

Ursula Reist

Some Call it Murder

Nick Baumgarten's Sixth 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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"If anyone can show just cause why this couple cannot lawfully be joined together in matrimony, let them speak now or forever hold their peace." Eliane Meier, civil registrar for the city of Lenzburg, let her eyes roam briefly over the assemblage of wedding guests before turning to the couple. "In that case let us begin."

"Wait – stop the wedding!"

The powerful, throaty woman's voice shattered the reverent silence in the castle courtyard and everyone present froze. No, please don't, thought Seraina MacAdam and grasped her husband's hand. Dear god, please don't.

The tension built. Ten seconds, twenty seconds – and then drums, piano and bass started up as the buxom singer in a gold lame sheath dress, microphone in hand, strode from the castle entrance onto the terrace to stand beside the bridegroom.

"You're just marrying her for spite
if she knew the inside story she'd tell you
what you're doing just ain't right.

Stop this madness before it starts!"

She slipped her arm under Colin MacAdam's and tried to pull him away from his bride.

"Don't do it, don't do it, don't break two hearts," she sang, "'cause you belong to me and I belong to you."

By now, the guests were over their shock, and, as the applause built, some joined in the refrain. "Don't

do it, don't do it, stop the wedding," Angela Kaufmann had taken hold of Colin's other arm and looked into his eyes: " 'cause you belong to me and I belong to you." Applause and laughter blended as the singer went back to her band and the town official, who was in on the gag thanks to Pino Beltrametti, picked up where she left off.

" 'Don't do it, don't do it, stop the wedding' – dear couple, honored guests, let this Etta James song remind us that life is ever full of surprises, even on days and during events that we plan down to the last detail. You two, Angela Kaufmann and Colin MacAdam, know this intimately from your jobs, and it just so happened that the unexpected also intruded on your wedding day. Now, let us proceed with your nuptials, knowing that in your shared life health and illness, happiness and unhappiness, the beautiful and the difficult will also alternate and that your love for each other must be the stable heart and secure foundation to let you deal with these uncertainties." She turned to the bride, who stood before her in a pants suit of shimmering blue and green silk, with her elegantly pinned up blond hair adorned with miniature white roses.

"Angela Kaufmann, if you are prepared to take this man as your husband to share your life with, please say 'yes'."

"Yes."

The bridegroom, elegant as ever in his anthracite colored three-piece suit, complemented by the silk cravat in the same colors as the bride's suit, nodded smiling at Angela.

“Colin MacAdam, if you are ready to take this woman as your wife to share your life with, please say ‘yes’.”

“Yes.”

“That being so, I now ask you and the witnesses to attest to the marriage. Congratulations, and I wish you all the best!”

The guests broke into applause again as Colin embraced his bride to kiss her, and the band launched into another famous Etta James tune:

“At last, my love has come along,
my lonely days are over,
and life is like a song.”

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Seraina MacAdam, the bridegroom’s mother, emptied her first glass of champagne in one swig and reached for another. Her husband Ian raised an eyebrow, but inwardly he was smiling. He knew what had flashed through her mind when that voice interrupted earlier: that it was Colin’s past catching up with him. A jealous past by the name of Lizzie. “Elizabeth is in California, sweetheart, she has no inkling of this wedding and even if she did, she would never have dared to appear, especially not like this.”

“You don’t know the bitch like I do. She is capable of anything.”

“Never mind. Come on, let’s enjoy this day, this beautiful place and the unbelievable weather.”

They walked over to Angela’s parents Franz and

Ursula Kaufmann and joined them in a toast to their children's wellbeing.

"You chose a wonderful place for this wedding. Your castles are at least as impressive as ours!" Ian, a Scot, lived with his Swiss wife near Inverness in the ancestral home, which he downplayed affectionately as "that modest pile of stones." The estate was, in fact, significantly larger and older than Wildegg Castle; it could even boast a mention in one of Shakespeare's royal dramas. The family occupied only one of its spacious wings, and they had opened the largest part of the castle and gardens to members of the public seven days a week. And they came in droves, to let themselves be shepherded through the high-ceilinged rooms. There they would marvel at the galleries hung with ancestral portraits, take a spot of tea in the castle's café, and pick up local delicacies in its shop. On the walk back to their buses, they could admire the border collies work a herd of sheep and marvel at the exotic plants in the covered garden where they sheltered against the nasty weather. Ian Mac Adam liked to say with a hint of irony that he was one of the "working poor," that he would be hard pressed to pay the bills without the visitors' largesse.

