

Ursula Reist

# **Death Takes the Tax Man**

Nick Baumgarten's Second 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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# Monday

The scream shrilled through the concrete desert of the parking garage beneath the Telli shopping center early Monday morning just as detective Peter Pfister was on his way to police headquarters. Jolted out of his daydream of imminent retirement to Las Rosas, he parked the car in the nearest space, quickly got out and looked around. Nothing – while in the car, he'd been unable to fix the direction where the scream had come from. At that moment, she – it had to be a woman – screamed again, and Pfister felt in his gut the sheer terror that spoke from the keening “Help.” She had to be somewhere off to his left, but that way was a dead end, just the room where the employees stored their bicycles.

“I’m on my way, where are you”? Pfister shouted, only to hear his echo bounce back from all directions.

“By the elevator,” the voice came again, this time from his right, but now he knew that it might not be the true direction. No one was by the shopping center elevator, so he ran across the lane to the high-rise elevator bank but could not open its door from outside. The entry is on the second level down shot through his mind, and he ran down the stairs. The woman was sitting collapsed against the wall, all color drained from her face and her eyes wide with fright. When Pfister saw the deluge of blood that she had launched at herself and into the parking garage with a routine turn of her elevator key he understood why she had screamed like that.

“What the hell is going on here, at seven in the morning?” Heavy steps pounded down the stairs, but then the large, sturdy man in blue overalls who

appeared stopped in his tracks and turned pale. "Oh, God. Wait, I'll lock the elevator and call the police."

"Present and accounted for," said Pfister and held up his ID. At times like this, only routine practiced over years would do. He alerted his counterparts at CSI and requested they bring along someone from the intervention team to look after the woman who had made the gruesome find. "It's a headshot, you know how messy that tends to be," he said quietly into his cell phone, "he still has the gun in his hand. And kindly get moving, because in half an hour all the employees will start trundling in, and then the serious work grinds to a halt. And is the chief in already? All right, then I'll call him. Thanks, bye." Probably enjoying himself with his girlfriend, Pfister thought, time we called him back to reality. He punched in Nick Baumgarten's cell phone number.

"Hello?" answered a woman's voice, still heavy with sleep, giving Peter Pfister a little jolt of almost malicious pleasure.

"Good morning, Frau Manz. Pfister here. Sorry to be calling so early, but we have an emergency."

"Nick is in the shower, he'll call back in two minutes. Good bye, Herr Pfister."

"So, and now as for you," said Pfister, clearing his throat. "You're the super, I suppose. Name and address?" The veteran detective pulled out his notebook and, with an audible sigh, started in on the detail work that every death called for: Take down personal information, ask standard questions, and write down exactly what he got to hear. Down deep, he liked doing this best, but at the same time he didn't like it at all when people defined him by it. "Do you know the dead man?"

"I sure do. He's Gion Matossi, some kind of big

wheel in the Department of Finance, on the tax side, I think. Frau Wirz over there can tell you more, she works in administration." He shook his head. "Sure looks like suicide, doesn't it? No wonder, what with all the stress we're under in government, especially when it comes to money."

"Suicide or not, that's still our job to decide," Pfister replied brusquely. "What you should do right now is make sure that no one comes through this door. Tell people to use the main entrance on the ground floor above, and if someone has any questions tell them there's been an accident. We'll look after everything else."

"Yes, sir, an accident," the super barked, snapped a salute and was gone. Impudent bastard, thought Pfister, that s.o.b. was making fun of me. Before he could get really upset, his phone rang and he saw his chief's number on the display.

"Good morning, Chief, up already? We found a senior civil servant dead in the elevator of the Telli high-rise, gun in hand. Could be suicide, but government people really don't have worries severe enough to kill themselves over, hihi. Right now I'm questioning the people who found him, and I would be glad if you could get here and size things up as soon as possible. Second level down in the parking garage, thanks, bye."

His chief ought to have a look at things, but, above all, do what he got paid for: Make decisions, push the investigation along, give direction. Pfister guessed that it would not be easy to get at relevant information in the discreet Department of Finance; he would be very happy to let Nick Baumgarten, deputy chief of the Criminal Investigation Division, navigate that minefield.

