

F r a n A n n a f o r d

H O W C A N I B E S U R E

T h e S t a r n b e r g S e r i e s – B o o k 4

First Published 2024
Austin Macauley Publishers Ltd®
1 Canada Square
Canary Wharf
London
E14 5AA

Leonie Hartmann-Brandt leant over the French press into which she had just poured hot water. The smell of freshly ground coffee wafted up and tickled her nose. She pushed down hard. "Would you have any objection to living with Thea?"

Her wife Pia stopped chewing on her toast. She tried to swallow but seemed to have difficulties. She reached for the coffee and poured herself a mug. It was hot and she burnt her mouth. Tears formed in her eyes as she struggled. Apparently, her toast still hadn't gone past her throat and entered her esophagus. "Darling, are you alright?" Leonie reached for her hand, but Pia shook her off.

Eventually she gulped. It looked painful. She managed to speak. Tears ran down the side of her nose. "Leonie, we've been married for less than two years. Am I boring you already?"

"What...no... you must be joking. I love you madly and I desire you most, no... all of my waking hours."

"But you want to live with Thea...again?"

"You know very well I never lived with Thea. What are you talking about? Oh, I see. Hell, I am so stupid. I meant to say, would you have any objection to sharing a house with Thea? Two separate apartments, of course."

Pia continued to stare at her, although her tears stopped.

"I was working with Suzanne yesterday, as you know. At her house on lake Starnberg. You know there is that dilapidated old ruin next door to them. We have to go past it when we visit. Well, it's up for sale, and she and Beth are terrified someone is going to pull it down and build twenty holiday apartments or something equally horrible. Well, not horrible for the twenty families, each with three children and hard-of-hearing grandparents and with at least six German shepherds and two Jack Russell terriers roaming all over the garden and peering through their hedge, but...you get my drift."

"Why don't they buy it themselves?"

"I'm not sure they are that wealthy."

"Do it up and sell on."

"They are thinking about it, but Beth says it would stretch their budget considerably and they have no interest in renovating it. They are both too busy. It will be a huge job."

"Where does Thea come into it?"

"She is thinking of relocating to Europe. She has no ties in the States anymore since divorcing her husband, and following the death of her mother. And she has become close to Suzanne and Beth."

"You seem to be intimately knowledgeable about her plans as well."

"Pia, don't be jealous. You know we keep in touch."

"I'm all too aware that she still loves you."

"And I love her too, but not in that way. I never did. I was always only in love with you. And she has got over me anyway. She goes from one affair to the next."

"I'll try to believe you. Why doesn't she just buy the house then?"

"Because it's too big. It's bigger even than Arabella and Marie's house. It cries out to be converted into two separate entities, and I thought...well, although we both adore this apartment and this area of Munich, and have no desire to move... but... it would be nice to have somewhere on the lake as well. You love

sailing as much as I do.”

Pia was quiet for a long time. “I can see the attraction. Can we afford it?”

“It’s expensive, of course, being in that position with a garden onto the lake, but sharing it with Thea would make it possible, I think. If we put this apartment up as surety against a mortgage, that is.”

“Have you talked to Thea about it?”

“Of course not. I would never do something without discussing it with you first.”

“Nice of you.”

“Darling, don’t. Come here. When do you have to leave?”

“In an hour.”

Leonie led her into their bedroom. They both still wore sleep shirts and shorts. She pushed her onto the bed and straddled her hips, pushing her shirt up and leaning down to suck her nipples, which hardened instantly.

Pia groaned. “The windows are open.”

“Your parents are away.” She pushed Pia’s shorts aside and stroked her folds.

“Oh my. Does disagreeing with me make you so wet?”

“Jealousy does.”

Leonie pushed into her. Pia bucked her hips, then reached down with a long arm and entered Leonie. They coordinated their thrusting, panting as they neared their climax. Pia came first, with a wail. Leonie followed shortly afterwards, her deep voice cracking as she groaned.

“I love you so much,” Leonie whispered.

Pia gripped her, allowing no space between their bodies. She was several inches taller, and she tucked Leonie’s head under her chin.

“Unfortunately, I can’t cancel my appointment.”

“Hurry back soon.”

“You can bet on it.”

“Thea can come down here on Saturday. We could go together to look at the house.”