"You know, the Aargau Canton received Wildegg as a gift from the Swiss Confederation for a token one franc." Franz Kaufmann, member of the Aargau Canton governing council and head of its health department, had taken a great liking to his son-in-law's father. "It may turn out to be a case of Greeks bearing gifts, because the upkeep is a drain on our budget,

so that we get continual moves in Parliament to put it up for sale. Perhaps you'd like to make a present of it to your new daughter-in-law?"

"Good heavens, no," exclaimed Seraina, laughing, "better that Angela make her career with the police; she's not cut out to play the chatelaine."

*

The band finished with a flourish, and now Colin took the microphone. "Dear family, dear friends, thank you all for coming today to celebrate with us. The castle and the wonderful park are all ours until the evening, and we have nothing on the program except for you all to have a good time. Bar and buffet you'll find over there in the barn, along with tables and chairs. The band's name is "Martina and Friends," and they've already shown us some good stuff – and now, I'm requesting a slow waltz, so I can have the first dance with my wife. Maestro, if you please!" Angela was not used to standard ballroom dances, but she closed her eyes and let Colin, who never missed a step, take charge and wheel her around the dance floor. It felt like he had her dancing on air, lifted off her feet, swept along, secure – she knew she had picked the right one.

*

Nick Baumgarten brought Marina Manz a glass of champagne, and, following her wistful gaze, said, "You know you'll have to look for another man if you want to dance, sweetie."

“Yes, and I’ve already picked him out. But, you do promise, don’t you, that when you retire, we’re going to take dance lessons?” She gave him a brilliant smile. “You know, they say that dancing slows the aging process and prevents dementia.”

“May I abduct your beautiful wife, chief?” Nick’s colleague, Pino Beltrametti had materialized next to them. “You can tell that she absolutely wants to dance, and we know you are hopeless in that department.”

With a twinge of envy, Nick watched the two of them move expertly through the “gangster tango,” then he turned away and walked over to the bar. He was ready for a good glass of white wine.

“Not a champagne fan either?” asked the tall man next to him. “I’m Max Caponio, best man and Colin’s doctoral supervisor.”

“And I’m Nick Baumgarten, Angela’s boss. Yeah, you bet, I also prefer wine over the bubbly. Cheers!” They chatted about the fine points of the Roero Arneis that the barmaid had decanted for them, and then moved on to their preferences in Spanish, French, and Australian wines.

“You smoke?” Max offered Nick a cigarette, who shook his head, saying he had regrettably quit some twenty years ago.

“Here we go again, policemen and doctors smoking and drinking, even though they should know better!” Corina Kaufmann, Angela’s sister and maid of honor, joined the two men and asked for a cigarette. “Now that I’ve married off my little Angela, I can give in to my habit again. Great party, isn’t it?”

And you simply must sample all the exotic nibbles, they are to die for.”

*

Throughout the festivities, the photographer had moved discreetly among the guests, disregarding all those taking selfies with their smartphones. He had been told to photograph each person present at least once, without formally posing the happy couple, their parents and their witnesses. His camera roll was to be as informal as the rest of the festivities. Later that afternoon, as the light changed, he climbed the steps to the castle terrace, where he nearly collided with a young woman wearing the long black apron of a server coming down the stairs at a rapid clip. He watched her hurry over to the buffet where she animatedly talked with a female coworker. Probably a catering crisis, he guessed, maybe they ran out of champagne. Leaning against the parapet, he took a few pictures of the castle courtyard. There was no way around it, he thought; I have to clamber up the circular staircase inside the castle to get the whole affair into the frame. As he set out on his climb to the top floor, he heard loud voices that seemed to come from the cellars. None of my business, he told himself, and continued looking for a window from which to take his shot.

And just as the civil registrar had intoned during the wedding vows, joy and sorrow would follow each other closely. Very closely indeed.

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Early Sunday morning, not even twenty-four hours later, Angela Kaufmann was called into an urgent meeting with Gody Kyburz, chief of the Aargau Criminal Investigation Department. He was tight-lipped on the phone and refused to say more.

"Just get over here," he told Angela, "I know you're probably packing for your honeymoon. It can't be helped."

On hearing this, Colin MacAdam, forensic pathologist and freshly hitched husband, groaned. "Now, I am aware that marriages with police women are doomed to failure, but starting on the second day already I do find a bit of an imposition." But he was smiling as he said it, and he took Angela in his arms. "British sense of humor, sweetheart, you know me. What do you suppose is up?"

She could only shake her head, but Colin saw the vertical worry line that had appeared over the bridge of her nose, the first time in weeks. "No idea, but nothing good, I'm sure," she said in a choked voice and gave him a heartfelt kiss. Then she pulled away to pick up her bag and keys from the table. "Duty calls. I'll be back as soon as I can,

otherwise I'll call. You know the drill, sweetheart."