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Pfister's call had dispelled the peaceful morning mood reigning in the apartment of Marina Manz and left a professional matter-of-factness in its wake. While Nick Baumgarten, not as slim in his mid-fifties as twenty years ago, gathered up his things, his girlfriend Marina made him a strong espresso.

"You'll skip breakfast, I suppose?" She smiled at him from a sleepy face. On Monday mornings, her cosmetics studio was closed, and she had time to spare.

Nick sat down beside her at the kitchen table and drank his espresso. "Yes, sorry to say, sweetie. I can't just leave Peter Pfister alone with a corpse on his hands. You know that he doesn't make friends among the living, the way he carries on." He stood up, cupped her face in his hands, bent down and planted a gentle kiss on the tip of her nose. "I'll check in when I know my schedule. Ciao!" The door fell into the lock behind him, and she could hear him hurry down the stairs.

Already on the far side of fifty and still so much energy, thought Marina, and he burns it up in his job more than anything else. As she had discovered in recent years, not much of this energy was left over for taking in a movie or a play; by now, this no longer bothered her, and she visited such venues on her own or in the company of friends. Nick preferred to stay home in the evenings to cook for them both or listen to music to eventually nod off by. His job claimed him to a high degree, and basically it was the same for her: Her small, successful business came first, something she was committed to with body and soul. In that sense they were an ideal couple, as they kept telling each other. However, sometimes, as on this morning, she felt abandoned.

She shifted her gaze out the window, where the leafy trees only let you catch glimpses of the Aare

River. Get in a boat, let yourself drift wherever the water might carry you, bask in freedom for an entire summer – she shook her head and drank the last of her coffee. These escapist thoughts were familiar to her, they surfaced when responsibilities threatened to overwhelm her, when routine obtruded, when relationships were strained. Action was the antidote, and so she sat down at her desk and booted up her laptop. She had orders to place, accounts to catch up on, and applications from potential interns to review – these were the things that kept Marina Manz, forty nine years old, long time divorcee, successful business woman, in a relationship with the deputy chief of the Aargau CID, grounded in reality.

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The reality of a death had lost much of its immediacy when Nick Baumgarten arrived on the scene. Three colleagues from Forensics, the photographer, the coroner and Peter Pfister crowded about the elevator, trying to do their work as best as possible without stepping on one another's toes.

"It does look like suicide, Chief, even if you can never be sure," said Pfister, as Nick stepped in among them. "You can picture it yourself. There is the gun in his left hand and I found out that he was left handed." Proud of himself, he waited for his superior's reaction.

"Good work, Peter," Nick said absently and took a step back to get a good look at the scene. The dead man sat or rather lay half propped up against the elevator's back wall in a large puddle of blood. The smell of it hit Nick like a fist to the stomach, and he turned away for a moment.

"He's been dead at least 24 hours, probably longer,"

said the doctor, kneeling next to the corpse, “and he no longer smells like a daisy because the air inside the elevator is so warm.” With a crooked smile, he handed Nick a face mask. “You never get used to it, do you? He died during the night from Saturday to Sunday, and the cause of death was the headshot most likely. It does look like suicide, there are traces on his left hand, but we won’t know for sure until after the autopsy.” He straightened up and pulled off the gloves. “I suppose you’ll want to look a bit longer at everything. Call me when you’re done, and I’ll have him taken to the Forensic Medicine in Berne. Have a good day.”

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“Please do have a seat, Herr Baumgarten.” Finance Department Chief Administrative Officer and Chief of Staff König gestured toward a comfortable looking black-upholstered seating group and sat down. “What a horrible Monday morning for all of us.” She was pale but her voice clear; he could sense her professionalism in the face of an extraordinary situation.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

Nick Baumgarten shook his head. “We only know that he died from Saturday going on Sunday, but everything else we still need to find out. What can you tell me about the deceased?”

“Gion Matossi was head of the Corporate Entities Section, that is, he managed those employees who deal with taxes on businesses and other organizations. He had worked for at least twenty years in the Finance Department; the Human Resources Department will have all the details. I will see to it that they open his file for you. So far as I know, he was divorced and lived alone; in any case, he never brought a partner to

parties or events. Councillor Vögtli can tell you more about that, but I have not reached him yet, as he is traveling in Baden-Württemberg today for consultations.”

