

Ursula Reist

A Talent to Kill

Nick Baumgarten's Third Case

Translated from the German by
Henry Randolph

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Characters and plot are the author's invention; they are only as real as they could be.

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1 Friday

"It's enough to drive you up the wall." Peter Pfister, veteran private in the Aargau Cantonal Police, wagged his head in disbelief. On the desk in front of him, surrounded by coffee cup, phone and stacked files, the day's edition of the Aargauer Zeitung lay spread out. "Cantonal Parliament MP Toggenburger thinks the government should adjust monetary policy to protect small and medium-sized companies against the weak Euro exchange rate. When he's in clover, he doesn't want to pay taxes and when margins shrink, he wants the government to bail him out. Is that typical or what?" Disgusted, he threw the paper on the stack of newspapers ready for recycling. "Only a politician could be that arrogant and opportunistic."

"If you'd just read down a couple of lines, you might get a kick out of what else the reporter writes," Angela Kaufman pointed out. "Because Steff Schwager says that it's a puzzle how the hot shot communications consultants of some elected representatives of the people earn their money. The PR person should have told Toggenburger to tread lightly or even say nothing, considering the fit he had last year when he was caught owing back taxes. *'But silence never was his strong suit, he'd rather talk his way into trouble,'* Schwager writes. A fine piece of irony, I must say, and not subject to a libel suit." Angela, all of thirty-one years old, was the youngest member of the team, but far from inexperienced. When it came to research or putting the latest technologies to work, she was miles ahead of the others. Today, she had her blond hair tied in a ponytail and wore no makeup. Steff Schwager had once remarked to his old pal Nick that she looked much too

good for a police woman when she was made up and let her hair down.

The same Nick, Deputy Chief of the Criminal Investigation Division Nick Baumgarten to be exact, just then was on his back on the floor of their CID office, trying to untangle cable spaghetti under his corner table. He was hunting for the empty outlet he remembered from yesterday to plug in his cell phone charger, but it was gone. "Here we're always talking about the 2,000 watt society, but every week a new gadget comes along," he huffed as he struggled back on his feet. "It must be this new water cooler that, unlike a faucet, also needs juice."

"But on the other hand, the water isn't green or brown and doesn't have a chemical taste," answered Angela. "If management can't break loose enough money to rehab the pipes in this building, then the least they can do is give us water dispensers, electric or not. By the way, you can charge your cell phone on your PC; look, let me show you."

That done, Nick high fived her and then asked if anyone wanted coffee. They also no longer filled the espresso machine with tap water, whose peculiar taste not even Angela's imported Italian coffee could mask.

It seemed that Peter Pfister was still hung up on said Toggenburger, for he now asked if anyone had news about the man's extra-marital affair with councillor Brugger. "Or did he get his divorce already?"

"Frau Brugger got her divorce already, but it seems Toggenburger's wife is fighting his. Looks like it may take a while and cost all the parties plenty, financially and emotionally," came Angela's answer. Her father was also a councillor and head of the Health Department, and her mother loved to cook big. At least once a month, they would invite all the government

executives with their partners plus assorted other people to the Kaufmann residence to be delectably spoiled. Angela would join in as often as possible, using the occasion to cultivate and expand her network and pick up valuable intelligence. "Frau Brugger always shows up alone at social events, never with Adrian Toggenburger. Could be the two have reconsidered."

"Aw, just let them be," Nick said. "No one whose life partner suddenly breaks up the relationship has it easy." Peter raised his eyebrows and cast a telling look Angela's way but kept quiet.

The conversation related to the time when the CID team had worked on the Matossi case. Businessman and Cantonal MP Toggenburger had come under suspicion for a time, and Nick had found himself far out on a limb, almost too far. Nick's unbridled anger at Andrew, the man who had lured his girlfriend Marina to the Caribbean and presumably seduced her there, had skewed his thinking and actions at the time, and it had nearly cost him his job.

Fortunately that's all over, thought Nick. The case had stirred up a lot of dust, too much for his taste, for as soon as the politicians plugged in, the difficulties started for the CID team. Only the forensic people and CID technicians could work unhampered, since they dealt with nothing but facts. But every interpretation of these facts turned into a tightrope walk, and suddenly a whole lot of instant critics felt the call to question the professionals' analyses and conclusions. Maybe I expect it by now, he thought, but I'll never get used to it.

He glanced at his watch. "Time to go home, people. Make it a good weekend; let's hope we won't see each other until Monday."

