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I was a minute's walk from the apartment. Sunshine streamed through the trees. Dappled shades of light and dark danced on the ground. A breeze stirred the highest leaves. Out of sight somewhere, a bird sang. And the taste in my mouth told me what I already knew, that the coffee at Orsonero Cafe was the very best that the city of Milan had to offer.

Just then, a scream cut the air.

The sound came from everywhere at once.

Above. Behind. Across the way.

Angry voices shouting at each other, fury melting into confusion.

Disagreement flared and faded at once into silence. Irritation, an altercation, and the voice of a woman rose above the rest. Glass smashed. Wood splintered. One moment's calm. Then a blur of grey and pink hit the pavement in front of me with brutal violence, landing so hard that the earth shook beneath my feet. The shape didn't move again after that. It lay motionless, arms and legs poking out at unnatural angles, like a broken mannequin.

Only this was no mannequin.

It was human.

A human who had breathed their last.

Playing out the requiem of a life now lived.

A yellow disc rolled away from the body, clipped my shoe and toppled over. I crouched to pick it up. The disc was a tub of lip balm from an exclusive Swiss sanatorium and had a drawing of a castle on its front. I dropped it into my pocket and looked at the person whose lips it had moisturised.

She was dead. That much was clear.

The woman was wearing the kind of charcoal grey suit that Christiana was so fond of. Her hair was similar too, mousy brown in a smartly cut if now dishevelled bob. Then there were the final letters of an Arabic word tattooed on the woman's wrist – just like Christiana had – right where the handcuff that was attached to the briefcase wrapped around her skin.

That was all peculiar, because it was Christiana I was coming here to see.

And my world was shaking on its axis.

Far off, a siren wailed.

As it faded, the door of the building swung open. A paramilitary *carabinieri* police officer tumbled out. He saw the body, swore in Milanese dialect, pointed his submachinegun at me and began shouting profanities. I sank to my knees, hands held high. Three more *carabinieri* followed, swarming around Christiana's corpse. Random questions were fired in my direction. *Who was I? What had I seen? And what was I doing in the shopping district at this hour?*

I said nothing. Just gazed into the *carabinieri's* watery blue eyes, blinking slowly.

He came a step closer.

Behind him, one of his colleagues yelled into a radio.

I knelt where I was, eyes focused on the gun's dark barrel.

The *carabinieri* took another half-step forward, one hand around the butt of the submachinegun, face like thunder.

A bird sang nearby. Long, sharp and imploring.

The breeze ruffled my hair.

The *carabinieri* began framing a new question, this one angrier than the last, about how I knew Christiana and what exactly my problem with speaking was.

Then tyres screeched and a black SUV bumped up on to the pavement. Its doors opened before it stopped and the *carabinieri* directed a foul-mouthed tirade at the driver. That was followed by a crack. And another. And a third. A red circle appeared on the forehead of the *carabinieri* officer and he fell backwards. The sound of more shots echoed off the buildings behind me. Moments later, all four *carabinieri* officers were on the ground. Nothing moved, aside from one twitching leg.

Silence hung over the street.

The air bruised and still.

The bird sang again, quieter now, mournful almost.

Four men got out of the SUV, speaking quickly in Russian. Three picked up Christiana's body and loaded it into the rear of the vehicle, two legs held by one and an arm each for the others. A fourth man scanned the street, his semi-automatic weapon at the ready. Doors slammed shut. Wheels spun. And the SUV vanished around the corner at a speed that would earn a lifetime ban on an

autostrada.

I got back to my feet unsteadily, processing what I had seen.

None of it made sense.

Blood, brains and shell cases were scattered across a street that should be safer than Park Avenue. An ordinary Monday morning had turned into the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre. Five people were dead.

What I did know was that I wouldn't meet Christiana today, or any other day for that matter. The taste of espresso was still in my mouth, icing sugar from the breakfast croissant on my lips.

And now my legs were moving.

I was running.

Running for dear life. Faster than I had run in all my days.