Leonie stared at her. “Did you call Thea?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

Pia looked shamefaced. “I do, but…”

“Do you know, that pisses me off a bit.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Did you want to check that I was telling the truth? That I haven’t already contacted her?”

Pia didn’t answer, which was her go-to reaction when her back was against the wall. Leonie had coped with it for the long months when Pia wouldn’t or couldn’t leave her previous relationship.

“I’ll forgive you this time. When will she be here?”

“She can be in Starnberg at midday.”

“Have you already called Suzanne too?”

“No.”

Leonie picked up her smart phone. Suzanne’s phone went to mailbox. She dialled Beth Taylor. “Sorry to disturb you. I’m sure you are brokering some billion-buck deal.”

Beth laughed. “No, actually, I’m sitting at my desk with my feet up.”

“I don’t believe you. You’re just being polite. Listen, I won’t keep you. We can all come down on Saturday. To see the house.”

"That's great. I'll get a key."

"It would be much better to look around without a pushy estate agent breathing down our necks."

"That's what agents do."

"Oops, sorry."

Beth was one of the world's top operatic agents.

"Will Suzanne be home?"

"She's teaching in the morning, but we can all have a late lunch when she gets back."

"Beth, we don't want to be a bother."

"Sweetheart, if you are seriously considering buying the house, I will cook you lunch every day for the next year."

"Then we are most definitely buying it. Your cooking is cool."

They drove down to Starnberg in the blue Mercedes convertible. It was one of its last outings for the year. It did not do well on slippery roads even with winter tires, so every November they put it at the back of the garage until spring. The insurance was very much cheaper that way. They parked in the Taylor-Weigl's drive and rang the bell. A cold wind came off the lake. Leonie shivered. She was also a little nervous about seeing Thea again. She had not been lying when she told Pia it was all over between them, but she had never yet met Thea without a stirring in her core as her mind jumped back to the extremely satisfactory sex they had shared in London. It was an automatic reaction, and she wished it would go away.

Theirs was the only car in the drive, so the famous operatic mezzo soprano either hadn't arrived or she had come down on the train. Beth welcomed them into the house, and they hugged each other.

"Let's have a mug of hot coffee before we brave the cold next door. It's going to be freezing in there."

Suzanne came in stamping her feet. "I stupidly didn't put my car heating up high enough. Frozen toes."

"You're back early darling. Not that I'm not happy to see you." They kissed.

"Two students cancelled with the sniffles. Wimps. But on the other hand, I don't want to catch something."

They sat in the living room looking out over the lake, sipping their drinks.

The bell rang. Suzanne went to let Thea in. She heard a masculine voice. Thea came in, hand in hand with a tall young man.

"Hello everyone. This is Simon."

Suzanne had already mastered her astonishment. Beth's profession lent her an unreadable expression, but Leonie and Pia stared. Thea had been married for years to a man. A conductor older than her. It was always said that she swung both ways, but no one in the group had ever witnessed a man in her presence. Leonie had seen the husband on one occasion, when he leered at her in the stalls of the opera house in London. Now she looked at the tall couple and laughed.

"I felt like a change."

Leonie was conflicted. She was glad there was no twitch in her sex, but she wasn't quite sure she felt OK with the situation. The thought of sharing a house with Thea immediately lost some of its attraction. Simon's vibes were more than unsympathetic. She tried not to show anything on her face. Pia was looking happy for the first time since they arrived. She was glad about that at least. Thea and Simon asked to use the bathroom and Beth made fresh coffee.

When they finished drinking it, Suzanne grasped the keys.

"Let's brave it. Is everyone warm enough?"

They went through the rickety gate next door. The garden was a wilderness and with the leaves now down, and the grass a soggy disintegrating mess, it couldn't have looked worse. They shuddered as Beth unlocked the door at the back of the house away from the lake. It had been built at around the same time as the Cooper-Nymans' house further around the lake. It was possible that Suzanne and Beth's house had belonged to the same owners, but they had long ago been separated. It was considerably larger than Suzanne's, and it was in a disastrous state. Doors were hanging off hinges, some floorboards were porous, and the smell of rot was overpowering. Windows were broken, and when they proceeded gingerly in single file up the far from safe staircases to the top floor, they could see the roof was letting water into some of the rooms.

