

Ursula Reist

**The Hotel of Dead  
Dreams**

Nick Baumgarten's Fifth 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

“Unbelievable,” an indignant Annemarie Bossard called out as she pointed to the mess covering the patio of her house on Landhausweg. “A single little thunderstorm and already this odious sewage drowns my flower border and floods the basement again! Hans, you have got to do something; we can’t go on like this. Make the city finally replace the old drainpipes instead of throwing money at useless bike lanes on Bahnhofstrasse!” With that, she pinched her nose shut.

“We’ve got to call in the sewer cleaning crew first before we sue the city, Annemarie.” Hans Bossard was a man of action, in total contrast to his wife, a chronic complainer who liked laying blame. “Sooner or later, they will have to be replaced, but I wouldn’t hold my breath. I’m going to call the experts now.” He went inside.

“Four times in two years already, and still the city sits on its hands! They are obviously economizing in all the wrong places in this Red-Green cesspool called Aarau; rock-solid taxpayers like us always get short shrift, and are left to drown in crap.” Even with no one around now to listen to her, she kept up her tirade. A lack of audience was no reason for sixty-year old Annemarie Bossard to keep her disgust with the state of things to herself.

“They’re already in the neighborhood; apparently it has affected more houses,” Hans announced from the living room. “They’ll get here as soon as they can, but my guess is not before this afternoon.”

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Only at dusk on this hot August evening did the

orange truck with its thick hoses leave Landhausweg and head back to the depot. The workers had pumped out the Bossards' collection chamber, but that proved to be only a temporary fix, because the chamber slowly backed up again. It was agreed that they would return in the next few days to look for the true cause of the blockage, if need be by using a camera. The supervisor let on that he had a specialist for this task but that he was still on vacation that week. He raised the possibility of the garden pond having to be drained, since mud might be constricting the outflow, setting off a chain reaction in the system. Annemarie Bossard naturally would have none of it. Her water lilies were her personal masterpiece and no specialist, no matter how expert, would mess up her pond. She was sure the old pipes deserved the blame.

"It's as if the attorney general is blaming me for Cécile Dumont prospecting for happiness in California," said Nick, leaning forward at the conference table. "There is no way this Rolf Spitz can fill her shoes."

The weekly squad meeting was over and no one remained besides Gody Kyburz, the head of Cantonal CID, and his deputy, Nick Baumgarten.

"I should think it wasn't easy to find someone to fill in for what may be just a couple of months on the outside chance of being offered a permanent slot and then only maybe. What's your problem with him?" Gody was ever intent on keeping on good terms with all the agencies the police worked with. He cherished harmony, went out of his way to avoid conflict and regarded open strife as an abomination.

"He gave us a half-hour presentation by way of introduction that had it all: PowerPoint, complete with animation, changing colors, and bullet points devoid of meaning. Angela told me that he wore an expensively cut suit and designer glasses to go with it, which in principle is neither here nor there, but it left us all with the impression that the packaging is better than its contents, and theory is more important than fact. No doubt he's clever, but he's also kind of arrogant. I guarantee that collaboration with Pino will not come easy."

"Well, that's hardly news. Pino has always been the maverick. You'd better make sure that he gets along with Spitz. What's Angela think?"

"She doesn't like to have her professional competence challenged, which is precisely what Spitz did during the session. He as much as called her justified

objection irrelevant and brushed her off. If he doesn't quickly make amends, she will turn a deaf ear to anything that comes from him."

Gody sighed. "Then it's up to you to smooth things over. Come hell or high water, your team had better put up with Spitz, at least until it's clear whether Cécile Dumont will marry this Andrew Ehrlicher and settle in California."

"We'll do our best. But should Cécile really stay in the USA, you need to impress on the attorney general the need for a careful vetting process, if you have to with our commandant's help. Spitz cannot be the permanent solution."

"Dream on, Nick; as if the attorney general would let us tell him what to do. You just work with Spitz for a while starting now, and then we'll see how things develop. Anything else on your mind?"

Nick shook his head and stood up. "No, chief, but don't say I didn't warn you. Ciao."