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I will start at the beginning. Or rather with Raymond Schenk, which is in so many ways the same thing.

Raymond was a petty conman who learnt accountancy from a correspondence course and then bought himself a cheap, shiny suit. He asked few questions beyond those needed to produce a set of financial documents that would fool all but the smartest tax authorities. He also knew which tax authorities *could* be fooled. That perhaps was his most valuable skill of all.

With impressive speed, Raymond recruited a list of super-rich clients and became indispensable to one of them. Trusting Raymond was the only real mistake that man made in a long career spent selling arms to murderous dictators. His motto was *never bullshit a bullshitter*. And he believed it, convinced that he could spot anyone as rotten as himself miles off. He hadn't reckoned on Raymond's ability to give a financial statement every appearance of truth, regardless of what lay beneath.

That was why Raymond now stood at the head of the priority boarding lane at Malpensa airport in Milan, about to take a flight to São Paulo. When he landed in Brasil, he would shed his identity, transfer \$243 million from three Swiss bank accounts into one opened in his new name and disappear forever.

I was there to be the fall guy.

'I already explained this to your colleagues at the front desk,' Raymond was saying in his whiny, nasal twang to the two LATAM officials. One was male, the other female. Both were Italian. 'The problem we have here is with the IRS computer system,' Raymond went on. 'It stopped talking to the State Department system at the start of the week.'

'I understand what you are saying, Signor Schenk,' the woman replied. Through the window behind her, I saw a 787 Dreamliner touch down and race along the runway. Smoke billowed from its wheels as the brakes kicked in. 'But the rules are simple,' she continued. 'With a red flag alongside your name from the US State Department, you cannot fly.'

The final call for a departure to Moscow echoed around the high-ceilinged

hall.

‘Can I make a suggestion?’ Raymond said.

‘*Per favore, fallo,*’ the male LATAM employee replied.

‘My assistant here, Al, has all the paperwork and documentation you need.’

Raymond waved his hand at me. ‘It’s all in order, as you will see when Al shows it to you.’

‘Come this way,’ the woman said, ‘and we will be happy for you to show it us.’

‘The thing is,’ Raymond said, ‘I have to be in São Paulo tomorrow. That is non-negotiable. If Al comes along a day later, then ... nothing personal, Al’ – he put his hand on my forearm and smiled thinly – ‘then we can live with that. But I need to be on this flight.’

‘So we should start now,’ the woman said. ‘Before more time is wasted.’

‘Believe me, I am all for not wasting time,’ Raymond said, trying to add warmth to his smile. ‘So here is what I propose.’ He placed his passport on the counter. The ends of six €500 notes stuck out beneath it. ‘I am going to board the plane now and take my seat. Al is going to go with you and call the State Department.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘It may take a few minutes to get through to the right people, but they will be open for business now. And once you speak to them, and share the information Al has, you will be satisfied that everything is in order.’ He turned to me. ‘Al, would you be okay with that?’

‘It would be absolutely fine, Raymond,’ I said. ‘I am pleased to do anything that will smooth this misunderstanding out.’

‘And should there be any difficulties with State,’ Raymond said, returning his gaze to the LATAM officials, ‘you simply grab me off the plane before it leaves and no-one is the worse off. How about it, can we all get behind that plan?’

The man and woman looked at each other. She raised an eyebrow. The man pushed his lips out, then dropped his eyes momentarily toward the money concealed beneath Raymond’s passport. They were probably recalling all the anti-bribery training they had suffered through and trying to figure out precisely where the security cameras were pointed. Her shoulders moved fractionally.

‘Okay,’ she said, smiling a second later. ‘Al, if you will come with me, we will allow Signor Schenk to occupy his seat on the airplane and *if* everything is in order’ – she drew the word out to the length of two syllables – ‘then we wish you

both *buon viaggio*.'