"Great, that gives me enough time." Angela pulled

on her down jacket while her computer was shutting down.

“Don’t tell me you have another rendezvous, or a ‘date,’ as they say in the new German?” Peter was very curious when it came to his colleague’s private life. “Who is it this time? Do we know him?”

Angela laughed. “No comment. I’m going to a cultural event, and that’s not something a philistine like you would be interested in. Bye!” And with that she was out the door.

“Impudent. These young people nowadays have no respect,” Peter griped, “especially the women. Say, are you up for a Friday evening beer, Chief? Not many chances left for one before I take my pension, you know.”

Nick would much rather have gone straight home, but he said yes anyway. He’d sacrifice a half hour for his coworker, maybe he’d learn something he didn’t know. Truth is, thought Nick Baumgarten, I’m going to miss this guy, even after he ticked me off so many times. And his own boss, Gody Kyburz, chief of the CID, so far had failed to give him a worthy replacement. A few job interviews were on the schedule for next week; he hoped among them would be the right candidate of whatever gender. These being quiet times, he didn’t need the added resource just yet, but experience told him the calm would not last.

“For one thing, I want to informally propose some names for my replacement and that’s best done over a beer in a quiet corner. How about the ‘Traube’ in Küttigen?”

Just what I need, thought Nick – Peter Pfister wanting to pick out his own successor. He swore a silent oath to not let himself be led up the garden path, that he absolutely would duck out after one beer and no

later than half an hour. A weekend off was rare enough in his line of work, and he had plans to enjoy this one to the hilt.

*

“Hello, Maggie, lovely to see you.” Marina Manz helped her client slip out of the elegant coat. “Go ahead and lie down in the back booth. Let me just finalize an order, and then I’ll be with you instantly.”

Working rapidly but with practiced efficiency, Marina set up the weekly email to her main supplier of moisturizing masks, peelings and cosmetic ampoules, ordered express delivery and hit send. Next, she turned on the answering machine and then did a quick check in the mirror. It had been a very busy week, and she was tired and felt drained, but the mirror only showed her the groomed, professionally made up, perhaps slightly pale face of a woman in her mid-forties to -fifties. Only she was aware of the crosswise crease at the base of her nose, sign of the lurking migraine that would either pounce on its victim or retreat quietly. There was no predicting it. She decided to forego one of her pills for now, having just taken one thirty-six hours before. She drew a deep breath, silently ordered her trigeminal nerve to calm down and swept a strand of her curled brown hair back behind the ear. Despite her fatigue, she looked forward to treating Maggie Truninger: they had become good friends after Maggie’s husband, the director Tom Truninger, had been stabbed to death in a gambling casino. Maggie was also the sole direct link to Andrew Ehrlicher who had nearly caused Marina to leave Nick Baumgarten.

“Sorry, but I just had to get that order out,” said Marina as she sat down on the rolling stool behind her

client's head. "Now, I'm all yours, and we have ample time to make your skin beautiful." She mixed a few drops of gel purifiant with lukewarm water between her fingers and spread it over Maggie's slim face. "First I'm cleansing the skin, then I'll apply all the nourishment it craves after these dry winter months."

"I'm due for it, my skin feels taut." Maggie's quiet voice sounded relaxed and not as sad as in the past. "But otherwise, I feel great, my business is starting to click, and my customers like what I package for them." She smiled with eyes closed. "And thanks to you, I also look good doing it."

"Nice compliment," Marina replied, "but your skin is only beautiful because you're feeling better. What I do only helps superficially." Nothing more was said as Marina gently massaged Maggie's face while applying a veil of mist. A few minutes of this and her client started to drift off to sleep, giving Marina a chance to follow her own thoughts. Relaxation was essential during the cosmetic treatment, but afterwards there would be much to talk about: interior designer Maggie absolutely had to take a look at Nick's man cave and work up remodeling proposals to make it livable for Marina as her home. And Marina wanted to talk about Andrew, even if he had vanished from her life. Perhaps there was a way to bring him back into it.

Maggie suddenly spoke, seemingly having read her thoughts: "By the way, Andrew says hello, I skyped with him the day before yesterday. He's on the other side of the globe once again and didn't let himself be pinned down when we can expect his next visit. My daughter misses him, and once in a while I do, too."

"That's just like him, isn't it?" Marina observed. "He is a genuine rolling stone who'll never gather any

moss." And will also never settle for one woman, she thought.