“Was he a good manager and professional? What was his relationship with the head of the Finance Department, the other section chiefs and with the employees?” Nick watched her reactions closely, but here he was up against a skilled communicator who had already recovered from the initial shock. She smoothed the tight skirt of her dark blue business suit and crossed her legs.

“I think you will have to speak with Councillor Vögtli about that, I’m not authorized to share that type of information. I only know that conversations about an early retirement have taken place, but that probably had more to do with Matossi’s age than his performance.”

She’s lying, Nick thought, deftly stonewalling but still lying. A CAO knows very well what is going on in her own department and would certainly take part in decisions regarding departures of managerial employees. But she was not prepared to tell him any more about it without her boss, and he didn’t want to waste time.

“Then I thank you for now, Frau König. Please let me know as soon as Councillor Vögtli can make time for me; we’re close by.” He looked out the window of the spacious 19th floor corner office down to the Police Headquarters building – small in comparison with the skyscraper, standing in the shadow of the Finance Department, as it were. “Just one more thing, Frau König: Keep the Tax Authority employees away from the press. Only the police will release particulars, and we will coordinate public relations with you.”

She stood up and escorted him to the door. “Good

bye, Herr Baumgarten. Can you find your way to the elevator?" And with that she was gone.

In the elevator going down, Nick studied her business card: LLM, LSE after her name, which told him nothing. His young staffer, Angela Kaufmann, would be able to enlighten him. Chief of Staff König, beautiful, blond and intelligent at all events was not a person to underestimate. Her top priority would be to protect her organization and only reveal what she wanted to and no more. In that light, she was just as professional as he was, and he vaguely looked forward to the inevitable conflicts with her.

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"It's a powder keg, Nick, and we have to watch like hell that we don't strike any sparks," Gody Kyburz, chief of the Aargau CID, cautioned his deputy. "Investigations that touch the government and the administration have to be handled diplomatically and with great sensitivity or we'll be in hot water, as you know." He grimaced and shook his head. "It was touchy enough when the lady doctor in Königsfelden was under suspicion, but this...anyway, I'll talk with the Commandant, let him work out the procedure with the politicians. What matters most is that we get to do our work in the Finance Department without interference, and that's what he needs to make clear to Director of Finance Vögtli. Better leave press contacts to me and keep me in the loop on everything that's happening." He took a last gulp of coffee, crumpled the cup and arched it into the wastebasket a full three meters across the room. "Don't forget, I'm available to you anytime if you need me."

"Thanks, Gody, I'll keep that in mind," said Nick.

"For now, the team's going to put together all the information we have so far and then plan next steps. Do you want to be included, or do you want me to brief you afterwards?"

Kyburz waved off; he would concentrate next on the politics and then probably touch base with the team. "You'll see, Nick, I'll have my hands full just keeping the journalists and politicians off your back."

In the open office area occupied by Nick Baumgarten's team stood two large wall boards where Detective Corporal Angela Kaufmann from time to time exercised her drawing skills. She knew how to visualize processes and during the past two years on the team had convinced her superiors that it was a useful tool. In general, she was a well-qualified and pleasant co-worker: Possessed of a sharp mind, she knew her way around electronic media and displayed a positive attitude to her work, something that no one could say about her colleague Peter Pfister even with the best will in the world.

He was sitting behind his desk in the corner and was on the phone, apparently with a colleague at the crime scene. "Come on, you ought to be able at least to tell if he himself took the shot or not! Why else are you so highly trained and highly paid? I mean, really, try not to look too stupid. You could...." Pfister turned in his chair, holding the phone away from him. "The wise guy just hung up on me." He grimaced and put the receiver down. "Well, so we'll let the gentlemen keep investigating. They'll call in if they discover something new."

"No, they won't, not the way you push them around." It always upset Angela to hear the tone Peter struck with his colleagues. "Getting any bit of information out of them now will be like pulling teeth. Why

can't you just talk normally with people?" She rolled her eyes and turned to the wall board that already had a picture of the crime scene on it and a photo of Gion Matossi from when he was still among the living. "Ok, let's summarize."