### 3

Pino Beltrametti lay back in the chair, feet on desk. Basically, he had nothing to do – not counting the four reports or so that needed writing. But stringing words together never had been his forte and so, during his forty-year career with the Aargau Cantonal Police, he had generally found someone to offload writing chores to. Lately, it had become progressively more difficult, and he was beginning to reckon that today once more he might not be able to get out of it. He was relieved to hear the phone ring and reached for the receiver. The Aarau Municipal Police was on the line, calling to report a suspicious find: a large plastic package about the size and shape of a person had surfaced earlier that morning in a citizen's garden pond.

“Leave everything how you found it, I'll be there in ten minutes. Landhausweg, you say? Yes, I know it; I also have my GPS.” He swung his long legs off the desk, grabbed leather jacket and smartphone and hurried down the stairs to the garage where his old Lancia was waiting. Finally, he thought, something is stirring again, even if he couldn't be quite sure what. Getting out of the office and not being forced to peck away at a report was all that mattered.

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It took three of them, all wearing gloves, to heave the large object wrapped in black plastic and bound with duct tape out of the pond, with Annemarie Bossard hovering around them, wringing her hands and ordering them to “watch out for my water lilies!”. That morning, the supervisor of the drain cleaning

crew, sewer system map in hand and hunting for the source of the overflow in the Bossard family's garden, had stumbled on the object poking through the pink blossoms. Being a devoted fan of mystery novels and with enough imagination to suspect a corpse in the longish package he had instantly called the police.

"While we investigate what we have here," said Pino, "we don't need any spectators, and certainly no hysterics." He looked at the supervisor and motioned to him with his head to take the woman into the house.

"I'm not hysterical. The nerve! I don't have to listen to this and especially not coming from someone who has no respect for horticulture! Go ahead, just keep trampling down my garden, you roughneck, you can count on my filing a complaint!" Even as the supervisor led her away by the elbow, Annemarie Bossard could be heard still complaining at the top of her voice.

Pino now kneeled beside the package and unfolded the small blade of the Swiss Army knife he had pulled from his pants pocket. He gingerly prodded the bulging plastic and then cut into it where he detected a small air pocket. The odor that assailed him with the outrushing air had him on his feet instantly and reaching for his phone. "MacAdam, hop on your bike, you're needed here. And bring Angela with you." Then he put in calls to Urs Meierhans of CSI and to Nick Baumgarten.

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It was no sight for sensitive souls that offered itself to CID in the manicured garden on Landhausweg. On the cut-open black plastic sheet lay the bloated corpse of a man with a gaping wound on his neck and brown, dried blood on neck, chest, and shoulders. The sweetly

odor spreading in the summer heat caused most of those present to gag. Only Colin MacAdam, the pathologist, remained unaffected and, having handed out face masks "you need to work, not faint," he took a closer look at the dead man. "It's not just since yesterday that he's been in this puddle but also it's been less than a week. If you would, Urs, have the water temperature measured and be good enough to get me yesterday's precipitation stats and the temperatures prevailing during the last few days." He turned the corpse's head to the side: "It looks like this gentleman's throat has been cut. Not a pretty death, and a fairly bloody one. He looks to be between fifty and sixty years old, on the lean side, not very tall. A strong person could have thrown him over the shoulder and carried him here." He looked up at them. "But where he gave up the ghost and who put him in the water, I guess you'll have to find out."

"Any obvious identifying marks on him? Tattoos, birthmarks, scars?" It cost her something, but Angela bent over the corpse. "He's wearing a wedding band; maybe it's engraved on the inside."

"I'll take it off him during the autopsy, then we will see. In frontal view I don't see anything unusual, but we might turn him over. Pino, want to give me a hand?"

Beneath the dead man's right shoulder blade they could see a reddish-brown discoloration about the size of a five-franc piece. The forensic pathologist took out his magnifier for a closer look. "Not a birthmark but possibly a burn. It could be from a Taser, or maybe from a laser used in tattoo removal, or an irradiation that went awry. It looks like I may spend some time on this fellow." He stood up. "In any event, a first rate subject for study. I can take him with me now?" He

nodded toward the two men that stood discreetly waiting in the background, flanking a collapsible gurney that had a grey body bag lying on it unzipped.