'And for now,' the male official's hand swept down and scooped the passport and bank notes from the counter, 'I will hold on to these.' He smiled knowingly at Raymond, as if he had just placed his rook one move away from checkmate. 'As soon as Gabriella tells me that everything is good, I will return your passport on board. And if there is an impediment, then this money was never here.'

'Fine,' said Raymond, 'absolutely fine. What money, hey?' He laughed abruptly, without humour. 'I am so pleased we could all find a way to be reasonable.'

'I will join you shortly, Raymond,' I said.

'You're a good man, Al,' Raymond said, taking my hand in his.

'Thanks,' I said. 'Take care of yourself ... on the other side.'

He tried to smile confidently at me, sweat beading on his forehead, but only managed a confused grimace. It was, I knew, the last image I would ever have of him.

'*Prego*, if you could come this way,' Gabriella said, indicating a door in the far wall.

'I am sorry to cause you so many problems,' I said as we walked, slipping into Milanese dialect, 'especially when I can see that you are so very busy.'

'Don't worry. Things like this happen all the time,' she said, holding the door open for me. 'And your Italian is very good.'

'Thank you.'

'Did you bang your head?' she asked, pointing at the bandage above my eyebrow.

'This? No, a minor surgery last week.' Then, seeing a look of anxiety flash across her face, I went on, 'Which was entirely successful. It was a small intervention. I'll probably have the bandage removed tomorrow. It has healed up very well indeed.'

'Good.'

'Now, are you able to call the State Department direct?'

'Yes. I have a contact there who should be able to help us progress Signor Schenk's situation faster.'

'Excellent.' The announcement of a flight delay to London Gatwick reverberated around the corridor behind us. 'I have the phone numbers of the

relevant teams within State, and all the documentation we will need,' I said.

'Bene.'

We paused as she swiped her security card through a lock, then we were in her office. It was a plain, utilitarian room, with walls the colour of cheese mould and no windows.

'Can I use this table?' I asked.

'Sure. You arrange your papers. I will dial the State Department on speakerphone.'

A series of high pitched notes filled the air as she dialled the long number. Then a long flat tone sounded, followed by a gap, and the same tone again.

'Hello. This is the State Department. Agent Bryant speaking.'

'Michael?' she asked.

'Yes, this is he.' He paused for a beat. 'Is that—'

'Gabriella Rossi. It is so too, calling you from Milano.'

'Oh, Gabriella, it's been such a long time. What a wonderful surprise. It's so nice to hear your voice. How are you? And how is Vittoria?'

'She is fine. Listen, Michael, I have a problem and I wonder if you can help.'

'This is a business call?' The tone of his voice suddenly became official. 'Try me.'

'I have a State Department red flag on a Raymond P Schenk who is due to fly to São Paulo, Brasil, in thirty-five minutes.'

'He's not going anywhere then.'

'Signor Schenk tells me that the red flag has been cleared and the problem is communication between the IRS computer system and the State Department.'

'That is possible. The IRS have been having a spectacularly unsuccessful week. A real clusterfuck, if you'll excuse my French.'

'I should say that I have someone here with me,' Gabriella explained tactfully. 'Another passenger who has information about Signor Schenk's situation.'

'Okay. Sorry. Can you give me the case details.'

Gabriella read a series of reference numbers, amounts and dates into the phone from the material I gave her in response to Bryant's questions.

'What have you got?' she asked when the sound of typing stopped on the other end of the line.

'Honestly? I have a big fat zilch. Nothing at all is showing up. I wish I could help you, Gabriella, but—'

'Could I suggest that you try Edmund Randolph at Diplomatic Security?' I interjected.

'Who is this speaking now?' Michael Bryant asked. 'Please identify yourself.'

'My name is Al.'

'Al what, sir?'

'My identity is not material. But time *is* of the essence. Could I ask you to speak with Randolph at DS.'

'Sir, the topic of our discussion is a long way from DS. That department has serious work to do and I am not willing to trouble its staff with aviation administration.'

'You will find, Agent Bryant, that Mr Randolph welcomes the call.'

'That may be true, sir, but it is not germane to the question in hand.'