Everyone except Leonie looked miserable. Her eyes were shining. "People, it's wonderful. Please please can we buy it?"

Pia put her arm around her wife. "Are you sure?"

Simon spoke up. "It needs pulling down and a dozen luxury apartments built.

Thea you could make a killing."

Thea had the grace to look embarrassed. "Simon darling, I think the whole point of the exercise is to avoid just that. Suzanne and Beth don't want an apartment block next door."

"You could rent them out in the holiday period and make big bucks."

Leonie stared at Thea. What is she doing with this guy? He must be fantastic in bed.

Thea met her gaze. "I would like to hear Leonie's opinion. After all she has a degree in interior decorating. I think we should be listening to her." She pointedly released Simon's hand.

"It is a beautifully proportioned old house. Just look at the tall ceilings. And the view over the lake from all the rooms at the front is stunning."

Pia kissed her hand. "Darling, can it be saved?"

Simon curled his lips as he watched them, his face a mask of distaste. What was wrong with Thea? He was a homophobe as well.

"It will have to be gutted, and the inside almost completely rebuilt." She had tapped on all the walls as they went around the house. "But the structure is sound. Naturally, an expert will have to come in to really do a proper survey, but I think I'm right."

"Then we'll buy it. Thea you can have a think and decide if you want to join us, but judging by Simon's reaction, I presume you won't be." Pia kept her voice level. She was used to dealing with incendiary situations in the rehearsal room. Which was part of what made her a great director. The creative ideas were one thing. Enthusing and controlling a chorus of up to seventy men and women for three hours determined whether one could do the job or not.

"I'll make my own decision here."

Leonie suddenly felt sorry for Thea. She must be aware what the group thinks about Simon. How embarrassing.

"Leonie, how would you divide the house to make two apartments?"

"I will have to study the plans first, but my instinct is not to have a top and bottom apartment, but to split it down the middle so that each one has all three floors. You see, the living room is the key. And it's huge, so could easily be halved. All the other rooms in the house seem to me to be built on the half axis anyway."

"What about the garden? It could be so beautiful the way it is."

"It would mean either putting a hedge down the middle and halving it, making two long narrow plots, or agreeing to share it.

"Then I'm in on the project, and I'm for the sharing."

"I think I should do a renovation costing before we finally decide. It won't be cheap, although ripping everything out and starting again in the shell of the house doesn't necessarily mean the costs are any higher. Brrr. It's awfully cold in here. I think you should all go back to the warm house. I need to take photos."

"Sweetheart, I'm staying with you."

Thea looked as if she would like to stay too, but she caught Pia's expression, and anyway, Simon had moved apart and was staring sulkily out of one of the windows with undamaged glass.

"Will you send me the photos?"

"Of course."

"Lunch is in a good half an hour. Is that enough time?"

"Perfect."

They left. Pia and Leonie stared at each other until they were out of earshot, then they burst out laughing.

"WTF." How old is he? At least ten years younger."

"More. A toy boy."

"The very definition of."

"Thea is too young for a mid-life crisis. How old is she?"

"Thirty-six, or thirty-seven. I suppose I can understand her needing some dick, but really."

Pia took hold of her arm. "You understand, do you? Do you need some too? We can leave now. The strap-on is waiting."

"My darling wife. No, no, and again no. I do not need a man. I don't even need your strap-on. Though it's nice sometimes."

Leonie put her hand on the seams leading to Pia's crotch and stroked gently.

Pia groaned and her hips moved in to make contact.

"Not here. It's too cold and much too dirty. But... later. We don't have to stay long."

They moved around the house taking photos in every room and from various angles. Shivering they ran back hand in hand to the warm house.

"Lunch will be on the table in five minutes. I'm sure you want to wash up."

For a change, Suzanne cooked rather than Beth. A delicious chicken and mushroom pie prepared the night before stood on the table. It was followed by cheese and a crème Brûlée.

"You did not make this surely?"

"I did. I wanted to prove it is possible, and it isn't difficult. You just need a free twenty-four hours."

Everyone giggled. Leonie looked at her watch. Pia caught her eye and smiled, but Leonie only winked at her.

"Can I be really rude and go to watch TV? It's biathlon from Finland, and Emma is in the sprint."