*

Pino Beltrametti was also less than elated about getting a call from Gody Kyburz. But, by now, after thirty years with Aargau CID, he was used to getting called into action, usually after a long night with little sleep. Janis Eggiman, his companion, had not left for her home until the wee hours, and, even after he had made the shower hot and the coffee strong, he did not feel quite up to par. Still, he was upbeat, and, after casting a quizzical glance at the sky, before getting into his vintage Lancia ragtop, he unlatched the roof and folded it back. If they were going to make him work, at least he would make getting there be half the fun.

*

Silence reigned in the detective team's office, where the district attorney had joined the CID chief at the round conference table. Cécile Dumont and Gody Kyburz had nothing more to tell each other, they were reduced to waiting for Angela and Pino to enliven the proceedings. Both seasoned officials, they had still been shocked by the day's news. It was written on their faces. Cécile was pale and unusually silent; Gody, eyes downcast, compulsively made and unmade a fist.

*

Pino quit whistling "I was born to love you" the moment he saw their expressions, and when Angela opened the door half a minute later, it also stopped her in her tracks.

"Let me have the good news first," she said.

"There's only bad," answered Gody in a husky voice, "really bad. Here it is: Last night, Nick had a massive heart attack that put him in Canton Hospital's intensive care. He is in critical condition."

"Oh, God, no!" groaned Angela. "But, he's alive at least."

"Man, say it isn't so!" growled Pino, bringing his fist down on the table. "Damn it, I've been telling him forever to throttle back!"

"He's alive," said Cécile quietly, "but he's not out of the woods. Marina is by his side; she'll call when she knows more."

"Did she tell you what happened?"

Cécile shook her head.

*

Gody cleared his throat. "I know this is not a good time, but there is more. We had a suspicious death at Wildegge Castle yesterday. A woman fell from a castle window and landed on the rocks below. Or, she may have jumped. Or was pushed."

"Please say it didn't happen while I was getting married." Angela's knees buckled, and she collapsed in a chair. "That's too much to handle."

"She was found early in the morning by the castle warden. We don't have a time of death yet. Forensics

will have to clear that up. Colin has his work cut out for him, too.”

“Who was she?” asked Pino.

“The owner of yesterday’s catering firm, I’m sorry to tell you.”

Angela could only shake her head. With tears in her eyes, she asked: “Can I make it all go away by getting divorced this minute?”

Pino walked up behind her to gently place his hands on her shoulders and, bending down, he softly said to her: “That’ll be the day, young lady. This doesn’t have a damn thing to do with your marriage. It is just a lousy coincidence.”

“I can assign another team to the case, if you want,” said Gody. “Maybe you’re too close to it. Urs Meierhans is already on site with his crew. He’ll call in when he’s done.”

Cécile and Pino exchanged a long look, and then Pino took the word: “I think we should be the ones to crack this case. We were there yesterday, we know the guests, we saw and heard a lot. And we need to stay busy while our Nick’s life hangs in the balance, or we’ll go nuts. Are you up for it, Angela?”

She hesitated but then nodded. “Call Colin and explain to him what’s going on, please. Tell him to cancel Vegas and make his way over here.”

“We first need to stabilize your husband’s heart action, Frau Manz, that is why we have him here in intensive care. We dilated the constricted vessel and put in a stent. Because you reacted quickly and correctly, we were able to keep the heart muscle from suffering any significant permanent damage. That said, he must be kept under constant observation, for sometimes these attacks happen in tandem. Now that would be a problem.” The chief of cardiology gave an inquiring look at the beautiful woman standing at the foot of her husband’s bed. “Let me suggest that you go home and try to get a few hours’ sleep. Don’t worry, we’ll call you if there is any change.”

Marina shook her head. “I’m staying. As scared as he was last night, someone has to be here to hold his hand when he wakes up.”

The cardiologist nodded. “Fear of dying is very typical in heart attacks. The patients feel like they have an elephant sitting on their chest. But, to reiterate, we are watching him around the clock. Go home, shower, have a bite to eat, a glass of wine, get some shut eye when you can, it will do you good.”

Marina was not about to be chased from her husband’s side. “I’ll go out of my mind if I don’t stay here, that I’m sure of. Let me go on holding his hand, he needs me.”

“As you wish, Frau Manz. At least take my advice, get some fresh air and move around a bit. It helps

clear the head. See you soon." He closed the door softly behind him.

She bent over Nick and kissed his pale forehead. "I'm here, my darling, I won't leave you alone," she whispered. She tried to lie down next to him, without success, because the bed was too narrow, and tubes snaked everywhere. Instead, she moved the chair closer to the bed, laid her arms on the mattress so that her hands rested on his abdomen. Then she put her head down on an arm and let the tears flow.

