renowned soft-pop singer until she outed herself at a large stadium concert six years previously, and then married her lover, the songwriter Jodie Sanchez. She lost some of her folksong loving public and cut back on her singing before virtually stopping when she starred in a highly successful TV series, *Prosecution!*, about a hard-hitting lawyer. Her film career took off and she won an Oscar. Frustrated about the *Powerfrau* roles she was getting stuck in, she concentrated on directing opportunities that came her way, and now had some successful TV films to her credit. This was to be her first feature film.

Sybilla had a moment of despondency as she looked at the women sitting at

a table in front of her. Her androgynous looks were sure to mean they thought she was lesbian. Was the gay mafia working for her? What would be expected of her? But she saw nothing other than friendly interest in their eyes. There was no hint of anything sexual. Someone came into the room, and she overheard the producer say something about returning to Toronto the next day where one of her sons needed her support through his exams. Which made Sybilla chide herself for thinking in stereotypes. She of all people should know better. Women often hit her on. It was a reason why she didn't really mind that Thomas was drifting professionally and rarely had a job. It meant he was often with her. And his possessiveness and propensity to touch her as often as he could was useful. The girls looked at her regretfully and moved on. The men sneered and scowled.

After being told by Juliette Simon that they would be in touch, she left the room.

A week later, she was told she had the role, a supporting one, in the film *Through the House give Glimmering Light*. The two stars were Melanie Blaine and Martin Hanlon. It was a psychological thriller with a beautifully written script. She was the love interest for the stars. And there were sex scenes with both. She didn't mind at all. The pair were beautiful, and she was an actress. She had kissed women on stage before. Twice in Shakespeare plays. It did nothing for her. When it came to it, she found her sex scenes with Melanie Blaine preferable to those with Martin Hanlon but that was influenced by their off-screen personas.

Near the end of filming, she was told the creative team were happy with her performance and she was offered a new role.

She was to star in their next production. *Star...* in a film which might well lead to a second one in the series. The books are hot bestsellers after all. Nothing like putting myself under pressure.

She zoned back into the conversation. "Do you mean less than more, or more than less? Your new chapter?"

"Back off, Sybilla. Don't be so fucking clever."

"You have time to write more today. You can't come to rehearsals. But you can come onto the set when we start filming."

"I sincerely hope so."

Kanika was winding herself around Sybilla's legs. "Are you hungry?" The cat opened her mouth in a silent meow. She opened a packet of wet food and put it down on the floor. Kanika ate a few mouthfuls before leaving to go back into the bedroom.

"Now you have fed the cat, I could do with some toast."

"Sure." She would not be baited. It would have been nice to wake to Thomas making breakfast this morning. She took cheese out of the fridge while the bread was toasting and laid two places at the small kitchen table.

She spread a thin layer of marmalade on a slice, added some cheese and tried to eat it. Her nervous stomach threatened to rebel, but she forced it down and felt a little better. She made her coffee thin and milky.

"Are you driving to the rehearsal?"

"Yes, it's the only way to get to the place out in Krailling. Why? Did you

want the car?"

"Yes, but it's yours."

"It's ours. But I really do need it. The last possible tram left ten minutes ago. Sorry. I'll get up earlier tomorrow so you can have it."

"Thanks."

She bit back a retort about him being a little more considerate. The last thing she needed now was a row. This morning could change her life. It would enable them to move away from the apartment in a house badly in need of renovation. And from the choking pollution on the main road. Six months ago, they had filmed on Lake Starnberg. What she wouldn't give to live in a house there, or on the Tegernsee or Chiemsee. Any of the upper Bavarian lakes really. A small garden for Kanika. Peace and quiet. They were utterly out of her price range. Their price range. She snorted. I'm the only breadwinner in this family.

"Anything the matter?"

"Oh sorry, no. I was just going over lines in my head."

"Well, good luck then. And watch yourself with all those gay women."

She rolled her eyes. "You know fucking well that I don't play on their team. Anyway, Melanie Blaine isn't in this film, so it's one less. As far as I know, Hannah Snyman is very straight. Perhaps you should be more worried about Ulrich Kirsch. I have a lot of kissing with him and one naked sex scene."

Thomas went quiet. "I'd like to be there when they are filmed."

"I'm sure the set will be closed. They always are for nude scenes."

"You wouldn't, would you?"

"No, Thomas, I wouldn't, and I won't. I am only interested in making this film a huge hit, and to be invited to do the second one in the franchise. Now, I really must go or I'll be late. I'll see you later." She leant over for a kiss, remembered her lip-gloss at the last second and presented him with her cheek.

"You look hot anyway."

"Thank you. Save it for when I get home."

"I'll have to get you a chastity belt."

"I think you mean chastity."

She hurried down into the courtyard. They bought the new car with her earnings from last summer's film. A sporty Audi TT. It was the first luxurious article Sybilla had ever owned. Her parents were middle class and not poor, but she aimed to be financially independent as soon as her education bills were no longer a burden she couldn't bear herself, and she succeeded.