"One moment, Colin." Nick Baumgarten, having paced to the end of the garden, head down and peering at the ground, had returned to stand next to the corpse. "Bled a lot, did he? How much?"

"Hard to say, it depends on the clotting factor and, of course, on the way the deed was done. But it was probably two or three liters. I'll soon know how much is left in him. Anything else?"

Nick shook his head. "Not now, thanks."

The two gurney men rolled the dead man into the body bag, zipped it and lifted it onto their contraption before pushing it down the winding garden path and disappearing. Colin meanwhile had walked over to his bicycle, from where, having dutifully put on his helmet, he gave them a wave. "I'll be in touch in a couple of hours, ciao!" he called out and wheeled his bike down the path.

Urs Meierhans folded the black plastic sheet. "Just a little blood on it, looks like he was only wrapped up after he had been dead for a while. I don't think he was killed here. Did you perhaps see anything in the garden, Nick?"

"Well, certainly no puddle of blood and at first glance also no drag marks. But we definitely need to look into the woods on the other side of the garden wall. There is a forest road about a hundred meters into it and, even though it's closed to traffic, we might find tire marks. If the murderer really carried the victim to the pond from there, we should also find footprints."

Meierhans laughed. "After yesterday's downpour? Fat chance. Besides, the walk to the forest edge is paved

with concrete aggregate garden tiles and finding any tracks on those is nearly hopeless."

Pino broke in. "Let's ask the lady of the house; man, she'd notice every bent blade of grass. I was a little rough on her earlier, and this will give me a chance to smooth things over." He turned toward the house, where a curtain could be seen moving. "She's been watching us all this time, and there's no way she can resist my charm."

"Well, let's see how far you get with her," Nick said with a chuckle. "Be sure to caution her not to tell anyone what we found here, at least for now, unless she wants a bunch of pushy reporters trampling her flowers."

But, other than their bruised water lilies, Annemarie and Hans Bossard, too, had seen nothing out of the ordinary among their manicured flower beds, and they readily agreed to keep their mouths shut. After Urs Meierhans had sent two of his staffers into the wood on a cursory first reconnaissance, the police circus folded its tent and decamped. Their first order of business would be to figure out who their stiff was.

This, however, proved to be a tall order. None of the databases yielded a missing persons report with a description that even remotely matched the dead man, and Angela came up empty even after searching data bases Europe-wide. Neither the dead man's fingerprints nor DNA were on record with the police. The investigators were also prevented by acting District Attorney Spitz from canvassing clinics or hospital for a possible electronic patient record. It seems that he had worked in the data privacy agency previously and was dead set, at least at this stage, against what he called "a fishing expedition."

"The police have no business snooping in electronic patient histories," he lectured them, "they are meant exclusively for use by medical personnel. Going at it in this hit or miss fashion and casting a wide net is a non-starter; it is totally out of the question. You have a thousand other ways to identify this man, so just put in a little more effort."

"How about putting a nice photo on the Internet, the TV, and in the Aargau paper?" Pino countered sarcastically, "so that we can shock the relatives publicly?"

"That can wait, too," Spitz decided, apparently immune to Pino's tone. "We can have another look at it in a couple of weeks should you fail to get anywhere. For the time being, I'm asking all of you to pursue this with all standard means at your disposal. I expect a daily update on your progress, Herr Baumgarten, before 5 p.m. and without fail if you please."

"Just so he can knock off on time," Angela murmured, incensed, after Spitz had closed the door on his way out. "I really don't know where else I could

search. And so long as we don't know who we have here, all the leads are beside the point." She stood up to walk over to their starkly empty pin wall with a mere half dozen photos on it: of the Bossard's, of the corpse, and of the plastic tarp but nothing more: no name, no connections, no facts.

"Spitz isn't that far off," said Nick. "Medical data has to be protected, otherwise we'd all be in hot water. Nothing to do maybe but for someone to call up Steff Schwager and bug him for access." Steff Schwager, formerly a reporter on the city beat for the local paper, the Aargauer Zeitung, who had focused often on the police and its work, had switched careers a few months back to become head of public relations for the Canton Hospitals in Aarau and Baden.

"And who might that 'someone' be?" asked Angela, who had had a brief affair with Steff a couple of years earlier. "You or me?"