"You know what I think?" said Maggie, suddenly the philosopher. "Tom and Andrew were like two sides of a single personality. Tom was the settled family man, Andrew the cowboy who rides off into the sunset. Each admired the qualities in the other that he missed in himself and neither of them could change his spots. It was inevitable they would end up as best friends. They completed each other." She sighed. "Andrew needs someone who can ground him; an important new friendship could have grown up with Nick." If Andrew had not been such an egotist, that is, and offered Marina a change of scenery and a job in the Caribbean; an offer, it must be said, that Marina had not seen fit to turn down. True, she had come home to Nick a month later and sworn to remain with him, but the men's friendship had broken up over the episode. "Do you keep in touch at all?"

"No way," replied Marina. "Nick is too jealous, and I don't want him to doubt me. But you're right, the two would suit each other. Who knows; somehow, someday a reconciliation might come about." Deftly, she mixed a moisturizing masque and brushed it on. "Now you can nap for twenty minutes, then I'll do your makeup, and after that we'll drop in on Nick for a glass of wine. Maybe he's even gone shopping and he'll whip up something delicious for us. See you in a bit."

She dimmed the light and went out to the lobby to check her voice mail. Her two assistants, Nicole and Diana, would work the Saturday shift tomorrow. As the owner of a cosmetics institute, Marina now and then treated herself to a weekend off. "You should take every weekend off," Dr. Hivatal, her neurologist, had

advised her a few days earlier. "Your migraine will only get better when the work stress diminishes. You should chat with your policeman some time, he'll give you the same advice: ease up a notch." Not that Nick is exactly a paragon of a well-tuned work-life balance, thought Marina, but perhaps it really is high time for me to make a fundamental life adjustment.

*

Guido Bär looked at his watch and raised his head at the sound of the office door on the first floor slamming, followed by someone bounding up the wooden staircase. "Pavel?" he called out and put down the pencil he had used on the text in front of him. Five o'clock, time for a small aperitif or, if nothing else, a short break.

"Yes, in a sec," answered his domestic partner's booming voice, followed by the sound of water running. A minute later, Pavel Beniak stood framed in the door. Or, rather, he filled it. "No time," he said, as if anticipating the next question. "I've got to go out again. Hartmann has a primipara cow, she's been in labor since noon, he's at the end of his rope and needs help." He stuffed his t-shirt into his blue overalls and slipped into its sleeves, not without some difficulty. "This piece of crap has shrunk some more in the laundry."

"Well, yeah," grinned Guido, "I've got to get that barn smell out, don't I?" He got up to help Pavel finish dressing, not without gently patting his stomach. "And the good life also plays a part in the clothes getting ever tighter."

"All your fault, for being such a good cook," answered Pavel and turned to go. "It may get to be late, depending on how things go. Don't wait up for me - "

"- but leave something out for me to eat," Guido

finished the sentence, part of their stock partner lingo, “will do, as always. Carola is still downstairs?”

“That’s right, she’s finishing up the office chores and next week’s schedule. Ciao, caro, see you later!” The veterinarian thundered back down the stairs. Guido heard him call out to his assistant that he was reachable only if it was a matter of life and death; then the ATV’s engine roared into life, and Pavel took off toward Villnachern. There’s a vet who puts heart and soul into his work, thought Guido, a man who loses himself totally in his job. Since there weren’t as many farmers as before, Pavel also had to treat sensitive Maine Coon cats and spoiled Yorkshire terriers, guinea pigs fed the wrong things, and tame rats, down there in his office on the first floor of the old farmhouse, but in actual fact he was an old-school large animal vet. Cows, horses, sheep and goats were his true calling, and when one of the more innovative farmers bought a few Scottish highlands cattle, Pavel would learn all about the breed and pitch in with great enthusiasm to create the right set up for the beasts.

Bär went downstairs into the kitchen where he took his cigarettes from the windowsill before opening the heavy wooden door to the farmyard. Three worn sandstone steps led down to the garden seating area. There, half under the projecting roof of the farmhouse and half under a walnut tree, stood a massive table, a bench and two old folding chairs with sheepskin warmers over them. He lit an American Spirit, sat down and put up his legs. I feel a deep sense of satisfaction, too, when I write, he mused, while letting his gaze rest on the still fallow garden, but what I lack is Pavel’s unbridled energy and enthusiasm. Maybe it had something to do with the wide spectrum of his own interests. They covered the gamut: as a freelance

reporter and author, he tackled all manner of subjects, from political, social, and cultural to scientific topics. He wrote columns, articles, and novels, taught writing workshops, appeared at literary events. But what his heart beat faster for, and what he was ready to fight for with everything he had, was not the modicum of fame and success that his profession brought him but it was his love for Pavel – for their unremarkable life together, in this house, in this small community in the Aargau. When you know this much happiness, he thought contentedly, you don't even mind growing old.

