

*Beguiling Mix of Suspense and Technology Trends
#1 in Electric Vehicle Mystery*

**STEPHAN
SCHWARZ**

ELECTRIFIED

Murder or Suicide?
Passion or Eco Crime?

Chief Inspector
Büschelberger
takes the lead in this
highly-charged case.

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About the Author



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Translated by NIALL SELLAR

CAPSCOVIL

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“Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect.”

— Mark Twain (1835-1910) —

Chapter 1

A steady drizzle was beating down through the beam of the headlights as Felix Büschelberger parked his car on the empty road. He sighed. The rain would soak him through again and it wasn't exactly an especially warm evening to start with. Then his gaze fell upon his two companions. They were also staring out into the darkness. Only their faces weren't lined with doubt; they displayed the sort of keen anticipation that is common in all people who truly believe in what they are doing.

Just then the lights on the car behind him went off and two more of his companions emerged. Both were wearing reflective orange jackets and carrying little blue plastic buckets. Felix allowed himself a smile at last: This was no ordinary night – tonight, he didn't have to solve any murders; he was here to cheat death with his four friends. Tonight, on this stretch of road halfway between Langenhain and Eppstein, there would be no crime.

The five of them spread out along the road and began to shine their torches up and down. There was a toad-crossing here. Pitted against their heavily motorized adversaries, the amphibians had little chance of reaching the lakes on the other side, where their mating spots lay. Felix picked up his first toad of the evening, a male that clung immediately to his middle finger. Astonishing how these little creatures reacted to movement of any kind.

They didn't notice when they crawled past a stationary female, but the slightest movement in the grass would send them into a tizzy. He slipped the toad off his finger and placed it in the bucket. Afterwards they would count and catalogue them, before releasing them once more.

Felix picked up another toad, a female this time, piggybacked by two males. She croaked several times in quick succession before being transferred to the bucket. He had often wondered what these animals were trying to tell him. In the glow of his torchlight, he could see it was going to be a good haul and remembered how his group had managed to save over 3,000 toads during the migration period two years ago.

There had even been a little article in the local paper, alongside a photo of everyone who'd helped, taken at some party or another. Naturally, it hadn't taken long for the report to find its way into the police station where Felix worked, earning him the nickname "Chief Inspector Frog." It had been pointless trying to explain to his colleagues that it wasn't frogs they saved, but toads. That would only have added fuel to the fire. A week later, a giant inflatable frog had appeared in his office. It was just sitting there in the corner one morning when he came in to work, and had given everyone a good chuckle.

Felix had left it at that and the frog was still there to this day. His colleagues had never understood why he continued to devote so much of precious free time to these creatures each spring, but the truth was he enjoyed it. It felt right, and all those who helped were idealists. Since his job involved dealing with violent criminals on a daily basis, these people were important for his mental stability.

Petra, for example, who was picking up toads next to him, was a marketing manager for a big Frankfurt company. Once they had bumped into each other at the mall and he had barely recognized her in her Gucci trouser suit, all made up and clad in ridiculously expensive designer shoes. Right now she wasn't wearing any make-up at all, just faded jeans and a baggy jumper under her protective jacket, with both hands deep inside a bucket full of toads. Idealists, people who still believed in something – yes, that was how he'd ended up with this group, and the reason he'd stayed.

The atmosphere was lively, in spite of the weather. As usual, they were competing to see who could find the biggest she-toad with the most males on her back, and, as usual, Petra was sure to win. She seemed to know exactly where to look. The first buckets had already been taken over to the other side, complete with their crawling contents. Things were going well with the second batch too, when suddenly Petra cried: "Four on one, I win!"

Her laughter was still ringing out in the night air as Felix and the others came over to look. A four-leaf clover – their technical term for this arrangement – was rare, and they all wanted to see it for themselves; besides, it came as a welcome little break. They

stood closely together, goofing around and looking at the tangle of toads under the light of Petra's torch. No-one heard the heavy vehicle approaching at high speed from Langenhain.

It wasn't until it was barely seconds away that they eventually took notice of the dark BMW 5 series suddenly careering round the bend, blinding them with its xenon headlights. It veered off the road, heading straight for them. Felix threw himself on Petra and managed to get her to safety. The others also responded just in time. But still the car caught two of their buckets and sent them high into the air, before disappearing seconds later in the direction of Eppstein.