Suzanne jumped up. "Oh, yes, I want to see that too. Our sweet little Emma is progressing fast up the ranks. She's in the A-Team now. Thea, do you like biathlon? We are all mad about it since we moved down here to the Alps. Emma trains just down the road in Garmisch-Partenkirchen."

"I've never watched it."

"Stupid sport," muttered Simon. "Pop...pop...pop."

They all stared at him before helping to clear the table, except for Simon,

who went outside to smoke. Thea looked more and more uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry everyone. I think I have been having a pre-menopausal crisis. He has to go."

Suzanne took her hand. "Don't be influenced by the present company. If it's what you want and need, then it's entirely your business."

Thea looked rueful and shook her head.

Leonie was in the living room in front of the large screen. "Come on, they've now switched over to Finland." They took seats. "There she is."

Emma Stoiber was suddenly in close-up. Leonie who was sitting next to Thea felt her stiffen. Emma was a ravishingly beautiful blue-eyed blond and the present pin-up girl of biathlon, in a sport where the women are often attractive. She was tall, and her long legs and perfect body were revealed in their entirety by the skin-tight lycra body suit the athletes all wore. As the camera stayed on her she wound her long hair on top of her head and crammed on a beanie. Then she tightened a leather band on her pronounced left bicep.

Suzanne chuckled in appreciation. Beth was still in the kitchen. "If I was twenty-five years younger..."

They laughed, knowing she was not being serious.

"And you know her?" asked Thea, surprised to find she was short of breath.

"We sat at the same desk at school for nine years."

"Leonie, you attract famous and beautiful people. It's uncanny." Thea looked at her in admiration.

The race began. Emma was moving off at number twelve.

Leonie explained to Thea how a biathlon sprint is run. "It's not as exciting as the Individual, where they all start together. The sprint is a shorter race. They have only to shoot twice, and the athletes run against the clock, which makes it difficult for them all to pace themselves. And sometimes they overdo it and run out of steam, and sometimes they become blue as it's called, when their muscles seize up. It must be excruciatingly painful."

The women set off at twenty-second intervals, and soon it was Emma standing waiting. The clock ticked down, and she was off at a fast pace. The camera followed her for a few seconds, before cutting back into the stadium where the first athlete was coming in for her first shooting round. She lay prone on her stomach on a mat on top of the snow and brought her rifle into position. She was last year's champion. The crowd who had been noisy were suddenly quiet. She fired off five rounds at a distant target. Four shutters fell, but the fifth stayed standing. The crowd groaned. She shook her head and got up as quickly as possible. The one mistake meant she had to turn off the main track and ski around a hundred and fifty metre penalty oval before coming back into the race and setting off for the second round. It would take her through woods for two and a half kilometres of undulating track, including a punishing hill climb at the two-kilometre mark. As she emerged from her penalty round, the competitor who had set off twenty seconds after her, was already ahead. She had shot a perfect five and could continue on her round without veering off to ski the additional metres.

"So has the champion lost the race?" Thea didn't take her eyes off the screen.

"Not necessarily. The beauty of biathlon is its unpredictability. She is a much faster skier than the second girl, who could miss all five shots when she shoots again. The competition isn't over until all, in this case one hundred girls, get over the finishing line."

Five minutes later it was Emma's turn to shoot. She brought her rifle up

quickly and fastened a cord to the strap on her bicep. It helped to steady the weapon.

"Marie loves the sport too because she is absolutely crazy about women's biceps. Arabella is in constant training because waving her arms around conducting orchestras for twelve hours a day increases them anyway. Marie can't get enough of her wife's arms."

"She's not the only one," murmured Thea.

"Shhh." The stadium was quiet. Emma shot at a steady pace and all five shutters fell.

Leonie, Suzanne and Pia cheered. Beth came in and sat on the arm of Suzanne's chair.

Suzanne pulled her down to kiss her. "Our girl has just shot a null/funf."

Her time around the circuit was good too. She took off from the mat before the girl who had been ahead of her. In fact, when she reached a timing point before the giant hill, she was in overall first place. She went up it easily enough.

"Not too fast," said Pia to the screen. "You'll over-pace before the last round."

Meanwhile, another fast sprinter had shot all five rounds and had taken over the first-place position after leaving the stadium.

"She shoots faster than Emma."