"Bye, Herr Bär, have a good weekend!" Pavel's office assistant had come around the corner of the house. She wore the young woman's standard leisure outfit: tight jeans, down jacket and sneakers; she wore her blond hair long and, when needed, piled high or tied up. "The answering machine is on, the invoices are all ready, and I also cleaned up." She unlocked her bike. "See you Monday!"

"So long, Carola, you have a good weekend also. Don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

She laughed, turned and waved to him over her shoulder. "I promise, Herr Bär. You better not either. Bye!" With a little kick she shut the cast iron garden gate behind her and pedaled off in direction Umiken.

*

Six hours later, it was a different story.

Angela Kaufmann, instead of dancing into the morning at the Aargau Art Awards soiree in Steff Schwager's arms, stood at a crime scene in her shimmering cocktail dress. She had at least had a pair of flat mocassins in her car to switch into from her high heel sandals, but she had no change of clothes with her, just

a coat. Naturally, the ever-inquisitive and slightly inebriated reporter of the Aargauer Zeitung had wanted to tag along when the call came. Affectionately but firmly, she had put him in a taxi and sent him home. He'd find out soon enough what had happened, and her chief didn't need to know just yet with whom she had spent the evening.

The shirt under Nick Baumgarten's dark blue uniform sweater was buttoned wrong, because when his cell phone rang, he and Marina Manz had been undressing each other. The evening they had spent with Maggie Truninger talking specifics about how to gently renovate his parents' house on Fröhlichstrasse had done wonders for his morale. Marina had decided to move in, having finally grasped that he would never try to clip her wings. He devoutly hoped that the harsh reality of police work would not induce a change of mind overnight.

Peter Pfister smelled unmistakably of beer, though after three steins he was still not quite drunk. But he thought better of getting behind the wheel, and had his wife pick him up to drive him here from the 'Krone' where he had his regular table. This is how they had done it countless other times during the past thirty years. She may have wished that it all was behind them, but in vain, for her husband was not retired yet. With a rueful grin, she waved to Nick, made a u-turn and drove home.

The paramedics packed up their gear and took off without having seen any action.

The two patrol cops from the Brugg regional police who had fielded the emergency call were waiting for their next orders.

The man sitting on the floor in the white-tiled room was leaning against the wall. He was alive, but he was

as motionless as the dead man sprawled on the floor next to him. A short distance from the pair lay two tipped-over gas cylinders, with hoses leading from them to a transparent mask next to the corpse. There was no blood, no disorder, no sign of a violent struggle, just the dead man with his shirt open and eyes shut and, next to him, a living one with the dead eyes.

Each of the onlookers formed an image during the first fifteen seconds of what had transpired in this room. Because Nick, Peter, and Angela were well trained and experienced, they would later unpack their theories, deconstruct them, put them back together in different ways, then discard them. But the first impression would stick, and none of them would forget it.

"Pictures," said Nick Baumgarten, "photos. We need lots of photos."

"No one touches anything before the forensics crew gets here," ordered Peter Pfister. "Everything stays the way it is."

"Is this exactly how you found everything?" asked Angela Kaufmann the patrol cops. They nodded. The younger one was very pale and had his back to the corpse. "Who called it in?"

With a nod, the older cop indicated the man sitting on the floor. "Paul Beniak, veterinarian, lives and works here. Came home from an emergency call and found him here in the office, he claims. That's all he would say."

"Good, thanks. I'd like your report on my desk first thing tomorrow morning." Angela turned to Nick, who was silently studying the room. "Should I?" she asked in a low voice, to which her chief nodded.

Angela bent down to the man still slumped against the wall and staring ahead of him. "Herr Beniak, I'm Angela Kaufmann. This place is going to be crawling

with people soon, can we find a quieter place to clear up a few things?"

He shook his head. "I stay here as long as he stays." The man gave off a strong odor of cigars and schnapps. "I'm not moving, you can't force me." He propped his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands. His shoulders quivered and they could hear a dry sobbing.