Nick refrained from commenting on Peter Pfister's communications skills, but he made a mental note to bring up the subject soon. Pfister actually was to have taken early retirement last June, but got cold feet because his house in Las Rosas had lost half its value in the Spanish real estate collapse, and he realized how much Swiss tax he would have to pay on his lump sum payout. He decided to work another year so he could draw his full pension. Working just for the money and not enjoying his job any longer was reason enough for his permanent bad mood, but deep down he was really a peevish human being. Nick Baumgarten and Angela Kaufmann had no choice but to continue working with Peter and use what he brought to the job: A dense network of connections throughout Canton Aargau and an obsessive attention to detail.

And, true to form, he started right in with details on the victim: "Gion Matossi, born 1948, Swiss citizen, but probably an immigrant judging by the name, lived here in the Telli. Employed in the Finance Department since 1990, before that, he worked in various communal tax offices and a private consulting firm. No prior convictions, no misdemeanors; there's nothing in the public record but a newspaper announcement of his promotion to Corporate Entities section chief. I don't yet know if he worked on certain, sensitive cases, but I can say one thing for sure: a tax inspector will make enemies just on principle. When you consider what these vultures extract from us ordinary citizens, to be honest, I have no problem understanding why somebody

would want to knock this tax collector off.” His face turned red, and he would have escalated his incendiary rhetoric had Nick not interrupted him.

“Enough, Peter, we know how you feel about taxes. Let’s stick with the facts of this death.”

Angela now took over. She listed the facts on the board and while she talked she created a colorful mind map. “Peter, for your information: Matossi is an old Graubünden family, there’s no trace of any immigration. He died in the night from Saturday to Sunday of a gunshot wound to the head, and the place where he was discovered also seems to be where it happened. The gun found in his left hand was a SIG Parabellum: as soon as we find the bullet, we will know if it was the weapon used. Every Swiss Army officer keeps this weapon at home, even after completing compulsory military service. My guess is that the tests will show it to be Matossi’s own weapon. If it was Matossi himself who fired, we will only know once the forensic examination is done. It won’t be available before late tomorrow morning.” She drew a large question mark next to the circle labeled ‘Perpetrator’. Do you believe it’s suicide, Chief?”

Nick shook his head. “No idea. Still, an elevator is an odd place to do yourself in, isn’t it?”

“Well, for me the case is clear-cut,” sounded Peter’s voice from his corner. “Definitely suicide, and that’s because a murderer who wants to fool us into thinking it’s suicide would never have hit on the idea of the left hand.”

“Unless the killer knew his victim and knew he was left-handed,” Angela pointed out. “Anyone who worked with Matossi must have noticed that he signed documents with his left hand, just like Barack Obama. This fact by itself gets us nowhere.”

"I agree," said Nick, "and that's why we will continue to treat the whole thing as a suspicious death. But I don't want to wait for the evidence collection and forensic reports; instead, Angela and I will go back to the Tax Authority office. Peter, you will stay here and be so good as to find out everything you can about Matossi's private life: Family, kids, friends, memberships, military, the whole nine yards. I don't want anyone to get suspicious, so keep it low key and don't tell anyone why you're showing an interest."

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"Can I ask you something, Frau Manz?" Verena Füglistaller didn't wait for an answer and kept right on talking, as Marina started cleansing her customer's face. "About your migraines. Have you tried homeopathy? Listen, I know a terrific doctor near us in Fricktal; though he's not taking new patients, if I ask him, we could probably work something out. He cured my sister almost completely of her rheumatic pain, and everyone knows how alternative medicine is especially good for headaches. Do you want me to have a word with him?" No, it screamed in Marina's head, no, you know-it-all, do you think I'm an idiot? Don't you think I've tried everything, from acupuncture to biofeedback, even craniosacral therapy, with detours to lavender oil, chocolate avoidance and Bach flowers? Why do people always meddle?

"That's very kind of you, Frau Füglistaller. I'm currently undergoing treatment by a neurologist and don't want to interrupt this therapy for something else." Keep it friendly, thought Marina, she means well.