Nick had to laugh. "I'll do it, don't worry; after all, I helped him get the job, and he owes me." He rather doubted that Steff even as head of PR would generously share information, but he was curious to find out what Steff's attitude would be now that he had changed sides. He called Steff's cellphone but had to leave a message.

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Like District Attorney Rolf Spitz, Gody Kyburz, head of CID, also wanted his team to keep him informed; above all, he needed fodder for the press. So far, there had been no feelers from the media and there was a chance that the body's discovery on Landhausweg was not yet on their radar. If so, it would not last forever. This time, however, he was determined to take

the bull by the horns and get ahead of the communications curve rather than react to a leak. He ordered the press office to put out a barebones communique about the discovery of the corpse, omitting details of where it was discovered but promising a press conference as soon as the deceased's identity was known and family had been informed.

Two days later, at eight o'clock in the morning, with espressos in front of them, Nick Baumgarten and Pino Beltrametti sat waiting in the team's office. Colin MacAdam had promised the autopsy report that day, and the two detectives hoped for fresh leads that would finally let them get aggressive on the case. Somehow Pino had in fact managed to get his reports written while Nick had concentrated on employee fitness reports and career development plans – Angela Kaufmann's to be exact. Both he and Pino still had two or three years of service in them, but Gody Kyburz and the human resources department were nudging him to get an early start on a succession plan. He knew that Angela, with her law degree, would jump at a leadership role; in fact, she might even be testing the waters elsewhere already – to assess her marketability or because she was getting impatient. In any event, it was high time he had a talk with her.

"Good morning, gentlemen!" Angela and Colin, both smiling and energetic, made their entrance.

"So, had a good night, did we?" grinned Pino.

"Eat your heart out," Angela retorted, "but we'll find the right woman for you yet."

Colin, well-dressed as usual but this morning even wearing a tie with his suit, sat down at the head of the conference table.

"Shall we?" He slid a few sheets of paper from his elegant leather portfolio followed by a tablet that he connected to the projector. Now, with a photo of the deceased thrown on the wall, they settled down to the serious business at hand. "I fixed him up a bit, so that we need not have any qualms about making this image

public. I will call him Mr. X, by the way, given that we still do not know his real name." He picked up his first sheet of paper. "Don't worry about taking notes, I've emailed you all the exhibits. So, our Mr. X was a small, sinewy man, 168 cm tall, weighing in at 65 kilos, with well-developed musculature, presumably from doing physical work. I can say that because his hands are not those of an office worker but rather of someone who handled tools daily. He was right-handed, as revealed by a right lower arm that is significantly larger in diameter than the left one."

Pino balled his fists and inspected his own arms. He failed to see a difference. "Could you also determine that in my case?"

"Presumably," Colin said drily, "shifting your antique Lancia's gears must be hard work. But in the case of X, the difference is really easy to see, and the hands are also calloused in various places, meaning that he worked with hard materials, wood, metal, stone or the like. The skin on the head, neck, and arms is tanned, unlike the rest of the body, so it seems he frequently worked outside. He is around sixty years old, give or take three years. He was of central European stock, like us; he had dark-brown hair, still quite a lot for his age, heavy five o'clock shadow, brown eyes, A+ blood type, no operation scars, no tattoos, no apparent organ damage, no signs of disease. Only the index finger points to a slight accident: the distal phalanx, sorry, the tip of his index finger had been broken some time ago and mended badly." He projected the image of the left hand, but it was not much of an anomaly. "It doesn't do anything for us, just his closest relatives might know about it, if that. He wore a traditional wedding ring on his left ring finger, two millimeters wide, rose gold, regrettably not engraved either with names or a

date. The wedding must have been some decades ago, because the finger has a visible indentation due to the ring, and the middle knuckle would have made taking the ring off an agony."