Men can't just simply cry, it occurred to Angela; they don't know how to, and it almost rips them up. She sat down next to him, pulling her tight dress over her knees. She felt a dozen sequins drilling into her expensive hose and felt it start to run. 'What a shitty, shitty job,' crossed her mind for a split second.

"Herr Beniak, can you tell me who this is?" She missed what he mumbled into his hands and repeated the question: "Do you know who he is?"

At that, Paul Beniak raised his head, inhaled deeply and howled like a wounded beast of prey, sending a chill down the back of every person in that tiled surgery. "Of course I know him! This is Guido Bär, damn it!" He started to struggle up from the floor. "And now everyone get the hell out of here and leave me alone! Go find the murderer!" Angela moved to give him a hand, but he shoved her away so that she nearly fell over. Peter Pfister immediately jumped him, trying to twist the man's arms behind his back, but he had not counted on the infuriated man's strength. Beniak shook him off and started to beat and kick at him, raging now, berserk. Nick Baumgarten and the patrol cops quickly piled on and it took the four of them to force Beniak on the ground and handcuff him.

"Get him out of here," barked Pfister, "book him for assault on an officer of the law and toss him in a cell."

"Hold it, not so fast, Peter." Nick shook his head.

“He’s in shock, and he’s not sober. I think we better put him in his own bed instead of jail.”

“Chief, you can’t mean it! He’ll take off as soon as he can halfway walk a straight line!” Peter was steamed; it had been years since he had been attacked physically with such force and he obviously took it personally. “He can’t just simply start throwing punches and get away with it, damn him!”

“End of discussion, Pfister! You know well enough by now how people’s reactions can vary under these circumstances. It’s my decision that he stays here, and I’ll take the responsibility. Maybe the doctor can give him something to calm him down, as soon as he shows up. Call and find out where the hell he is.” Nick shut his eyes, his jaw muscles working as he stifled his anger. He needed to concentrate on the present and find out as quickly as possible what had gone on here, if possible before Beniak was sedated. But try as he might, he, too, could not get the veterinarian to say anything. With his aggression dissipated, the man now just shook his head when Nick asked him something. Half an hour of this, and Nick gave up. With the doctor helping, he led Beniak upstairs to a bedroom. There was no need for a shot of sedative. The vet seemed to have collapsed in on himself like a kid’s balloon emptied of air, and he was impassive.

Nick Baumgarten went down the stairs back to the doctor’s office. It was shaping up to be a long night, and the envisioned weekend with Marina had receded into a far distance.

2 Saturday

"The author?" asked Marina. The coffee maker in Nick Baumgarten's kitchen was going full tilt; the time was Saturday between five and six a.m. The man of the house emerged from the bathroom, toweling his already thinning hair. He had come home not to sleep but for a shower, a fresh shirt and coffee – and to gingerly break the news to Marina that their plans for the weekend were off. She had taken it in stride, and once again he marveled at how she dealt with his unpredictable absences. Being the type of woman whose happiness did not depend on a partner or other person and who knew what to do with her time no doubt had something to do with it.

"Exactly, the author. Do you know him?" It was a natural question to ask Marina, who probably knew more people in Aargau than Nick's team combined.

"Not personally, but I read one or two of his novels, and last fall I went with Maggie to a reading. I like his style, he tells a great story. What in the world happened?"

"We're not sure yet, but it may have something to do with narcotic gas. He died in his domestic partner's veterinary clinic, in the house they shared."

"Oh, poor Pavel."

"Pavel?" Nick's eyebrows shot up. "I thought his name is Paul?"

"Pavel Beniak. His parents fled here in 1968 with him and his older sister from what was then still Czechoslovakia. He was a real exotic bird in our State College, everybody knew him. A striver, smart, who made some teachers mad because he knew more than they did, and he let them know it. He was also older

than his classmates, of course." Marina draped her arms around Nick's neck. "And then when it turned out he was gay, a bunch of cute female high school graduates were in tears." She kissed him tenderly. "Me included."

"It's enough to make a guy downright jealous," laughed Nick. "How and when did he meet Guido Bär?"

"No idea; you'll need to ask him that, I was gone from Aarau for too long. I only heard from Pavel again when he and Guido Bär were one of the first homosexual couples in Aargau to marry or whatever they call it. It must have been three or four years ago; I remember the newspaper stories and the nasty letters from readers. In any event, back then they looked very happy."