"It's entirely up to you, Frau Manz. I just wanted

to do something for you, and the treatments to date obviously haven't helped, otherwise you wouldn't keep changing appointments on me all the time." She pinched her lips, sulking, but Marina knew her customer well enough to know that she just couldn't let it drop. She'd bring a magazine article about migraine to the next session, or a flyer for the latest, guaranteed effective therapy based on shark cartilage – the almost septuagenarian Frau Füglistaller was herself robust and healthy, but she enjoyed nothing better than to concern herself with the infirmities of others.

"This is going to be hot, Frau Füglistaller." Marina deposited a moist towel on her customer's face that left only the nostrils showing. "I'm going to soften up your skin a little, so that the facial penetrates better later on." And so that you'll keep quiet at least for a moment, she thought, and so I don't have to continually fend off new advice. With practiced movements, she opened a vial and let the contents drip into a small bowl. She removed the hot cloth and spread the serum over the woman's cheeks, forehead, chin, and nose, then worked the active anti-wrinkle liquid into the skin with tapping motions to let it do its work. She mixed a mask – "Watch out, Frau Füglistaller, this is going to be cold" – and brushed it onto her face, neck and décolleté. "Twenty minutes, and your skin will be like new. Enjoy your nap!" Marina stood up to take the utensils she had just used into the kitchen; moments later, she heard snoring from the booth. What on earth is the matter with me, Marina asked herself. I'm usually much more tolerant, let my customers talk, don't get upset.

"So, mine's asleep, yours too?" Diana, who had recently passed her apprenticeship final exam with flying colors, came into the kitchen and poured herself

a Coke. "Honestly, if she doesn't stop smoking, her pores will just keep getting bigger, no matter what I do." "Shh, not so loud, Diana," said Marina, the anger rising in her voice. "How many times have I told you that they can hear us in the booths?"

"All right, boss, I'll whisper from now on." Diana gave her a quizzical look. "Why so upset? You seem pretty stressed out and abrasive lately."

"Oh, I am, am I? Then I guess I have no choice but to keep quiet and let you do the talking." Marina drank her water and banged the empty glass into the sink.

"Don't get so uptight right away, boss. We all have our bad days; although in your case it seems more like a bad month. Can I do anything to help?"

Marina managed to smile at her employee. "Thanks, Diana, I'm fine and I suggest that you get back to your customer. I'll do the same."

"Ok, if you'd rather not..." murmured Diana, paused to cast a probing look into the mirror and then swept out of the kitchen. She knew it was not headaches that plagued Marina, she knew her too well for that. No, it was more likely stresses in a relationship or some other crisis that was eating her, and she never verbalized these private matters. Diana and her co-worker Nicole certainly knew that Nick Baumgarten, the deputy CID chief, had been Marina's boyfriend for a couple of years, but the employees never found out any details, even though they were curious and would have relished knowing more; for example, if the two planned to move in together or even to marry. Marina systematically blocked questions about her private life with the reminder that they were a work group, not a family. They also could get nothing out of the charming inspector, on the rare occasions that he showed up in the studio on Rathausgasse. Diana sighed, closed

the curtain and busied herself with her customer. The young woman was pretty sure that whatever was bothering Marina Manz was bound to come out.

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“Andrew, what a surprise!” Nick Baumgarten and Angela Kaufmann were heading into the Telli district when the phone sounded. He did not recognize the number on the display of his cell phone. “Where in the big wide world are you keeping yourself?”

“Actually, I’m here in Küttigen, at Maggie’s and Selma’s, and wanted to see if we could get together over a whiskey this evening, just us guys. Or are you on a case?”

“I am, but I can always make time to lift a glass with you. When and where?” They agreed to meet at nine o’clock at the ‘Einstein,’ whereupon Nick shoved the phone back into this coat pocket with a flourish.

Angela gave him a sidelong look and said: “If that was the Andrew who I think it was, then I’m really jealous, Chief.”

Nick gave a laugh and confirmed that he had been speaking with Andrew Ehrlicher, the good looking, elegant, charming and extremely well off Swiss-American whom they had gotten to know during the Truninger murder. He had probably been the murder victim’s only friend, and, using his connections, had prevailed on the Spanish Policia Nacional in Teneriffa to put the killer behind bars. The deportation proceedings, however, had ground to a halt, and it would be a while before the case came to trial in Switzerland. Meanwhile, Andrew and Nick had become good friends, although they saw each other infrequently.