Although the rehearsal room was on the other side of Munich, she was going against most of the traffic on the ring road, and she arrived half an hour early. A tall black woman with a tablet stood at the door. They embraced warmly.

"Letitia, it's so good to see you."

"You too, Sybilla. Would you like to go into the smaller room over there? Dominique likes you all to make an entrance." She winked.

She stopped to greet some of the crewmembers who she knew from *Glimmering Light*. Everyone was smiling and laughing. It was contagious and the knot in her gut unwound a little.

The room was still fairly empty. She introduced herself to actors and actresses who would be playing minor roles. A dainty and very pretty Eurasian girl came in carrying a large camera bag.

"Sasha, I'm so happy to see you. Are you the official photographer on this film?"

"Thanks to you and a few others believing in me, yes, I am."

There was a hint of bitterness in her voice. While interning and making herself invaluable on Glimmering Light, she had been framed by the stills cameraman. Dominique Thibault suspended her, sending her off the set without even attempting to hear her side of the story before Emma Stoiber helped to clear her name.

Sybilla never believed that Sasha Strauss had sold her photos and a scurrilous story to the notorious Blick Zeitung, but Dominique and Juliette had, and it left a scar, and a very uneasy week of filming before the problem was resolved. Sybilla wondered if the bridges had been rebuilt. She noticed Sasha wore a beautiful white gold diamond and sapphire studded band on her ring finger and was glad she had apparently found personal happiness in the intervening six months. She would ask her later, but the room was now filling, and she recognised Ulrich Kirsch. He was one of the handsomest men she had ever seen, with his black shoulder length hair and a muscular torso very much in evidence under a tight shirt.

She hesitated. He should introduce himself to her, but he looked a little shell shocked, and anyway, she was the star. She walked over and held out her hand.

“Hi, I’m Sybilla.”

“Um...Ulrich...Kirsch.”

“Considering we are going to go to bed with each other, I think we should duz.”

Ulrich laughed. “You said it.”

Up close to him, Sybilla saw that he wore a smudge of kohl around his eyes.

She also saw that he was gay. For a second, she felt disappointed. I was intending to use him to make Thomas a little jealous. The thought did not sit well and she shook her head slightly. He looked at her curiously and whispered, “Don’t worry, darling. I am an actor and can play butch.”

Am I so easy to read?

Everyone looked to the door as Juliette and her wife, Jodie, Dominique Thibault and Emma Stoiber came in. They surveyed the room and came over to Sybilla and Ulrich, bright smiles on their faces. Other than Dominique, who looked a little grim... as usual. There was a lot of hugging and kissing. Even Dominique approached and gave her air kisses. The producer was in full-on CEO mode, wearing a pencil skirt suit, starched shirt, and high stilettos. All for show on the first day. She would be in designer jeans and sweatshirt when they filmed. As Sybilla was also wearing high heels with her black leather jeans and black wool blazer, it put them at similar heights, and they towered above the rest of the women in the room.

“Are we all met?” Sybilla sniggered appreciatively. “Someone knows their Shakespeare. We can go in.”

“I don’t see Hannah Snyman.” Dominique looked slightly irritated as she checked her watch. It was already five past eleven.

“Fokken verkeer. Jammer almal.”

“Ah, Hannah.” Juliette looked amused as she moved to the door. A woman with long curls swinging over her face and down her back almost to her waist, walked into the room. She was two or three inches shorter than Sybilla’s five foot ten inches. More or less, the same height as Juliette. Her luxurious hair was a colour difficult to describe. Auburn was probably the nearest, at any rate brunette with a lot of dark red highlights. Sybilla wondered if it was natural. She curled her lip when she saw that the slim woman had the full breasts she would so like to have owned. In the elegant dress she wore, her perfect figure was on

show for all to see.

She disliked her on sight. And even more so when she spoke to Juliette in English with the heaviest Afrikaans accent she had ever heard. It provoked an immediate flashback to her school years, three of which she spent in an exclusive boarding school in England, courtesy of a scholarship, and where she had never been more miserable in her life, primarily because she was bullied by a prefect who just happened to be from South Africa.

Still, the experience had got her this role because she spoke English without a trace of an accent. The film was to be shot in English and German, and not dubbed, as was usually the case with German films. Dominique Thibault did not wish it to be released in the States as a foreign language film.

Dominique looked at her watch again. "The crew will be getting restless. If Miss Snyman is ready, we can go in and meet them."

The South African blushed. Sybilla hid her smirk. They moved as a group into the large room next door where around fifty crewmembers were waiting. The room hushed as Dominique tapped on the table. "Hello, everyone. Some new faces among you and some very familiar ones. I always say the same thing. Try not to look too bored."

There was some nervous laughter. Not one of them would dare to cross 'Dragon Lady', as she was known in the film world.

"I will not introduce everyone. You can do that yourselves. Just the cast and our illustrious director. Most of you will know, we took best foreign film and best director at the Sundance Festival for *Glimmering Light*. Thanks, Juliette. You are the best." There was loud applause and some whoops. "Now we are going to make a stab at the Oscars with this wonderful screenplay written by Juliette and the bestselling author of the book, Emma Stoiber."