"I'm not sure what to make of him yet." Nick took a swallow from his coffee cup and went back into the bedroom to finish dressing. He sucked in his stomach in front of the mirror, to little avail; his abdomen still could only be described as a convex curve. "One thing is sure, he has bigger muscles than me, and he packs a punch when need be."

"Is that so, even now? I thought maybe that he would have outgrown that on the way to adulthood. Well, if you bring cows into the world, you need brawn." Marina yawned luxuriantly and sank back onto the bed. "I'm going to catch a little shuteye for an hour, even without you. Will you call me?"

"Sure, cara mia. Enjoy your Saturday at liberty." He bent down to kiss her on the forehead, the tip of her nose, on her lips, the right breast, left breast, belly button – and stopped. "Later."

*

"Say, Angela, tell me what the problem was last night. You literally dumped me, to put it politely." Steff Schwager sounded fairly hung over and indignant.

Angela had rejected his nighttime calls, but now, in the office, she was ready. Still, she kept her voice low and avoided saying his name. "I'm really sorry. You know I can't take you along when duty calls and, besides, you'd had your share of drinks. Did you have a good sleep?"

"You don't have to mother me, just because you drink little or nothing. All I want to know is if there's anything I should reserve space for in the paper tomorrow."

"Say, is the only reason you take me out so you can pump me?" It was exactly what she didn't want to say; it sounded like whining and emotional blackmail.

"Well, sure, why else?" Now Steff was laughing, but there was an undertone. "One hand washes the other, right?" This half ironic, half serious conversational tone was typical between them. Sometimes Angela asked herself if it was their way of keeping their distance. She liked the journalist, and it seemed to be reciprocal, but both were careful and for the time being not ready to let down their guard.

He seemed to divine through the telephone line what she was thinking. "No, seriously, I was really frustrated yesterday, when the gorgeous woman next to me suddenly took off on a call instead of spending the night with me. I'm fine with murder and mayhem ranking as more important in the CID scheme of things than the private lives of its staff, but then I'd at least like to know what's going on. I'm a reporter, I look into things, I snoop – it's my job. Got that?"

"Well, sure. On the other hand, my job does not allow me to supply you with information, at least not

right now. As soon as Nick and the whole crew get here, and I know what happens next, I'll give you a call."

"Just give me a name, just a name is all I want, please, pretty please."

"Not yet, Steff; no names."

"Okay, okay," he grouched, "but I need meat on the bone, not just the time and date of the press conference, sweets, you can go ahead and tell that to your boss. We don't want to call into question the good working relationship between the Cantonal Police and the local press, now do we? Ciao, see you later."

Mission accomplished, thought Angela, I gave nothing up, but it gets more difficult all the time. I absolutely have to tell Nick later today that we're a couple; otherwise we'll have a problem in no time.

*

At half past seven that morning, they were all seated around the conference table in the team's office: Gody Kyburz, head of CID and Nick's direct boss; Urs Meierhans, their colleague from Forensic Technology, along with Angela Kaufmann, Peter Pfister and Nick Baumgarten, conducting the meeting. He had personally seen to it that everyone had their coffee and in the middle of the table stood an open paper bag filled with wonderfully aromatic croissants. Nick was a firm believer in such small touches contributing to the group's effectiveness. He had even sprung for an Italian espresso machine a few years back, and ever since colleagues from other departments personally brought their documents over instead of sending them through the internal mail.

The pin walls all around them had been prepared

and written on by Angela, their star visualizer who always managed to lead investigations down new trails by drawing clever cross-connections. For now, she had only pinned up a few of the crime scene photographs.

"All right, let's put together what we have so far. Peter, what was the chain of events?"

"Last night, at two minutes after 11 p.m., an emergency call was received from Paul Beniak. The police was on the scene five minutes later, the ambulance slightly afterwards. Beniak said he had found Guido Bär on returning from his house call to a Villnachern farmer's cow barn. The paramedics report that he tried to revive the victim with oxygen; he had kneeled next to him and held a mask to the victim's face. However, it was no use; Guido Bär was dead. The doctor said he had died at most two hours earlier. Which leads me to conclude that Beniak did not resuscitate him, instead it was he ..."

Nick interrupted. "No conclusions at this point, we first need just the facts."

"Whatever you say, boss. Anyway, Beniak, who smelled of booze and cigars, didn't want to say anything more and only wanted to knock heads. He came at me, and, really, he is damn strong, that I can tell you. I would have taken him in immediately and jailed him, but you were against it. So, anyway, then Forensic Technology began their work and I caught a few hours of sleep. That's it."