Peace descended once more over the darkened road, and for what seemed like an age, no-one said a word. Then Petra began to groan. Jochen, the group's founder, cursed loudly and unleashed a volley of expletives.

Felix thought only of the smell of Petra's hair as his memory transported him back to an evening two years before. She had made him a pretty clear offer but, as a recent divorcé, he had felt disinclined to accept.

He forced himself to return to the present, and dragged himself up. Then he helped Petra to her feet and asked if anyone had been hurt. All of them responded in the negative, though their oaths and obscenities were testament to the anger they felt.

"Couldn't you have shot at the tires?" asked Eric, the youngest of the group.

"I think you watch too many American action movies," Felix replied. He couldn't help laughing though, as he imagined himself valiantly firing his gun in the wake of the fleeing car. "Besides, it would be illegal. Did anyone manage to get the registration number? I could only read F-MS and even then I'm not so sure."

But no-one had seen anything. One of the buckets lay destroyed about fifty feet away; the second had vanished completely. Unsurprisingly, none of the toads had survived the accident.

The atmosphere was heavy. They collected toads for a further half hour, and then set off back towards Frankfurt. As they went their separate ways, Felix promised to investigate the driver of the BMW the next morning.

Back at home, he took a hot shower. He loved the feeling of warm water running down his body. But the whole time all he could think of was Petra. He could still perceive the scent of her hair, and the memory of lying on top of her made him feel aroused. Sitting down in the living room he poured himself a glass of the red wine he had opened the previous evening. It was dark red and dry with a berry flavor: just the way he liked it.

But where on earth was Django? He looked around. Django was his grey tomcat; adopted a few years back during the Alex M. murder. There had been no next of kin and the animal shelter had wanted to put their latest four-legged acquisition down. Who would want to take home a cat that was missing an ear and that wasn't exactly the cutest in the first place!

The inspector couldn't bear the thought of the tom meeting his maker this way and since then, the two of them had formed a bizarre team. Django seemed to sense when his human cohabitant needed a quiet, sympathetic ear.

In return for this service, all he demanded was to be allowed to come and go at liberty – and that his food bowl be filled on his return. Otherwise, Felix could bring home whomever he pleased. They all met with Django's approval, usually expressed in the latter's total disregard for the visitor in question.

On this particular evening, however, his sixth sense appeared to have deserted him. Felix would have to talk to himself if he wanted someone to listen. Sighing softly, he was just about to pour himself another glass of wine when a stray cat paw scratched against the living room window and demanded entry.

“There you are, my friend. I thought you'd forgotten about me.”

The animal disappeared into the kitchen where his feeding dish awaited. Felix stayed in the living room. There was no point giving him the hurry-up; Django would come when he was good and ready. Indeed, just a little later he hopped onto the living room table and settled down in his favorite corner. His ear was pricked in anticipation and he was looking at Felix as if to say: “Come on, tell me all about it.”

His tail dangled over the edge of the table and moved in time to Felix's account.

"You were nearly orphaned today, though everything worked out OK in the end. The only thing is I can't think of anything but Petra since it happened. And that, I suspect, is a problem." Felix was aware how muddled he sounded. He looked the cat in the eye. "You think I'm babbling, don't you?"

Django blinked and yawned, then had a good stretch.

"OK, understood. I'll call her tomorrow and then we'll see what happens." Felix emptied his glass and released the animal back into the night. Then he turned out the lights.

The inspector entered the office at quarter past eight and greeted his colleagues, who were already in the midst of their early morning tea ritual. Emilio was on spiced black tea at the moment – Syrian style today, with a hint of cinnamon and cardamom; Frauke, like the inspector, had a preference for green tea; and Arno only drank East Frisian tea, which his mother would send him specially from Aurich. Arno didn't even trust the blends in the tea shops here in Frankfurt.

Frauke handed Felix his cup. "I've made sundew tea for us today!"

He smiled at her and couldn't help thinking about the strange reputation enjoyed by his team. He didn't know of any other unit that consisted solely of tea drinkers. Java consumption might have been high elsewhere; here it was practically non-existent.

"Before we discuss our brief for today, I'd like you to check a registration number for me," the inspector turned to Arno. "It's a black or dark blue BMW 5 Series, partial registration F-MS."