There was a lot of cheering and whistling. It bounced off the walls. Sybilla had an urge to cover her ears.

"Our leading lady most of you know. Sybilla Frank. Our leading man is new to us. Ulrich Kirsch."

"I'm always the cherry on the top," he said in the campiest of voices, which got a laugh and a round of applause at the word play on his surname.

Dominique rolled her eyes. She didn't like to be interrupted but a hint of a smile made her lips lift.

"Hannah Snyman will play the evil corrupt *Polizeikommisarin*, although that is evident only at the end of the film, which brings me to my last remark. No leaks from the set of any kind. Punishable with instant suspension."

There was a heavy silence in the room.

Dominique sighed. "I know what you are all thinking, and you are correct to think it. For those new to this crew, there was an unfortunate occurrence on our last film, *Through the House* give *Glimmering Light*, and at the time, I did not have the courage to make a public apology. I falsely accused Alexandra Strauss, then assistant stills photographer on the film, of selling photos from the shoot. I suspended her without allowing her to speak one word in her own defence.

Needless to say, she was entirely innocent. I don't deserve to be forgiven and I'm sure I never really will be. Sasha darling, I'm so terribly sorry."

Her eyes glittered and Sybilla saw a few people wipe their eyes. Dominique held out her right hand and only then did Sybilla notice she wore the same white gold band on her ring finger.

"For those who don't know her, this is our immensely talented stills photographer, Sasha Strauss, and I am very much in love with her."

She leant down to kiss the much smaller woman and there was applause, and some whistling.

“So, that’s it from me for now. Please circulate, grab coffee, and make some friends for life. Sasha, will you please take the usual wedding photo?”

The cast lined up with Dominique standing between herself and Juliette.

Next to her stood Ulrich. Hannah Snyman was on the other side, next to Juliette.

I suppose I’ll have to introduce myself. When the camera shutter stopped clicking, she went around behind Dominique. She held out her hand and spoke in English, “Hi, I’m Sybilla Frank. Nice to have you on board, Miss Snyman.”

“Hallo, ganz meine Vergnugung. Es tut mir so furchtbar leid. Meine Verspätung, mein ich.” The German was perfect except for the accent underlying it, although it was not quite as noticeable as it was when she spoke English.

“Oh, you speak German.” Sybilla’s tone was haughtier than she meant it to be.

She would have missed the look if she hadn’t been staring into the expressive eyes. Unease? Pain? Hannah Snyman blinked first.

“Of course. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have got the role, would I? There is to be no dubbing on this movie I think.” Her tone was even but her eyes were now flinty.

No. We are definitely not going to be friends.

Juliette positioned herself between them, looking from one to the other. “I wanted to introduce you. Sorry. I see you have managed on your own. As you know, you hate each other in this film.”

Hannah nodded. “Did you type cast us, Juliette?”

Sybilla already didn’t like her but the remark rankled.

“Well, I know you are both famous for being hot-headed but there is no reason you can’t be friends off the set, is there?”

“Of course not.”

Letitia interrupted. “Can I get you two ladies a coffee?”

“Latte, no sugar,” they said together.

Letitia laughed. “Coming up.”

Sybilla had no wish to stay anywhere near Hannah and Juliette had moved off to speak to Ulrich, so she said quickly. “I’ll grab my own, Letitia. You have got better things to do.” The queue at the machine had diminished. “Phew, save me from that please, Letitia. What a bitch.”

“Is she? Not the impression I have up until now. It wasn’t her fault her taxi broke down. It must have been embarrassing getting here late on her first morning and knowing practically nobody.” Sybilla grunted. “What don’t you like about her?”

“I don’t know yet. I can’t put my finger on it, except that I loathe her accent. The thought of two months having to listen to it is numbing my brain.”

“How odd. Do you hate mine too?”

Sybilla laughed. “Letitia, that was a very gentle way of ticking me off, and I apologise. It makes me seem like a racist. And no, I adore your Italian accent. I have unhappy memories about hers but maybe I won’t notice after a while. It will be rather odd though for her role. She plays a Bavarian police inspector.”

“She is an actress and can probably ease it back for her scenes. She did play a character in the London West End in a Noel Coward play. I doubt if she spoke broad Afrikaans for that.”

“I see. She is here courtesy of Melanie and Lennie.”

“Yes, Lennie directed her in the play. Juliette and Dominique loved her when

they watched the DVD of the production.”

“Hmmm.” Sybilla stopped herself from asking if she is gay after all. And she hated herself for even thinking the question. Their relationship in the film was purely work related, not romantic, so what the hell did it matter. She excused herself on the grounds that she was forever being thought of as a lesbian, so the topic was becoming an uncomfortable obsession.

She saw Hannah coming over to take her coffee and moved off to join Jodie. Sasha was photographing the room. She wondered what the shots of their confrontation looked like. Was the mutual dislike evident?