“I’d like nothing better than to take you along this

evening, but Andrew explicitly said a whiskey just among men. Should I say hello to him for you?" Nick blinked in amusement at Angela, and she smiled back.

"Yes, please do, but there's no hidden agenda. He is in a different league, and I'm kind of young for him."

"Or he is too old for you?" asked Nick with a chuckle. He knew that, sooner or later, the thirty-year old Angela wanted to have children, but likely not with a nearly sixty-year old man.

"Yes, and besides, I don't think he's my type. He's always on the road, you know, and that type doesn't like to be tied down anywhere. But I do go for his cowboy boots."

Nick once more had to marvel at how good his colleague's intuition was where people were concerned. She grasped the essential character traits rapidly and was seldom mistaken; instead of a good policewoman, she would also have made a good human resources manager.

"Good. Now, let's get back to our case. We need to speak with all of the dead man's coworkers, and I'm especially interested in what he was working on. Peter isn't entirely off base when he says that you make enemies in this position, and it could be that Matossi stepped on someone's toes too hard."

"Granted," Angela demurred, "but don't forget that he was responsible for corporate entities and that means companies, foundations, organizations. Even though he would have had run-ins with chief financial officers and company lawyers, do emotions rise high enough in this environment to end in murder? Unless, that is, he caught wind of some dirty business and threatened to go public with his knowledge; if so, blackmail could be part of the equation. Everything is possible, and we don't even know yet if he took his own life."

“That is exactly why we must vacuum up all information. Let’s interview the staff members, it may yield something tangible. The chief of staff by now no doubt has put muzzles on these people, but that won’t keep us from asking the key questions.”

The elevator door opened and there stood the splendid Frau König already to greet the investigators. She had prepared two adjoining meeting rooms for the interviews and handed them a list of employees who she thought might help the police along.

“I suggest that you start with the people who worked most closely with Herr Matossi. Their names are marked with highlighter and you can see from the org chart how they related to him. My secretary will bring them in to you. Also important is this empty box here on the chart,” she said, “perhaps you are aware that the highest-level managerial position at the Tax Authority is vacant at present and will remain so for two months. Herr Matossi reported directly to the head of the Finance Department for the duration.”

“Thank you very much, Frau König,” said Angela, “has Councillor Vögtli been informed yet?”

“I reached him fifteen minutes ago,” the chief of staff answered, addressing her response to Nick, however, and not Angela. She apparently made it a point only to speak with superiors, not inferiors. “His commitments in Germany unfortunately prevent him from returning earlier than late tonight. He will be able to talk with you tomorrow morning.” She nodded curtly and turned toward the door. “Coffee, tea, and water will be here shortly.”

When she had closed the door behind her, Angela looked at her chief with raised eyebrows. “Does it strike you as normal,” she asked, “that an executive in this kind of case doesn’t drop everything to return to his office?”

Nick shrugged. "Politicians are subject to all sorts of pressures, and if German General Steinbrück threatens Switzerland with sending in the cavalry, then they're obligated to ensure a better frame of mind at the Canton and Federal level."

"But members of the Executive Council are first and foremost department heads," insisted Angela, "and the way I see it, a department head should drop everything if one of his closest colleagues loses his life under unexplained circumstances. I just don't understand that." Her father was an Executive Council member, too, who led the Department of Health and Social Affairs, and she simply could not imagine him acting this way. She had to admit, of course, that the Finance Department, more accurately the Department of Finance and Resources, was knitted on a different pattern, that the goals of the two organizations were completely different, and hence also the people who worked there. Well, she would find that out soon enough.

"All right," she said, "so let's get started. I would prefer for us to jointly interview each person, but in the interest of efficiency we should divide them up. Who do you want to call in first?"

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Despite the news blackout, non-disclosure agreements and muzzles, the news of Matossi's death spread like wildfire through the Cantonal government, and it was within hours that Aarau journalists, Members of Parliament and the general public knew that a gruesome death had occurred in the Telli high-rise.