"Thanks Peter. Angela, what have you got?"

She had noted all of Peter's important points on the wall and now she filled them in. "Guido Bär, born 1951, writer, lived together with Paul Beniak for twelve years, in a licensed civil union since 2007. Bär has no police record, but Beniak does, for brawling. But the last time was more than ten years ago, since then he's

been clean. The two lived and worked in the farm house between Villnachern and Umiken. So far as I could determine, the house is Paul Beniak's. I wasn't able to make any financial inquiries overnight."

"Good. Urs, what does Forensic Technology have to tell us?"

Meierhans rose and pinned up another photo. "Here we see the two gas cylinders that were on the floor next to the victim. One contains oxygen, the other Isoflurane, a narcotic gas. In veterinary anesthesia, to knock out the patient, they use a specific mixture determined by what kind of animal it is and how much it weighs. The gas is in most cases administered through an intubation hose, but anesthetizing guinea pigs, birds, and other small animals calls for a respiratory mask. And now, dear colleagues, get ready for this: the mask on the dead man's face is a model for humans and not for animals." Meierhans looked around the table to gauge the team's reactions. "So that would be a first anomaly. We found two sets of prints on the mask. One set is Beniak's that can be explained by the alleged resuscitation attempt and then there are those of Bär, the victim. An attempt to defend himself might be one explanation. In the surgery are other traces, such as textile fibers, hair and partial shoeprints. We collected all that, but we need time and above all luck to analyze them. The surgery was cleaned thoroughly as scheduled on Tuesday evening; since then at least a dozen animal patients and their owners have come and gone. We've got our work cut out for us, I can assure you."

"Thanks very much, but of course you'll keep at it, especially as concerns the human traces. Have we heard from Forensic Medicine yet?"

Meierhans shook his head. "Only with yesterday's

preliminary, non-definitive report: he presumably was asphyxiated, but there were no external clues. They'll contact us as soon as they know more."

CID chief Gody Kyburz cleared his throat. "This may or may not be germane, but my wife knows Paul Beniak, because he once stood in for our own vet. She was not at all pleased with him. Although he did a good job with our wire hair dachshund and prescribed the correct medicine, the human communication was lacking. She said at the time that he was really curt and impolite, no trace of being customer oriented. We never went back to him."

"Thanks for this comment, Gody. Beniak's first name is actually Pavel and he comes from Bratislava, but he finished secondary school here and is a Swiss citizen." Nick looked questioningly at Peter Pfister. "Anything ring a bell from your old State College? He was born in '53, which means you must have overlapped at least one year. Do you know him?"

Peter answered in the negative but said he would look into it. He would also ask around in Villnachern and vicinity, if anyone had seen or heard anything, and he planned to speak with the farmers among his customers.

Angela received the assignment to get busy on Guido Bär's life, his family, and his finances.

As for Nick Baumgarten, he would venture another attempt at speaking with Paul Beniak.

After everyone knew what they had to do, Gody Kyburz closed the meeting by saying: "Let's get back together at four p.m. today. Please keep an open mind and don't yet concentrate on any one track. For the time being we don't know anything, and we don't want to overlook anything." They all knew that his strictures were more than mere clichés, but to observe them in

practice and to take off the blinkers was another thing altogether.

Angela pulled Nick aside. "I need to discuss something with you. It won't take long, but it's important."

Her chief gave her a curious look and then, with a wink, said: "It doesn't by any chance have anything to do with Steff Schwager?"

Angela blushed and nodded. "How do you know? Did Steff say something?"

"No, not straight out, but anyone with eyes in their head ..." He looked straight at her and turned serious. "You know the difficulties, Angela. The press absolutely must not be allowed to compromise our investigations by divulging too many details to the public prematurely."

"I'm totally on board with that, Chief. The only problem is that he pressures me and by doing that mixes the private and the professional. Since last night, he has been badgering me the whole time to give him a name; he just won't let up."

"Like any journalist who is worth his salt. Just try not to take his questions personally. You're usually so good at it. And if he doesn't let up, I'm always there and can draw the line for him. Can you manage it?"

"We'll see." She seemed doubtful, and Nick saw that she was. He would have to keep an eye on the situation, because he knew Steff Schwager and his ways only too well.