Colin, clearing his throat again, poured himself a glass of water before continuing. "Dry throat, beg your pardon. Now, on to the cause of death. As I suspected, the burn on the shoulder blade was caused by a Taser that was touching him or was fired from a minimal distance. It would have been painful and knocked him out of action for a minute or two, but it is not fatal. Cutting a throat, on the other hand, especially this deep, will be fatal. His head, in fact, was almost cut off completely. That takes strength, technique, and a sharp knife, or a saber like those used by the Islamic State types. Interestingly, the cut went from right to left, and, since you can only actually cut somebody's throat from behind, you are looking for a left-handed killer. X must have been allowed to bleed out, and then the corpse was wrapped in the black plastic and tied up with duct tape. When exactly the deed was done is difficult to extrapolate, but he was in the pond for roughly 48 to 72 hours before bobbing up."

"Given that there was a storm on Sunday night," said Angela, "nobody would have heard or seen anything if he was thrown in the water that night. And that the lilies the next morning were a little worse for wear also escaped notice."

Nick agreed. "That would work, if we accept the shorter time frame. But it could also have happened during the night from Saturday to Sunday. We will have to ask the Bossards and people around the neighborhood to see who might have spent their Saturday evening in the garden, seeing that it was a fine evening for an outdoor barbecue. And on Sunday, too,

the weather was nice and warm until around nine p.m.”

“I hope you’ll have fun doing good old police work, knocking on doors,” said Colin. “I suppose Mr. X will stay with me in the cooler, the toxicological tests alone will take a few days. I’m off to Berne now, I am expected in court as an expert witness. See you.”

Colin nearly collided in the doorway with Urs Meierhans. The head of CSI now took his place at the conference table. “If someone will spring for some reasonably good coffee, I’ll tell you all I know.”

It took Pino a few seconds to get up and busy himself with the espresso machine. Under his breath he mumbled something that to Angela sounded like “women’s work,” but she pretended not to hear it.

“Unfortunately, I have to tell you that we came up just as empty as Colin did according to his report. Up to now, we haven’t found a murder weapon, no pool of blood, no footprints, no tire marks. On the day after the rainstorm, that makes it Monday, the foresters were in the wood with their heavy vehicles cutting up fallen tree limbs and cleaning blocked drainages. Their tractor treads churned up the ground so much that nothing else is left to see. Our technicians searched everywhere between the forest road and the gardens and found nothing. Our working hypothesis for now is that the killer or killers drove as close as possible to the pond with their corpse. Because they didn’t want to be seen, they approached from the woods and not the lit-up street. And, being professionals, they left no clues, not on the plastic tarp or the adhesive tape. Almost, that is – we did find a single hair on the inside of the plastic tarp, a beard hair about two centimeters long. Since X does not have a beard, this presumably is the only thing pointing to the perpetrator, and as soon as

we extract the DNA we'll run it against the databases. Long story short, I'm persuaded the killing was done by someone who is good at it, ergo, a pro."

"And it looks like the crime could have been committed anywhere." Pino leaned back. "We need to find out why Mr. X wound up in that particular pond. Either there is some link to the Bossard family, or the perps took care to scout the neighborhood. It could be, for example, that Mr. X lived nearby."

"But then we'd have a missing persons report," Angela replied. "Unless the family had a part in it. But someone sometime or other has to miss him; for instance, his employer; if he did indeed work outdoors, it could be a construction outfit or something along those lines."

Nick stood up. "Right. As long as we don't know who we have here, we'll have no choice but to go with our hunches. There is at least some chance that X comes from the vicinity of Aarau, so let's have a look at the map, Angela. Here is where he was found on Landhausweg. The woods by the Distelberg are crisscrossed by forest roads, this here being the closest one. It runs between Unterentfelden and Roggenhausen. There is a cabin set back from the road and we definitely need to inquire if it was rented on the weekend and if so to whom. Someone might have noticed something."

Angela walked up to the wall board. She talked as she wrote on it. "So, we'll ask the Bossards and their neighbors if they noticed anything, and then the forestry people about the forest cabin. We will look for clues to a car that drove illegally on the forest road, or to persons unknown that might have been seen, or to unusual noises during the night. Anything that someone might have noticed." She looked over to Nick. "Just

the three of us won't get it done within a reasonable time frame. Should we draft Kevin Pedroni again?"

"Sure, why not, if his boss can spare him." Pedroni, a young cop with the Canton Police North precinct, had enthusiastically given them a hand on the case of the dead professor in Brugg. "But I'll also ask the Aarau Municipal Police if they could let us have one or two live bodies."