Adrian Toggenburger, businessman and Member of Parliament, whose motto 'Tax evasion is a human

right' everyone had gotten to hear a thousand times, could not contain his glee. Shortly before noon he called in the finance director of his metal construction company, told him what he knew, namely that someone had whacked Gion Matossi or he had blown his brains out, and then he proffered his employee a glass of Tegerfeld Chardonnay. "That takes the worst of the pressure off for now, Beat. Cheers!"

On the one hand, Beat Müller privately felt it was irreverent to toast a murder victim or a suicide, but, on the other, he understood Toggenburger's delight at having bought some time.

"The authorities are so inefficient that it will be months before taxman Vögtli hires a replacement for Matossi. And then it will be years before said replacement will venture to scrutinize the firm of a Member of Parliament again – by that time, we'll be in the clear."

"Don't you think," Müller asked carefully, "that Matossi might have mentioned the file to someone?"

"Hell, no; he was so intent on nailing me in a big way that he is sure to have kept it a secret! And if he put anything in writing, he presumably encrypted it, or maybe the documentation actually disappeared, just like that." A wicked little smile played around the corners of his mouth as he said it. "Beat Müller, we've gotten out from under once again, and kudos to your creative bookkeeping. Cheers!"

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Steff Schwager, reporter on the local politics beat for the Aargauer Zeitung, heard about it from two suits standing in line ahead of him at Starbucks, speculating if the Telli murder was politically motivated. Electrified, he punched Nick Baumgarten's number

into his smartphone and left a message. While still waiting for his triple espresso macchiato, he called the editorial desk and asked them to hold plenty of space for him on next day's front page for the hottest story of the year. Whistling cheerfully, he stepped out in direction Bahnhofstrasse, walking with a vigor quite unlike his usual gait typical of a considerably overweight person. Finally, something was afoot again, even if he was not sure exactly what – his reporter's heart beat faster, he was looking forward to a good day's work.

And he knew someone else who would be ecstatic: Monika Brugger, the newly elected member of the Executive Council and head of the Education, Culture and Sports Department, who had been under constant fire by the media since her election. And leading the critiquing horde of newspaper, radio and TV journalists was none other than Steff Schwager, who was not at all happy about the defeat of Brugger's charismatic predecessor. With sharpened pen he went after the new Education chief's weaknesses, meticulously and successfully digging for a series of mistakes, even if lately the trend was down. Monika Brugger would notice to her relief that for once she was not on his radar.

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Chief of Staff König took the elevator down to the lobby, and walked behind the Telli shopping center to have a smoke under the roof. She might be a masterful diplomat when her own effectiveness or that of her department was on the line vis-a-vis the outside; but she was brutally honest with herself. This is why now she reminded herself not only of the difficulties that this death brought her as the administrative manager, but also that it solved a big problem. Matossi may have

been a highly professional, successful tax hound, but he was neither popular with his staff, nor did he have any political sense; when he latched onto something, he would not let go, just like a trained fighting dog. He had said point-blank to her that she wouldn't succeed in sending him out to pasture early, no matter how she tried to outsmart him. Now, like magic, she no longer had this problem; she could concentrate on finding a successor with strong leadership credentials. During the current financial crisis, it would not be difficult to recruit someone for such a secure job. Certainly, the death had to be cleared up, and she had to deal with the resulting anxiety in the department, but this was not the first crisis that Sarah König, PhD, Master of Laws, London School of Economics, had succeeded in managing, and it wouldn't be the last. She lit a second cigarette and took a deep drag. Well, looks like she would have to skip her planned vacation after all.

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After Marina had seen Frau Füglistaller out the door, she read the text message that had arrived while she was with her. 'Honey, I'm meeting with Andrew this evening. Would like to invite him and Maggie T. to dinner, Sat or Sun. Will that work for you? XXX.'

'You bet, looking forward to it,' she texted back and also appended three x's in lieu of kisses. Nick and she had gotten used to staying in touch during the day just via short messages; they had played mailbox phone tag too often. They knew that the timing of an answer would depend on the work situation, but at least this way they were never completely out of touch.