*

It was a radiant morning, not a cloud anywhere; the March sun warmed Nick through the car window so that he could shut off the heater and crack the window open. Wisps of fog rose from the surface of the Aare

as he crossed the bridge to Schinznach; he could hear bird song and it seemed to him as if spring had broken out overnight. It would not be long now and the trees along the river would begin to sport leaves again, the fruit trees in the orchards would blossom and the people would mothball their caps and gloves. Nick made a right turn at the roundabout in the river flats and now drove past farmsteads and the municipal plunge, through the heart of Villnachern in direction Brugg. A few hundred meters later, after the last of the single family houses, he turned right into Guido Bär and Pavel Beniak's driveway. He had already noticed the night before that the house looked much smaller from outside than it was inside; both the veterinary practice and the living quarters had been attractively designed by incorporating the old beams and walls, and they were spacious. In front of the house was a carport for two cars, with two more parking spaces next to it and a small bicycle stand. The entrance to the practice was easily visible from the parking area, while the path to the front door led through a garden gate and around the corner of the house. Today, a dark green Jaguar with a low number on the license plate glinted in one of the parking spaces, and a loud argument was under way at the entrance to the practice.

"I insist on speaking with the doctor personally, not with some nondescript person, do you hear me? I am a long-time customer, and my little Stella here is feeling so poorly that she requires emergency treatment. She limps, she is in pain, and she can't possibly spend a whole weekend like that." The blonde, of a certain age and dressed in chic clothes, held a miniature dog under her arm while trying to push past the other party. All in vain: under the door jamb stood a large, buxom woman dressed in bright colors who barred her way.

"The practice is closed; the doctor cannot treat you and your dog today. If it is an emergency, you have to drive to an animal clinic." A lovely, full voice, thought Nick, it goes with the impressive appearance.

"But the doctor knows my Stella and she is comfortable with him, I'm sure he'll make an exception for us. You tell him that Frau Professor Scholl is here, go on, and get him." Obviously, she was used to being obeyed.

"No, I'm afraid that is impossible," came the answer, friendly and clear as glass.

"But why on earth not? A doctor must always be accessible for his patient, man or beast; this is what he swore his oath on! I absolutely insist on seeing him now, is that clear?"

Nick intervened. "Good day to you, ladies. My name is Nick Baumgarten; I'm with the Aargau Cantonal Police. Sorry to say, Frau Scholl, but Herr Beniak is not available for consultation today. Please be so good and drive to another animal clinic. Good bye."

"Police? What's going on – did he do something? You haven't arrested him, have you?" The blond woman suddenly was no longer interested in her lap dog's tale of suffering, but instead in this unexpected, potentially scandalous piece of news. "Tell me; did something happen to him instead? Or to that nice Herr Bär?" She held her hand out to Nick. "I'm Sabine Scholl. What was your name again?" She was carefully made up, every hair of the blond mane was in its place, and her clothes spoke of golf, good taste, and loads of money. She was at least fifty, maybe even sixty, but no wrinkles anywhere except on her neck and hands. She preserved the figure of a younger woman.

"Regrettably, I cannot give you any information, Frau Scholl." He took her by the elbow and politely led

her to the Jaguar, all the while taking care not to get bitten by the wild beast with the unpredictable temperament that she carried under her arm. "Check in at the practice next week, Frau Scholl, everything should be back to normal by then. Good bye and speedy recovery for Stella." It was easy to see that she would have liked to stay longer. With the engine purring softly, the Jaguar with its precious cargo backed out and then sped off.

Nick turned on his heel and walked over to the woman still standing in the doorway. She offered her hand. "I'm Marketa Beniak, Pavel's sister. Please come in, Herr Baumgarten. I'm sure you could use a coffee." She led the way into the bright live-in kitchen in the rear of the house, fixed him an espresso and sat down across the table from him with a large cappuccino. "Herr Baumgarten, all I know is that Guido is dead, but please tell me what happened. Pavel called me in the middle of the night and only said that Guido is dead, then he hung up, and I drove here as soon as I could."

"Where is Herr Beniak at the moment?" Nick was not about to divulge any details before he knew whom he was dealing with.

"He is asleep and I can't wake him. There's an empty Slivovitz bottle on the nightstand – I don't have to tell you what that means." She cleared her throat and as if to make an excuse said: "In our family, they drink when there are problems."

"Frau Beniak, I'm sorry, but can you show me some i.d.? Without knowing your bona fides ..."

"... you can't tell me anything, I get it." She stood up and brought her handbag over from the kitchen counter. She reached in and took out a thick notebook held together by rubber bands. "I.d. card, driver's license, and my business card. Will that do?"