"That's odd. We got a call twenty minutes ago about a male corpse that has been found in a vehicle at the east port. A black 530d, registration number F-NS 609. Looks like suicide at first glance. Police and forensics are on-site already; the case will probably be assigned to us."

Felix looked at Frauke, who had surprised him with this information, and felt a tingling sensation. Could it be true? He wasn't even sure he'd made the number plate out properly.

The telephone rang. He answered. “Murder squad, fourth district, Chief Inspector Büschelberger.”

It was the DA, Cando. “Good morning. I hope the tea break’s over because I have work for you. You’ve heard about the dead man at the east port? I want your team to take the case; all other units are conducting on-going investigations. Good luck.” Cando hung up without waiting for a response.

Felix looked at his colleagues. “Frauke was right as usual, we’re on. So, Emilio and I will head out there. Arno, use the registration number to find out what you can about the owner. Check if there’s a license plate with MS while you’re at it. And you, Frauke, you take care of the admin side of things. We’ll meet here when we get back.”

Emilio had the keys in his hands already and was reaching for his jacket; Felix meanwhile drained the contents of his mug, burning his mouth in the process. Still swearing under his breath, he climbed into the black Focus, a Lazio FC sticker adorning its trunk. Though it was against regulations, the inspector tolerated it because Emilio was reliability personified. If need be he would work through the night and on weekends, even though he was the only one who was still married.

This Ford Focus was the second reason the unit was viewed as rather special. The Mayoress of Frankfurt, a Green, had purchased ten electric vehicles of this make and required volunteers to test their suitability for public service functions. Felix was the first and only policeman to have ordered an EV for his unit – but ultimately even Emilio, the Italian car friend, had grown to appreciate the zippy number.

The car hummed softly as they shot out from the courtyard. Emilio always drove as if he was on the racetrack at Monza. During the journey Felix smiled as he recalled the discussions concerning the benefits of an EV. His colleague had harbored reservations about its acceleration performance. After all, the Focus offered five full-sized passenger seats and a high load capacity. Would it be fast enough for them?

It was an argument their test drives had countered with ease. An EV had a better acceleration ratio than many cars with internal

combustion engines. Besides, even Emilio had to admit that high speed car chases occurred only very rarely. In truth, it was the discussion surrounding the car's range which had proved the more problematic.

In rough conditions, such as driving through rush hour on a cold winter's day, the Focus should still be able to do 100 miles fully charged, since the braking force was converted back into energy, recuperating the battery. Emilio had once managed a trip of 110 miles non-stop, but always with a careful eye on the special visuals in the instrument cluster. The telematic system calculated the possible extra range he could go beyond the next charging station, and this was represented as little blue butterflies on the dashboard. Charging the Focus normally took just under four hours if connected to a 240V charging station.

A statistical evaluation of all company and state owned vehicles had revealed that police patrol cars covered an average of 60 miles per day. This meant that it would be risky if they had to go on a longer trip and needed to use every feature the car was offering; both Felix and the Mayoress were well aware of it. With the trial, they hoped to find out how much the use of flashing blue lights and sirens drained the battery and thus affected the vehicle's range.

The Focus was equipped with a telematic system featuring an 8-inch display which together with the instrument cluster made Emilio feel like he was sitting in a sci-fi command center. Its GPS system offered a special feature to calculate the most economical route. And the system could also be remotely controlled to pre-program charging, or to switch on the HVAC prior to setting off. It had become second nature for Emilio to connect the Focus to the charging station as soon as he got back to headquarters.

An added advantage of the EV, the one that had finally convinced the Italian, was its handling. As the batteries were located on the underside of the vehicle, its center of gravity was very low, allowing Emilio to take each bend as though driving a Ferrari. The final point in favor of this zippy electric speedster was the result of the crash test: it had shown the car to be just as safe as comparable vehicles with conventional internal combustion engines. Moreover, the car's power supply was deactivated as soon as the airbag was

released – so there was no chance of passengers or passers-by being electrocuted.

They reached the east port in record time.

“Come by plane, did you?” asked Chief Constable Müller, as they came screeching to a halt in front of him.

Felix liked Müller. Always calm, he had seen it all before and collected a wealth of experience during his thirty years in the force, which he made available to anyone who wished to draw on it.

The inspector gave him a friendly tap on the shoulder. “You’ve seen how Emilio drives; one of these days, we will take off. But he must have made a pact with some saint or another – no accidents yet, despite his kamikaze style. So, what have you got for me?”