She was looking forward to finally getting to know the handsome Andrew better, and Marina had already

known Maggie Truninger, an elegant, likeable woman, since before Tom Truninger's murder. Nick would come up with an interesting menu, buy the ingredients at the Saturday farmer's market and, of course, do the cooking – he was passionate about standing at the stove where he could give free reign to his great talent. His wine cellar was so versatile that he had the right wine for every dish, be it as accompaniment for Coquilles St. Jacques, Ticino rabbit or Spanish tapas. They would eat dinner at Nick's place: In the duplex on Fröhlichstrasse that he had inherited from his parents and whose ground floor he occupied and where, besides the spacious live-in kitchen and other well-designed rooms, there was, last but by no means least, a room set aside for Marina. She spent a lot of time at Nick's but so far had hesitated to give up her own apartment and move in with him. In spite of all the advantages it offered, she was wary of losing her independence and shied away from the finality of it, from the commitment.

Of course, Nick was aware of these anxieties, and he never pushed her, but Marina knew him well enough to know that he suffered because of her indecisiveness. For him, there was never a question about the stability of their relationship and hence a future together; he knew he had found the desirable woman of his dreams and whom he would not relinquish. To fall asleep together, wake up together, cooking, cleaning up, working in the garden, watching TV – what Nick wanted most of all was a humdrum private life as a counterbalance to his work. And Marina felt comfortable with this man, no question: If she was ever going to live with anyone again, it would be Nick. But to settle down with such finality and so forego all other chances that life possibly still had in store for her? At

barely fifty years old, fixing her in place irrevocably at an age when other women took off in completely new directions? And in Aarau at that?

She looked in the mirror, only to discover the deep vertical fold between her eyebrows, the first and often only warning of an impending migraine. She swallowed one of the expensive Triptan tablets, hoping it would take effect before the storm in her head broke out. To ward off any nausea, she ate a pear and drank a glass of water, and then she was ready for the next customer. She looked in the mirror once more in passing, this time to check her skin and hair: Her brown eyes were still perfectly, if modestly, made up, her make up hid two small blemishes on her even-featured face beautifully, and a few brush strokes restored the luster to her chestnut brown hair. Now get in there and fight.

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“The Parabellum that fired the deadly shot did in fact belong to Matossi, and, besides his own fingerprints, there were two others we could not assign, as they are not in our database.” Angela was paraphrasing the most recent findings from the first interim Technology Forensics report in front of her for the team, with Gody Kyburz present. “The shot was fired at very close range; it may even have been a contact shot. Matossi was standing in the elevator when the shot hit him; we know this because the bullet lodged in the elevator wall at a height of about 1.70 meters. However, we don’t know if the elevator was already at the garage level when the shot fell or if it was on its way there. And something else we regrettably do not yet know, gentlemen,” Angela looking around at all of them, “and that is who fired the shot. To date there is

no conclusive evidence as to whether it was suicide or murder.”

“No fibers, hairs, other DNA traces?” Kyburz asked, sounding slightly unnerved. “The second man, if there was one, must have left something behind, for Chrissake!”

“They’re not finished with the tests yet,” answered Angela, “the elevator is used by dozens of people every day and we picked up numerous traces. We’re concentrating on the deceased’s clothing, but that’s going to take our technicians a few more days. In the end we’re sure to find something, but it takes time.”

“And just what do I tell the journalists in the meantime?” Kyburz feared all press briefings, even if no one had any inkling that this was the case when he stepped before the microphones. Only his coworkers knew that he would look for a thousand excuses to get out of these occasions.

“Let me back you up, Gordy,” Nick volunteered. “We’ll give them more details; for example, that his attaché case, which was intact, had an appointment book in it that we are evaluating, that the remaining files were harmless and that we did not find a cellphone. We can also clarify that this is not a robbery killing, because his wallet had a good amount of cash still in it, and a signet ring with diamond was still on his finger. Our summing up for the press must be that we have a suspicious death, but that as yet we do not know who the shooter was. They’ll have to be satisfied with that – unfortunately. Come on; let’s face the mob, so that Peter and Angela can continue working.” He stood up and together he and Gordy walked into the conference room, where the ladies and gentlemen of the press were already waiting for them with cameras, microphones and laptops poised. Steff Schwager, who had

heard all the details from Nick an hour before and already had his article for the Aargauer Zeitung roughed out in his head, winked at his friend and acted as if he had no idea what was about to go down.