'Of course, Agent Bryant, if you prefer not to bother Mr Randolph, I could call Under Secretary Gibbons myself. But I had hoped it would not be necessary to involve her in what is, as you imply, a minor administrative hitch.'

'Under Secretary Gibbons is currently out of the country, sir, and not contactable.'

'I know. She is on a secret visit to Havana. I can speak to her there if there is no alternative, but, aside from everything else, the cellular reception is so *bad* in Cuba. And we both know what a grouch she can be if she doesn't start the day with an almond chai latte.'

'What you have said is classified information with restricted circulation, sir. I am not sure how you—'

'It is information I am fully authorised to have, Agent Bryant,' I cut in. 'And I repeat, time is a factor here.'

'Sir, I am unclear what my parameters are—' He stopped the sentence there, and left it open for several seconds, unsure how to continue. 'Gabriella, can you help me out?' he said finally.

She looked at me questioningly, with eyes the colour of horse chestnuts fresh from their shells. Warm and rich and deep. For a moment, everything else disappeared. Sound faded to nothing, replaced by a rhythmic throb that pulsed through my head. Colours lost form, separating into their contingent parts and

dissolving. Deep inside, I felt something that had been locked down tight loosen up and unfurl. A flower blossoming in the dark. The start perhaps of something mysterious and wonderful.

Then a smile spread across Gabriela's face.

'It's fine,' she said quietly.

'Then I'll make the call to Randolph.'

Bryant's line went quiet.

I realised I was seeing Gabriella properly for the first time. Sunglasses perched high on her head, lips parted slightly, tanned skin exuding vitality and health and possibility. Like a model from *Vogue Italia* blended with a Madonna by Raphael. Magnificent. Radiant. Her eyes grew bigger, then she tossed her head backwards and shook her auburn hair lightly.

'What?' she said.

'I feel as if I died and have come back again,' I said. Energy pulsed through my veins. 'Rebirthed. Given a second chance to do something with my life.'

'That sounds like a beautiful feeling.'

'It is,' I said. 'Absolutely remarkable. Tell me. If you could leave here today and go anywhere, do something useful and honest and worthwhile that would really benefit the world, what would you do?'

'If I could do *anything*?' she said, biting her lip.

'Anything.'

'Aside from sitting on a beach on Aruba eating ripe mangoes plucked from the tree? Or trekking the high Himalaya to a bodhisattva in Bhutan?' A furrow crossed her brow. 'Or visiting the man in the White House to deliver a gift-wrapped hand grenade—'

'If that's your *anything*—'

'No, it's not,' she said quickly. 'My thoughts may be dark sometimes, but my heart is not. I would fix ... *this*.'

She lifted a newspaper from her desk and turned it to face me.

'China demands return of Outer Manchuria from Russia?' I said puzzled, reading the main headline.

'Not that. *This*,' she replied, pointing at a story that started below the fold on the right hand side.

'Vitali Maiski crashes new Pininfarina sportscar in test drive at Monza,' I

read. 'Road safety is what you would change?'

'No, him. Maiski.'

'Who is he?'

A recollection was hazily taking shape in my mind.

'To the public, he owns a highly successful football team in one country and a basketball franchise in another. He dates supermodels, and dines with Prime Ministers and kings. He wears clothes that make other men envious. Hidden amongst his many business interests is a brutal people-trafficking operation. So I am told, anyway.'

'Told by whom?'

'Anti-Slavery International. FLEX. Amnesty International. Plus the internet. Blog writers. Investigative journalists. People who know and who care. Work in my business and you know these people. Three migrants out of five who leave on his trafficking journeys never arrive at their destination.'

'So many as that die?'

'Die, or are turned into virtual slaves, or prostitutes.'

'You think it would be easier for them to stay at home.'

'If you saw where they were leaving, you wouldn't say that.'

'Fair enough,' I said, visualising a compendium of scenes from television documentaries I had seen over the years. A familiar face flashed in the middle of them. 'More to the point, why does *he* do it? His legitimate business must make him richer than Croesus.'