Emilio rolled his eyes, growling audibly as he followed the pair to the site where the body had been found. Sometimes the joke just wasn’t funny.

“The corpse is male, thirty-nine years old. He was in the driver’s seat; exhaust fumes entered the cabin through a tube. Thanks to the driver’s license we’ve already managed to make a positive ID: the deceased is a Dr. Uwe Kaptain, registered as living here in Frankfurt at 16 Beethovenstraße. He was discovered at nine minutes past seven this morning by a jogger, who then tried to resuscitate him. However, he very quickly realized it was pointless. Those are the bare facts. But if you ask me, I have a strange feeling about this. I don’t think it was suicide, though I couldn’t tell you exactly why.”

A red and white ribbon cordoned off a wide area around the site. Felix saw the forensics team working around the BMW, trying to secure the evidence. At the helm was Dr. Kevin Dour, the best man possible for the job. He was a pathologist with a second doctorate in philosophy, and enjoyed a very good reputation among experts. In tricky cases, his opinion was sought nationwide – even though he was known to be extremely moody.

With the inevitable cigarette sandwiched between his lips, he was busying himself with something in the car grille. Felix couldn’t remember ever having seen Dr. Dour without a cigarette. He even smoked during autopsies. In fact, he had probably been born with one of those things in his mouth.

Both men respected one another and were on friendly terms. As well as Dr. Dour's team, there were also three police officers present, one of whom was currently speaking with a man in running gear.

"Felix, check this out!" called out the pathologist.

"Be there in a sec," he replied and turned towards Emilio. "Take a statement from the jogger so he can go home. But get him to stop by tomorrow so we can take his fingerprints and run a comparison. If he wants, the police can drive him." He pointed the two officers standing around looking bored.

Emilio nodded. Felix silently took everything in once more. First impressions of the site were important; he needed to take it slow. After all, it could also have been the crime scene.

This was his only chance. If he slipped up here, he might overlook an important clue. It was his first partner who had taught him that and, as so often before, he had been right. Felix still met the now-retired Chief Inspector Ludwig Ruebens from time to time. They would discuss Felix's current cases over a few bottles of beer; although these opportunities were becoming increasingly rarely these days.

In the background the inspector saw the Frankfurt skyline – or Mainhattan, as it was often called. The river Main ran along it, all cold and grey. Given the vehicle's position, the driver must have been looking at the skyline as the fumes filled his lungs. Night-time, the city in lights: a spectacular view for sure.

Otherwise there was nothing out of the ordinary and so Felix went over to see the pathologist, who, to his amazement, was grinning broadly. Dr. Dour was a fitting name: he wasn't a man with a particularly well-developed sense of humor. Right now he was leaning against the grille, lighting another cigarette.

"I was starting to think that you weren't interested in my discovery." He displayed his wolfish grin once more, before stepping to one side and pointing to the lower part of the grille. "An interesting mascot, very rare I'd say."

Felix realized immediately what Dr. Dour was referring to. The toad wedged into the middle of the grille was indeed a bizarre

sight. It seemed that the driver from the previous evening had been found.

“I knew this would please our Frog Prince,” the pathologist smiled.

“Chief Inspector Frog, I’ll have you know. Besides, it looks more like a common toad to me,” Felix replied.

“Exactly. A member of the *Bufo bufo* genus. An unusual cause of death at any rate. I’ve never seen our local amphibians jump so high as to get caught in mid-flight. You know as well as I do that the majority die on the road – and not because they’ve been hit either. The high air pressure generated by the cars as they speed over them causes their innards to burst. The French developed a weapon in the mid-eighties that operated on a similar principle. They used sound waves to provoke internal bleeding in their enemies. But I digress. Anyway, I’ve no idea how our little friend made it up here.” Dr. Dour glanced at the dead toad.

“That I can tell you. I was out with my environmental group yesterday evening. We were almost run down by this car; the driver wiped out two of the buckets we’d been using to collect toads. One of them must have been catapulted into the air, landing here. We’ve been trying to identify the driver. Guess I don’t need to anymore.”

The inspector scratched his head. Dour whistled through his teeth.

“Well, just be careful that they don’t try and pin a motive on you!” Then he smiled, revealing his nicotine stained teeth. “But all joking aside, the man’s been dead for at least five hours and I can’t believe he died through carbon monoxide poisoning. His face is the wrong color – it just doesn’t seem grey enough. Of course I won’t know anything for sure until after the post-mortem. You know the procedure.”