Pino shook his head dubiously. "It's a long shot; tomorrow FC Aarau plays FC St. Gallen and our esteemed colleagues in uniform will have their hands full with soccer hooligans. We'll take Pedroni along, but the more people we involve in the canvassing, the sooner we'll read about it in the paper." Impatient now, he said: "Let's just get going instead of talking" and got up.

"I'm not quite done," said Urs Meierhans. "There is a possibility that the murder weapon is on the bottom of that pond. It's true that a professional could have ditched the knife or saber far away or cleaned the weapon thoroughly in order to keep it. Still, if we're going to proceed systematically and in organized fashion, we have to start by looking for it there."

"But only with the district attorney's blessing," said Nick, "Frau Bossard's water lilies we will not touch without orders from the very top."

"My point exactly. Can you see to getting us clearance to proceed?" Urs could not stifle a grin. "You can leave the digging in the mud to us. Ciao!"

\* \* \*

"Eggimann?" Lotti Eggiman did not recognize the cell number flashing on her display.

"Hello, Frau Eggimann. Please, I wish to talk to Jack."

She did not recognize the woman's voice. "He's not here. Can I help you?"

"But where he is? I must talk to him. Is urgent."

"He's away on vacation. Is it about business? Who are you?"

"Yes, business. When he comes back?"

It was German, but the grammar was wrong, and the pronunciation was off, too. Lotti knew little about foreign accents, but she was sure the caller had one.

"This weekend. Do you have his cell phone number?"

"I called, gives no answer."

"He doesn't answer calls when he's on vacation; he likes to be left in peace. Give me your name and number, I will have him call you as soon as he returns." But already the line had gone dead.

Strange, thought Lotti, she thought she knew all the people in the plumbing company where her husband worked, and the only woman there was the owner's wife. Frau Fischer was native-born Swiss, and she would know that Jack was on vacation and for how long.

Well, he would be back soon enough. And, because Lotti Eggimann had learned on her own person in the course of her almost forty years of marriage that it paid not to involve yourself in your husband's business, she decided to ignore the call. She took a bowl out of the kitchen cupboard, slipped into her garden shoes and went outside to the long row of raspberry bushes behind the house. When their daughter Janis was still a child, the Eggimanns had planted potatoes, onions, carrots, pumpkins and lettuce, but at some point Jack had decided they didn't need to raise their own vegetables and, at any event as he put it, a lawn with a place to sit and a grill was much more civilized.

So this is why Lotti was now left only with the raspberries by the fence which she proceeded to pick with deft fingers. They shone red and ripe from between the leaves and tasted wonderful, especially when you ate them hand to mouth without putting them in the bowl. Embarrassed, she looked around: no telling what the neighbor women would think if they saw her. But there was no one. With renewed enjoyment, she popped the sun-warmed berries into her mouth and was already looking forward to her favorite TV show, 'Hotel of Dreams'.

\* \* \*

Nick opened their fridge and pondered what he could throw together for dinner. As if on command, Felix, their black and white cat, shot into the kitchen from the terrace and with a loud "meow" rubbed against his legs.

"Yes, I know, you always come first," said Nick. He shredded a chunk of chicken breast into bite sized pieces, added a few of drops of lukewarm water and served the animal his bowl in the corner. Felix purred pleausurably between bites.

"He can hear the sound of the refrigerator door from a kilometer away," laughed Marina and put her arms around her husband, "and you've turned into a loving cat daddy. What's on the people menu?" It wasn't that Marina did not know how to cook, but working at the stove relaxed Nick and let him get creative. His long stint of bachelorhood also paid off in that he never left the kitchen in a mess, and so Marina most of the time let him spoil her.

"I think I'm in the mood for something simple and old-fashioned. Eggs gratin with ham, some fried

potatoes on the side, just like we used to fix at home when I was a kid. And with it we can drink the pinot grigio, *d'accord?*"

Nick poured the wine and started to manhandle knives and pots. The large live-in kitchen in his house on Fröhlichstrasse was the center of their life together: here was where the two of them spent their evenings, looked back on their day, entertained guests – and occasionally also quarreled.

"Give you a hand?" asked Marina, "peel the potatoes, for instance?"