'It does. But he couldn't run it without the blessing of the Kremlin. And they tell him that he needs to traffick the poor and needy into Europe. That's the price of doing business in Russia today.'

'Surely the people would come anyway.'

'They would. But not in such numbers. And not so recklessly, nor so young. Not unless he was there, encouraging them to, that is.'

'And you're saying that all this is done just to make life more unpleasant in Europe? It's hard to believe that there are people who would behave like that, in this day and age.'

'Read the articles about him and figure it out for yourself. So, speaking for me, I would go to London or Monza, wherever he may be, and I would ... *talk* with Vitali Maiski.' She mimed a fist hitting flesh with her hand. 'Talk rather

bluntly, with a jack hammer.'

'I can't tell from your expression if you're actually serious or not.' My eyes gazed deep into hers. 'Would you ever do something like that?'

'Me – in real life? No.' She laughed briefly, warmly. 'I have responsibilities. Two beautiful children, the oldest about to start school. A husband who loves me. A family I couldn't live without, even if they drive me crazy. Even a job I like and which helps people.'

She waved her hand around the room.

'All of that matters more than what Maiski does to thousands, probably hundreds of thousands of people every year?'

'It does to me. Yes. But what about you – is your Signor Schenk such a saint that your loyalty to him comes above everything else?'

'Raymond Schenk? He's a terrible man, as you may have worked out. An absolute monster, to be fair. He's just not in Maiski's league. And anyway, I am in the process of setting Raymond straight. That's why he needs to be on *this* flight.'

'I thought you seemed determined to arrange it.'

'It is my job to be determined. But your Vitali Maiski, he interests me, strangely. He reminds me of something from my own past. A wrong that needs to be set right. Maybe I should look him up once Raymond and I are square.'

'*Urca*,' she said, gazing into my eyes. 'I think you may actually mean that. If you do meet Maiski, I wish you every good fortune. You *will* need it.'

She was looking at me curiously, almost with wonder, as the speakerphone crackled back into life.

'Okay,' Bryant's voice said. 'I am here again.'

'Michael,' Gabriella said. 'What have you found?'

'Well, I have absolutely no idea what you folks have cooking with Diplomatic Security, nor do I have any desire to know either,' he added hastily, 'but you have all necessary clearances and I am pleased to say that you are now good to go.'

'That's it?' Gabriella said, without taking her eyes from mine. 'Simple as that?'

'Everything has been sorted,' Bryant reiterated, 'green lit all the way through to São Paulo. The State Department wishes you safe and speedy travels. And please pass on my personal apologies to Mister Schenk for any inconvenience he

has been caused. The IRS is, well ... one of these days we are going to have to do something about the IRS.'

Gabriella thanked Agent Bryant, which involved a lengthy series of injunctions to really stay in touch this time and to look him up if ever she was in the DC area, then called her colleague, Antonio.

'Signor Schenk is on the plane,' she said to me, putting her radio down, 'and Antonio handed his passport to the cabin crew as the door was closing. That's the good news.'

'I can guess what the bad is.'

'The captain refused to wait any longer. Even the five minutes it would take for you to get there from here. She said that she will lose the take-off slot if she does, and that will mean they arrive too late in São Paulo to go out for drinks. She was in a bad mood anyway, with her favourite co-pilot substituted out at the last minute.'

'So I've missed the flight?'

'You have. I'm sorry. If only Bryant could have been faster—' she began, then stopped. 'Let me book you on to tomorrow's departure. At least I can do that for you.'

'There's really no need,' I said. 'I can sort the new arrangements out for myself. I'm just glad Raymond made it.'

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For a short time, I had been worried that Agent Bryant would follow protocol and refuse to call Randolph at DS. That would have complicated my plans. But, whatever history he had with Gabriella clearly counted for a lot, and she, I and those €500 bills had come together in a very convenient way.