“Müller doesn’t think it was suicide either,” said Felix.

“Then you’ve got a lot of work to do. You’d better leave me in peace!” With these words, Dr. Dour turned to his team: “Are you ready?”

“If you want to see the body again before we take it away, now’s the time,” he said, focusing on Felix once more.

They went around to the other side of the car, where a white sheet covered the deceased. For the inspector, seen like this, death always had something unreal, almost peaceful about it. He associated the color white with innocence. Dr. Dour lifted back the sheet.

The victim lay there as if asleep, his face appeared relaxed. Uwe Kaptain was wearing a beige polo neck sweater, blue jeans from Joop and light-brown, expensive-looking branded shoes. As Felix circled the victim he saw the label Salvatore Ferragamo woven into the soles. Italian handmade, he realized, not without a hint of jealousy.

He had often dreamed about such expensive but comfortable shoes. However, given the places his work took him, it didn't seem worthwhile investing a lot of money in footwear. Nothing else was particularly noteworthy. Overall, the victim seemed very refined and must surely have turned a few heads in his lifetime. An avenue they ought to pursue, Felix thought to himself.

"Can you tell me anything more?" He looked at the pathologist, who gave a reluctant shake of the head.

"Not for the moment; you've already heard what I think. So can we take him down to the lab?"

"Sure, he's all yours."

The inspector himself, however, was in no great hurry to learn what was required to coax secrets from the dead. Kevin Dour signaled for the employees of the funeral home to take away the deceased before the pair was joined by Emilio.

"Our witness's name is Matthias Grüntal; he lives close by, at 13 Holzgasse. He runs along the banks of the Main twice a week and found the victim this morning, slumped over the steering wheel. Our man opened the doors to pull the body out and then tried to resuscitate him. Although it was soon clear that nothing could be done for Kaptain, he continued to check for vital signs before finally giving up, switching off the engine and notifying us by cell phone at seven fifteen. All in all, he seems to have coped pretty well with the incident. He even noticed that the BMW's heating was still on. Why he switched off the engine he can no longer say. He's going to stop by the office in the next few days to clear up any questions and make a formal statement."

“But you smell a rat?” Felix asked, having surmised from his colleague’s tone that something wasn’t quite right.

“I’ve questioned a lot of people who’ve found dead bodies, but very few were so laid-back about it. I don’t like it. We need to take a closer look at this Grüntal,” Emilio growled.

“Good, then do it. But for now let’s go to Uwe Kaptain’s address and see what we can find out.” Felix headed to the car.

From the outside, 16 Beethovenstraße appeared thoroughly un-spectacular, just a regular residential building with twenty-four tenants. No-one would ever have suspected that one of them could own such expensive clothes as the victim.

When pressing the buzzer next to Kaptain’s name provoked no response, Felix began to push them all until an elderly female voice came on the line: “Yes?”

“Good morning, Mrs. Schumm,” he replied, glancing briefly at the plaque. “My name is Chief Inspector Felix Büschelberger and I’d like to speak with you for a moment if that’s possible.”

The buzzer sounded and they went in. The fact that she lived exactly opposite the victim’s flat was a happy coincidence in Felix’s eyes. The door was slightly ajar and a pair of blue eyes regarded them vigilantly: “Could I see your ID please?”

“Of course!” They showed their ID cards and after a lengthy examination, Mrs. Schumm let them enter the apartment.

“You can never be too careful.”

The two officers could only nod in agreement. Felix noticed straightaway how fresh everything smelt. Often apartments gave off a strange odor, particularly those belonging to elderly people. There was no trace of that here. He surveyed the woman with her full lips and snow-white hair worn long and loose, and guessed she was about seventy-five. She had been very pretty once, that much was clear.

“Please excuse us for disturbing you, but this morning we found your neighbor, Uwe Kaptain, dead at the east port. We wanted to see if he had any relatives – and if we could take a look at his flat,” said Felix.

A mixture of curiosity and horror was reflected in the blue eyes that surveyed him.

“Oh, how awful, poor Dr. Kaptain! Isn’t that dreadful!”

“You know that he was a doctor? Can you tell us any more about him?” he asked.