"Not necessary, thanks, just get comfortable and tell me about your day. As for me, nothing important happened; we still haven't identified our dead man from the pond and we are busy chasing our tails. It's boring and very frustrating."

"I, on the other hand, had an interesting call today. Remember the Zurich Comedy Club, that English-language amateur theater group that I used to belong to? The director of the November production wants me to do make-up for the actors. Ten performances, that would be two weeks in November, and before that I would have to work the important rehearsals. Sounds good, don't you agree?"

"You could have fun with that, especially since you know the people. What are they putting on? Unlikely as it is that I would know it." He slid the gratin into the oven and started browning the potatoes in hot oil.

"Shakespeare's comedy 'Much Ado about Nothing' a perennial favorite of theater group repertoires. It's about two sets of lovers at a ducal court that wind up with each other only after lots of intrigues and tribulations."

"Just like in real life," Nick laughed as he covered the skillet. "It also took us a while, and it was not

without its trials." He looked at the clock and sat down next to her. "Dinner will be served in twenty minutes." He was thinking of all the months he had spent alone while Marina tried to get her head straight about her future. On an island in the Caribbean, with another man, no less. Today he was sure of her, but back then...

Marina put her arms around his neck. "While we're on the subject, have you heard anything from Cécile or Andrew? Her last email was almost a month ago, and I'm starting to wonder what is going on in California."

Nick shook his head. "All I know is that we sure could use Cécile here; the fellow substituting for her is a pigheaded careerist who treats us with high disdain."

"That would be Spitz, right? If it makes you feel better, unless someone can help his career, he looks down on everybody. Cosmeticians, for example. So, don't take it personally; that's just how he is."

"Well, yes, you're right, but he does actively put obstacles in our way, and I worry that we're in for a dust-up with him. Anyway, enough of that; let's eat, and a second glass of wine at this point certainly won't hurt."

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Janis Eggimann, sales rep for the *BeauSkin* cosmetics brand, and her husband Helmut Vontobel, insurance agent, champagne glasses in hand, were getting a Cook's tour by Vontobel's boss of his new villa: three floors, total living area of at least three hundred square meters, four bathrooms and an open kitchen which a starred chef would gladly have called his own. They ended up on the huge terrace with its pool lit up by colored lights and a three-car garage below it. Exotic woods dominated the furnishings – "from Madagascar,

but of course from a certified sustainable plantation” – the furniture all must have been designer pieces, and their tourguide pointed out with relish that the home theater speakers were hidden behind the plaster. What impressed Janis most were the chutes in bedrooms and bathrooms for dropping dirty laundry directly into the laundry room; she had never seen anything like it. The entire set-up was a bit overblown to her way of thinking, but then everybody got to spend their money as they pleased, and there was no arguing about taste. She didn’t mind the obvious pride of ownership their host and his family were reveling in, but her husband Helmut grew ever quieter as they went along, and his eyes took on a peculiar look. Already at the start of the delectable evening meal – they had been served a marvelously tender beef filet, naturally simmered with vegetables and little potatoes in the ultramodern steamer – Helmut had practically emptied a whole bottle of Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande himself and had loudly started telling smutty stories from the world of insurance. Both Janis and his boss knew Helmut’s penchant for drink, especially when it was free; their hostess, on the other hand, was embarrassed and let the kitchen fan run on its loudest high setting. Janis left the table to help her prepare cheese and dessert while taking the opportunity to fill her in on the latest thing in cosmetics. When the grappa and whisky bottles appeared on the table, Helmut did not have to be asked twice to sample both fire waters. It was well past midnight when Janis finally managed to maneuver her husband into their car; she warmly thanked their hosts and made excuses for Helmut who sprawled passed out in the backseat.

Chauffeur-ing her by now loudly snoring husband homeward, she asked herself once again why she was

still putting up with this. Helmut had changed; he was not just ambitious now but obsessed about making money, and lots of it. This evening she had seen the naked greed in his eyes: he wanted this house, this home theater, this life style for himself, no matter what. It made her ask herself once again if they still shared the same goals and, more to the point, if she was going to acquiesce in having her life yoked to such ends. Not likely, she said out loud, with a glance at the rearview mirror.