"She's quicker on the circuit too. But Emma is a comparative newcomer. A place under the first three would be a tremendous achievement."

Leonie leant across Thea to reach Pia and gripped her hand as the camera showed Emma skiing back into the stadium. She was breathing heavily, but they all did that.

She stood, consciously steadying her breathing before bringing the rifle up to her eye. She balanced her trigger arm against her hip.

"That is a sexy position," murmured Thea. The tight body suit was taught across Emma's stomach and mound.

Leonie looked at Thea's darkened eyes. "I think biathlon has recruited a new fan this afternoon."

"Emma Stoiber has in any case." Beth was amused.

"Shhh." Emma shot steadily, though not fast. All the shutters came down. A roar went up from the crowd.

She slung her rifle across her back, picked up her sticks, and pulled down her tinted glasses. Then she took off on the last round. At the time-point at the foot of the large hill she was in second overall position. The room was tense as they watched her ascending the hill.

"She's tired," commented Pia.

"I know." Leonie said through gritted teeth. "Come on, you can do it."

Emma reached the top and crouched down for the long descent where she would pick up speed before another much shorter hill and the last flat section to the finishing line.

She overtook two other girls on the descent, but had some difficulties with the small hill, before finding strength to race over the finish line. She collapsed in the snow, breathing heavily.

"Oh dear, look she's in trouble. She's hurt herself." Thea was concerned.

"No, they all do that. It looks worse than it is. You'll see. She'll be standing in a few seconds." Emma got up, leant down to unclip her skis and picked them up, smiling into the camera. "She's in first place for now, but there are a lot of other good athletes behind her. She won't maintain the position; she was too

slow shooting. But getting all ten shots in is a great achievement for someone so young to the sport.”

They sat watching as first a French girl, then a Norwegian came in with faster times. She was still holding on to third place when a Czech girl with a phenomenally fast time, missed the last shot on her second round. Despite her speed around the circuit, she came in two seconds behind Emma’s time. None of the remaining twenty competitors after that came anywhere near her finishing time.

Emma stood on the winner’s rostrum for the first time in her career in a well-deserved third place. At the flower ceremony where she received her medal, she had taken off her beanie. Her long blond hair cascaded around her face and down her back. She proudly wore the German team jacket. Leonie was busy sending her a text.

Thea couldn’t take her eyes off the TV. “She looks like an angel.”

“That’s what her boyfriend Andy says as well.” Leonie felt a bit mean pricking the balloon, but what was Thea thinking about anyway, with Simon pacing around the garden smoking one cigarette after the next.

“Yes...of course.”

“How does she pay the bills? I’ve never understood how they manage to make ends meet. She trains for hours every day.” Pia frowned at her wife. She did not always approve of Leonie’s ability to be a little cruel. Which usually stemmed from a brilliant mind being impatient when others could not keep pace. Which was not now the case. Does she still want Thea? Was that jealous spite?

“She is actually a policewoman. Although it’s a hidden form of sponsorship. She has about three traffic duties a month as far as I can make out. Otherwise, she’s just training, training, training.”

“Does she wear uniform?” Suzanne licked her lips. Beth looked at her indulgently. Thea swallowed as if her mouth had gone completely dry and her tongue was stuck to her teeth.

Pia got up. “I think we should be getting back. We both have an early start tomorrow.”

“On a Sunday?”

“Yes, we have a technical day in the theatre. Where are you staying Thea?”

“I...we...have to drive to Stuttgart. Simon has an audition tomorrow.”

“And you?”

“I’m in Strasbourg for the moment. It’s not so very much further. I’ll stay with him overnight and then we go on to Strasbourg after the audition. Or perhaps I’ll just drop him off and keep going.”

“Let us know what you finally decide about the house. As you see, Leonie is panting for it, so we will put in an offer anyway, and get the surveyors onto it.”

“I’m ninety-five per cent with you. Just let me know the cost estimation.”

They all left together. Suzanne and Beth didn’t protest. Leonie was sure they wanted a cosy evening in front of their fire.

Suzanne kissed her. “I’m so thrilled I can barely digest the news. My adopted daughter is going to live next door to us.”

“Not full time. Not yet anyway. We still need the Munich apartment as our base. But it will be lovely to have a place to get away from it all.”

“And bring up the children.”

Pia and Leonie laughed.

“Who knows.”