“I need to sit down first. I’ve just made a cup of tea if you’d like one. Then I can tell you what I know, which isn’t a lot. He was always such a friendly neighbor, sometimes he even helped take my shopping upstairs,” she mumbled.

The two inspectors followed the woman into the kitchen and sat down at the table, where a steaming pot of red fruit tea awaited. Next to one of the cups, which Mrs. Schumm had already filled with tea, was the review section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The room seemed very clean and tidy. Felix and Emilio gratefully accepted their mugs, exchanging a brief smile in the process. All this tallied with their reputation as a tea-drinking unit.

The hot tea seemed to soothe the old lady. “What is it you’d like to know?” she asked, turning towards them.

“Did Mr. Kaptain have a family or did he live alone? Where did he work? What was he like? These are the questions we always try to answer first,” Felix replied.

Mrs. Schumm was just about to say something when Emilio interrupted.

His pride and joy was his Galaxy Tab, which he used to take down statements, before transferring them wirelessly to his office computer. Both devices belonged to him. Emilio, the technology fetishist, had become so infuriated with his out-of-date office computer that he had appeared one day with a new PC. This had, admittedly, caused a few problems with the IT department, but since Emilio was technically their superior, the issue had soon been resolved.

“Oh, aren’t you well equipped! I don’t have any idea about this sort of thing – is that a kind of Dictaphone?” Mrs. Schumm eyed the gadget with interest.

“It could almost be, couldn’t it? But no, it’s a Tablet PC; the keyboard’s operated by a touch-sensitive screen. I use it to take notes; then we don’t have to type anything up back in the office. It saves a lot of work. With the right kind of software, these devices can even record conversations and convert them into text

documents; things could get pretty interesting then.” Emilio was falling into raptures.

“Today I’m going to try something new by transferring the document directly to our Cloud server so that my colleagues at headquarters can access your statement immediately.”

“Sorry, who’s well endowed? I didn’t understand a word of that!” The old lady gave him a confused look.

“Please excuse me. Sometimes my enthusiasm for technology runs away with me,” he replied.

“Never mind; I’m quite used to it with my grandson. He’s always talking like that and when I don’t understand something, he just rolls his eyes. But I’d like to know more.”

“OK,” Emilio said, after glancing sideways at Felix. “I’d be happy to explain. Cloud technology is the development and sharing of resources via the internet and other networks. If that all sounds a little complicated, then imagine you want a cup of tea in your living room. You’ve brewed it and taken it through. But then you realize you’ve left the sugar in the kitchen. So you have to get up and traipse back inside, which takes both time and energy.”

Mrs. Schumm smiled. “Believe me inspector: that happens quite a lot!”

“Now you see, that’s exactly how the old network system worked. Everything had a fixed place. You needed to know where something was and then put it back there after you’d finished, so that others could find it. The Cloud is different. The name denotes a vast space where individual users no longer have to know exactly where things are located physically. Nevertheless, they are still able to share everything with one another. That’s because of special software tools, which arrange everything in the mist of the Cloud and make it available to lots of different people. In your case it would mean having a serving hatch. That would be the Cloud in which your sugar was kept. You’d be able to take a little sugar out of the bowl and your grandson there in the kitchen could do exactly the same. You’d both be sharing the sugar, even though you were in separate rooms. Thanks to the Cloud, different people can share, consult or adapt various programs, documents and reports simultaneously when they’re online.”

“Well, thank you, I actually understood that! So, everything you write down can be read immediately by your colleagues?” the victim’s neighbor asked.

“Exactly. As soon as I’ve compiled the report, irrespective of where my colleagues are, they can access it and use the information to catch criminals. Crime happens in real time; now we can fight it in real time too!” Emilio’s eyes sparkled.

“Since when have we been in the Cloud?” Felix asked in amazement.

“I sent you, Frauke and Arno an email the day before yesterday with your user accounts and log-in details. As soon as you activate them, you’ll have access to all the data stored in the Cloud. You can even log in using your iPhone. I’m always saying we need to update our methods so we don’t lose any time.”

Felix placed his hand on Emilio’s shoulder and stopped him before he became completely absorbed in his favorite topic. “So, Mrs. Schumm, what can you tell us?”

“Well, Mr. Kaptain lived here alone, but I think he had been married. I’m sure he told me that once. He was a Doctor of Chemistry in some lab or other and worked very long hours. He is – or was – always friendly; I never saw him angry or upset. No, I have to say that his whole manner was very refined. I can’t quite believe he’s gone. How did he die?”