*

An hour later, there was a gentle rap on the door, it opened a crack, a nurse peered in, only to close it again immediately. Waiting for her at the floor station was Cécile Dumont.

"I'm sorry," the nurse told her, "Frau Manz is asleep, so is Herr Baumgarten. I don't want to wake them, unless necessary; they've both been through enough the last few hours."

"Sure, I understand. How is he doing," – a glance at the nurse's badge – "Frau Schäfer?"

"You'll have to ask the doctor, I don't know the specifics."

"I know, regulations. But, I also know that experienced nurses like you know at least as much about a patient's condition as the attending physician. How is he, really?"

After a pause, during which the nurse gave the short, rotund but energetic visitor a level look, Frau Schäfer smiled and said: "You will not get anything

out of me no matter how nicely you ask, except that he is doing as well as can be expected under the circumstances. I don't think you're a relative, are you?"

"No, I'm not, but then I'm a good friend of Frau Manz and work closely with Herr Baumgarten. He is Aarau CID's deputy chief of detectives and I'm the Canton's district attorney. My name is Cécile Dumont."

The nurse laughed. "I like your cross-examination technique, Frau Dumont! Why don't you grab something to drink in the cafeteria and try again later?"

"Not an option, I've got to get back to work. Mind if I leave you my number? I really would like to hear from either Frau Manz or you when you know more."

"That will be fine, Frau District Attorney. I'll tell Frau Manz you were here."

Instead of packing suitcases, between bouts of looking at the first wedding photos with Colin, Angela found herself in Auenstein with Pino a good hour after the team meeting. They pulled up in front of a small, older single-family house with a front yard overgrown with weeds. Pino parked the Lancia next to four neatly lined up bikes, telling Angela to be careful of the finish when opening her door.

Angela bit back a cynical retort and peeled herself out of the low car seat. They had the conflicted task once again of conveying the news of a relative's death to a family while also being on alert for clues during this first contact. So far, they only knew that the victim's name was Claudia Duss, age 46, that she was married to one Bernhard Duss and there were three children, ages 10, 15, and 18.

Angela took a deep breath and let it out while pushing the doorbell. It set off a commotion inside, punctuated by a loud "Who the hell left their shoes on the stairs again?" The door opened to reveal a young man who now scrutinized them both, but then fixed his gaze on Pino and half-smiled. "Two cops with serious faces. So, what did I do this time?"

Pino had also recognized him, from a time when the young man had been in a gang of teenage toughs that had given Pino a few headaches. "Yes, it's been a while, Patrick. But it's your father we're here to see. This is my colleague Angela Kaufmann."

Patrick stood aside to let them enter, then led

them up a few steps into a living room. "Papa, meet Herr Beltrametti and Frau Kaufmann, they're from the police. They're here for you, not me." He winked at Pino, turned and disappeared down the hallway.

Bernhard Duss was in his fifties, tall, and with a physique bordering on haggard. His large nose and piercing blue eyes struck Angela immediately, as did the grief creases bracketing his mouth. Without inviting his visitors to sit, he asked: "It's about Claudia, isn't it. Did they take her to the clinic again?"

Angela and Pino exchanged a puzzled look.

"What clinic?"

"The psychiatric one, of course, Königsfelden."

"No. But, we regret to inform you, your wife has died, Herr Duss," said Pino. "Please accept our condolences."

Duss froze. "What was that you said? She's dead? Not in Königsfelden? What happened?"

Angela forced herself to ask the inevitable question: "When was the last time you saw your wife, Herr Duss?"

The answer came as if from an automaton: "Heard her, didn't see her. Yesterday morning the alarm rang at 5 a.m., she got up and left for her firm to cook for some event, I turned over and went back to sleep. So, they didn't take her to the clinic?"

"No, Herr Duss, she's dead," Angela said. "Have a seat, I'll get you some water."

She turned, only to see Patrick standing in the hallway. His face was chalk white, and he was leaning against the wall. "She killed herself, didn't she," he said, in a flat voice. "Where and how?"

Pino stepped over to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. "She fell out of a window at Wildegg Castle. That is all we know so far, we are treating it as a suspicious death until we know more. Where are your brother and sister?"

"Kati is in England, Timmy is with granny in Brugg."

"They need to be told. We can help with that if you wish." Pino watched Patrick as he now sat down next to his father and looked at him imploringly. But Bernhard Duss just stared ahead at nothing, did not move to comfort his son or be comforted by him.

*

It turned into a long day's work for Angela and Pino. Using repetitive, probing questions, Angela gradually drew the husband out of his torpid state, while Pino and Patrick informed the relatives. In the afternoon, when Bernhard's parents drove up with the boy Tim, the detectives left the family to its devices.