So now Raymond was relaxing in a First Class seat high above Portugal, sipping a cocktail and smiling as he imagined a new life of luxury for himself in South America, where his dollars would go so much further. I meanwhile was sat in the back room of a respectable, if loss-making, publishing house in a bland office building in the Acquabella district. My beard had gone. My hair had been cut shorter and made four shades lighter. The bandage replaced by a skin-coloured plaster. I pushed a small pile of banknotes across a desk.

‘That is what we agreed, I think you will find,’ I said in Italian, allowing the hint of a Russian accent to clip my words.

The silver-haired man picked the money up and counted it. Behind him, a bookshelf sagged under chunky volumes on the Shining Path, the MPLA’s struggle for freedom in Angola and the Marxian economic perspective on Facebook. Beside it, a battered fan on a filing cabinet rotated round to hit the window frame, rattled against it for a few seconds, then began moving back in the opposite direction.

‘I am afraid I must ask you for six hundred Euro more,’ he said with an embarrassed shrug of his shoulders. ‘For administration.’

‘And if I give you that, I can have the passport now?’

‘Ten minutes, maybe fifteen,’ he said. ‘She is fixing the laminate as we speak.’

‘It will work in the ePassport machines?’

‘Yes it will. And with any biometric sensor currently on the market.’ He looked at me directly for the first time. ‘Should a new security machine be deployed, I would strongly advise you not to try it with that. We cannot know what is in development. But, that aside, you will have no problems.’

‘You used the name and biographical information I provided?’

‘We did. Alexander MacKendrick, born Shanghai to British parents, now a

naturalised Swiss citizen. Significant dates and personal attributes as you specified. Wife deceased. No children.'

'Excellent.'

'We have also updated the Swiss border control system with your information.'

'Good. When will that be live?'

'It usually refreshes overnight. I would allow forty-eight hours before crossing an international border. To be on the safe side.'

'Understood.'

The man fell silent. He smiled at me ingratiatingly, then turned to scrutinise the bookshelf as if he had never seen it before. Silence spread across the room like milk from a glass dropped on a tiled floor.

In that moment I knew what had felt wrong this morning. The word that was out of place. Before the thing with Christiana *happened*. When the world was still normal. Raymond and I had been talking on the phone. He said he had spoken with her, that she was back in Milan and that she was expecting my visit.

'Christiana has it,' he went on.

'She said that?' I asked. 'She actually has it?'

'So she says.' Raymond breathed heavily through his nostrils. '*Ho quello cavoli*. Those were her words.'

'*Cavoli*?' I said, confused. 'You mean *che vuoi*?'

'*Che vuoi, cavoli*. She might have said *cannoli* for all I know. It all sounds the same to me at the speed she talks and with that accent. Why, what does *cavoli* mean?'

'It means cabbage. It's also slang, meaning—'

'I don't have time for this now,' Raymond cut in. 'She *has* it. I need it. Go get it.'

'I'm saying that *cavoli*—'

'Just go!'

I had hung up, slipped my jacket on and left the Orsonero Café.

Truth be told, whilst Raymond wanted what Christiana had brought back, I had my own interest too. It would be the culmination of long years of work. A truth that would resonate the planet round. Proof of concept, and of so much more. Well, when I got to her street, my day took a nosedive into the unknown

instead. Christiana was no more.

Back in the here and now, there was a knock at the door.

‘Enter,’ the silver-haired man shouted.

A frail woman, old enough to be his mother, shuffled across the room and handed the red passport across. He looked through it carefully, examining each page and holding several up against the light. Then he took a makeshift electronic device from his desk and used that to test it.

‘It is beautiful,’ he said simply, passing it to me. ‘She has done a perfect job.’

I took it from him and analysed it myself, employing some rather more sophisticated technology than his homemade scanner. It passed every check.

‘You weren’t exaggerating,’ I said. Then, turning to the woman, I added, ‘You are truly a maestro. I thank you.’

She blushed and began giggling.

I put a thousand Euros on the table and left.