“It looks like suicide,” came Felix’s response.

“No, I don’t believe it; no, certainly not! He was always so cheerful... No, inspector, I’m afraid you must be mistaken.”

The certainty in her voice made Felix sit up and take notice.

“Naturally, our investigation into the cause of death is still ongoing. Can you tell me anything about the people he mixed with?”

“No, I never came across any visitors; I seldom heard anything either. But the walls here are thick and contrary to what you might have heard about single old ladies, I am not particularly nosy. Live and let live: that’s my motto, and it’s always served me well,” Mrs. Schumm said.

Felix was beginning to like this lady more and more.

“Who owns the apartments here? – and is there someone who might have a second key?”

“Yes, but didn’t you find the key on Mr. Kaptain?” the old lady asked.

“We did, but it needs to go to forensics first. We can’t just take it like that.”

“I see. There was me thinking some stranger was going about with the key to our building!” The relief in her voice was audible. “The building belongs to HL incorporated; it stands for Heavenly Living. That’s almost certainly the brainchild of some young marketer, but this really is a nice place to live. Unfortunately, I don’t think our janitor, Mr. Rosen, has a key to Dr. Kaptain’s apartment.”

“And where can we find this Mr. Rosen?”

“He’s on vacation at the moment. In emergencies, tenants are supposed to contact administration directly,” Mrs. Schumm replied.

“Call the locksmith,” Felix turned towards his colleague, who immediately reached for his cell and gave the address.

“They’ll be here in about ten minutes.”

Felix looked at his watch. “Are there any other people who knew Mr. Kaptain?”

“The Schmidts and Mrs. Wenzel – they all live on this floor. They’ll be at work though. I don’t know if anyone else knew him, sorry.”

Felix nodded. “That’s fine. Let’s wait until we find out if it was suicide, then we’ll question the others.” He stood up. “We’ll wait downstairs for the locksmith. Many thanks for the tea.”

As the door closed behind them, Emilio said appreciatively: “Che cosa una bella signora.”

“Yes, she’s a very attractive woman; I thought so too.”

They waited exactly eleven minutes for the locksmith. The job was done in seven seconds flat.

“It wasn’t locked, only pulled shut,” the tradesman said and turned to leave.

Felix followed him with his gaze, and wondered, not for the first time, how many of these locksmiths moonlighted as burglars. It was amazing how quickly they overcame any obstacles.

“That’s strange; maybe our man left in a hurry.”

The chief inspector couldn’t help but agree with his partner, particularly after an initial look at the décor. Money was clearly no

object here; whoever lived here had exquisite taste. You didn't leave a flat like this exposed.

The floors were parquet-covered, while art prints hung from the wall in every room. The wallpaper was pastel-colored: pea green in the hall, warm ochre in the living room; the kitchen a light blue and the bedroom a deep shade of red. All in all, the apartment seemed very tastefully arranged, and nothing like a typical bachelor pad.

When Felix thought of his own flat, the difference was all too plain. Here, everything was clean and tidy; a bouquet of flowers even adorned the living room table.

Meanwhile, the detectives put on gloves so they didn't leave behind any unwanted traces. In truth, they shouldn't have been there at all. But three separate people had now cast doubt upon a verdict of suicide, and for Felix that was reason enough to be a little "creative with the rules," as Emilio would have put it. They began to take a closer look around the living room, but found nothing resembling a suicide note. The chief inspector was just inspecting the answer machine when his partner called out. "Hey, you've got to take a look at this!"

Felix found him in the bathroom; there was a lace-up, all-in-one men's leather suit hanging from the shower cubicle. On a table next to it lay not only a leather mask with zip-up holes for the eyes and mouth but also a leather detergent - biodegradable and, as the packet stressed, non-harmful to humans.

The chief inspector whistled through his teeth. "So Kaptain wasn't just friendly. From time to time, it seems, he liked to play a little rough."

Emilio shook his head. "I'll never understand what these men see in it. I think it's perverse!"

"Perhaps more people than you think enjoy this sort of thing. That's what I've heard anyway."

The Italian threw his boss a questioning look...

Chapter 2

Was it suicide?

Or murder?

What else did Kaptain have to hide besides his lace-up leather suit?

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