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I lowered my Philip K Dick novel and looked out the café window. Diagonally across the street was an unassuming *Laziale* restaurant, and above it the flat where Christiana lived when she first arrived in Milan. I had been gazing at it for ten minutes now, since before the empty cup on the counter contained a hot *espresso macchiato*. Something was not making sense. Part of my mind telling me not to cross the road and go in.

The safest thing would be to leave the district and never come back. That was prudent, and what the textbook said to do. Yet Christiana's words to Raymond kept returning to me. Her joke that she knew his Italian wasn't good enough to understand.

The word '*cavoli*' means cabbage, as I had told him. It is also a slangy way of saying 'crap'. People use it on the streets, at the market stalls too. Christiana was saying, 'I got the crap'. And being Christiana, she was saying something else too. The shabby apartment she lived in all those years ago was out back of the main station, right above the Capra e Cavoli restaurant. She had called it the *cavoli* from the day she moved in, because she could smell the kitchen cooking classic dishes from the region morning till night.

When Christiana had said '*Ho quello cavoli*' to Raymond, it was a message. There was something in the flat that she wanted me to see if she didn't have a chance to remove it first.

And then I understood what had stopped me crossing the street.

Twenty metres back, two men were sitting in a grey BMW, the kerbside window wound down to let out the smoke from their cigarettes. I had caught the eye of the man in the driver's seat as I passed. He was, I suddenly realised, one of the men who had arrived at Christiana's regular apartment this morning and despatched the *carabinieri* with such efficiency.

Whoever he might be, he was waiting for whoever went into the apartment.

Which would be me.

I, meanwhile, had no interest in meeting him.

I routed a call – of the untraceable variety – through to the city's anti-terror

squad and said I had seen smoke coming out of a car in the station district. *I was worried it was a bomb. Could they check?* I supplied a description of the BMW and its location, then allowed events to unfold.

Within ten minutes, three police cars with flashing lights and a van were parked alongside the BMW, boxing it in. A heated argument was happening on the pavement, and the sniffer dogs were growing agitated.

I paid my bill, slipped out the door and weaved across the road between the traffic. The police van now blocked the line of sight from the Russians' car to the flat's front door. I was through it in fifteen seconds and away up the stairs. The door to the apartment took closer to forty seconds to open with a torsion wrench and a pick. Then I was inside a living room-cum-bedroom that I remembered from days gone by. The bathroom – such as it was – and kitchenette were located behind the two doors in the wall to my right. The apartment's décor hadn't changed. Tired white walls and ginger woodwork. There was a Jättebo sofa bed from IKEA with Vilhals shelving units on either side and a Baggebo bookcase further along. A standard lamp stood next to it, coloured an insipid shade of beige. And on the wall between the two doors was a reproduction of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*.

A quarter of an hour's painstaking search revealed nothing. Every drawer was emptied, taken out, turned over and examined minutely. Walls were tapped for hollow recesses. Carpet rolled back and floorboards lifted up.

A nun might have lived here.

I looked out the window at the street below. The space where the two Russians had been parked was now occupied by a yellow Ferrari convertible that had no-one in. Wherever they were, they were no longer watching the flat. That was little help to me. I sank down on to the sofa and gazed at the room, despondently. Whatever Christiana had left here was going to the grave with her.

Then I spied a copy of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* on the top shelf of the bookcase. I was on my feet and sliding it off its shelf in moments. The book fell open to reveal a folded receipt. It was for an extortionate sum, €8,450, and covered a direct delivery from Milan to Felixstowe, the largest container port in England. The consignment shipped at 6.50am that morning, and had a woman's name as the booking reference, Yelena. The arrival date was in three days' time.

Hardly express service, considering the fee.

It meant that whatever Christiana had died for had gone on its way without her. And no-one would be waiting to receive it when it arrived. Unless of course someone happened to understand her cryptic message and stopped by the apartment as a result.

That someone being me.

It was time, I realised, for me to leave Milan.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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