

ORIANO GALVANINI

THE BLOOD  
OF THE  
JELLYFISH

JUSTICE AND REVENGE

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*Oriano Galvanini - [www.galvanini.com](http://www.galvanini.com)*

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## Chapter 1.

Bruno glanced at his IWC chronograph on his right wrist and realized he was running late, but he didn't worry too much. Lawyer Candler was a friend who knew him well and appreciated his remarkable skills as a private investigator, so an occasional lack of punctuality would surely be forgiven.

Before leaving, he informed his secretary:

"I'm going to Candler's; I don't know what time I'll be back."

"Okay, Bruno," came the reply from the other office.

The secretarial work was handled by Aunt Alina, a woman in her sixties, youthful and in great shape. She had been widowed by Manfredi Bonomo, who died in a terrible bombing of the city in June 1944, along with her sister Rachele, Bruno's mother, and her husband Amerigo, Bruno's father.

They were left alone, the two of them, without other relatives, and Aunt Alina, who was then thirty-four, took care of him when he was nine.

Bruno managed to overcome the severe grief thanks to the affection of his aunt, who embraced him in their shared sorrow and raised him as if he were her own son. They had no financial problems since both Uncle Manfredi and his parents were well-off and left a substantial inheritance, which included several properties.

Young Alina, shaken by her loss, felt unable to manage the inherited properties and turned to lawyer Candler, a family friend, asking him to sell them. To ensure Bruno had a future and given his love for the sea, when he turned sixteen, Alina suggested he join the Naval Academy in Livorno, where he was accepted thanks to family connections.

His naval career progressed rapidly. After finishing the Academy, he requested to be assigned to the Comsubin in La Spezia, and in '57, with the rank of Sub-Lieutenant, he embarked as a second officer on the destroyer Artigliere. In '62, during a leave in Trieste, he met Giulia Pagano and fell hopelessly in love. For her, he left the Navy and enrolled in the law faculty that she attended. He graduated brilliantly in 1967 and, shortly after, for a brief period, he in-

terned at the office of Notary Cagnoli. Cagnoli, who had been a friend of his father's, welcomed him warmly, intending to guide him into the notarial profession. He was unmarried and, having no heirs, would gladly leave the office to the son of his dear friend who had passed away prematurely.

The love between Bruno and Giulia, a true bolt from the blue, came unexpectedly for both of them and led them to marry in 1962 after only a few weeks of knowing each other. Unfortunately, their happiness was short-lived because Giulia left him in 1968, taken away by a sudden and incurable illness.

Bruno reacted to this new terrible loss, but something changed within him; his spirit hardened, and his innate sensitivity transformed almost into cynicism, into detachment from everyone else. After this last tragic loss, he felt a genuine repulsion for sedentary office work.

His first impulse was to leave Trieste and everything that reminded him of his beloved Giulia. However, the affection he felt for Aunt Alina prevented him from doing so, and he clung to her once again, as she considered him her own son.

The time spent at sea had left an indelible mark on him even after his discharge; he felt a need for the sea, for open spaces, for air, and this desire intensified even more after Giulia's tragic disappearance.

Sedentary work had become unbearable for him, and following the suggestion of his friend Edi Rustia, who was a private investigator, he opened a similar agency that would surely provide him with a less monotonous job.

He often thought about moving to Barcola, up on the coast, into one of those splendid villas with terraces facing the sea, but when he proposed it to his aunt, the response he received was categorical:

"Are you crazy, Bruno? Do you know how the *bora* blows up there? I wouldn't be able to stand up even with stones in my pockets!"

She would never abandon the area of Viale XX Settembre, where she had always lived, and he complied out of affection. He would never separate from her, and thinking about how she had cared for him as a child and comforted him as an adult, he felt it was his duty to stay close to her now that she was approaching old age.

That morning, he walked to lawyer Candler's office, which was almost at the end of Viale XX Settembre, on the first floor of a stern nineteenth-century building. He ignored the old elevator locked in an artistic cage of wrought iron curls and hurried up the stairs.

The young secretary in the waiting room was a charming blonde with a ponytail whom Bruno considered as "bubbly" and very efficient. Hearing the creaking of the ancient parquet, the young woman looked up from her typewriter and, with a knowing smile, pointed with her thumb to the office door behind her, saying:

"Good morning, Bruno. He's waiting for you, and he seems to be in a great mood this morning."

Bruno returned the greeting with a smile and peeked inside as he opened the door halfway. The lawyer, a huge man, whose weight was incalculable according to Bruno, was sitting behind his desk. Resting an elbow on the armrest of the imposing red leather armchair, which struggled to support his enormous bulk, he shifted to the side to get a better look at him and called out, laughing:

"Come in, Bruno. I'm not mad about your tardiness."

As Bruno settled into the chair opposite, the lawyer, pointing to the large desk covered with semi-open files piled haphazardly, added:

"Look at this mess! I fear we'll have to check them all to resolve that little problem I mentioned to you."

The lawyer was engaged in a legal action for damages initiated by Ettore Ravalico, a client of his, who owned an important construction company, against a certain engineer Crisanti.

Given the amount of damages, which hovered around two billion lire, he had tasked Bruno with verifying the financial situation of the opposing party.

They immediately got to work, and Bruno began jotting down on a notepad the names of people possibly involved in the dispute, their details, and what checks to conduct. He was very meticulous about this and often asked for clarifications and details about the various individuals, some of whom were quite important people in the city. Absolute discretion and delicacy would be imperative.



It was almost two in the afternoon when they both realized they were hungry, and the lawyer suggested:

"It's time to grab something to eat, what do you say?"

Bruno nodded and asked with a smile:

"Voltolina or Mozzi?"

They were two nearby places but completely different from each other. Voltolina was a trendy modern spot on Viale XX Settembre. It was tiny, accommodating no more than five people at a time, and you ate standing at the counter or outside on the sidewalk. They made fanciful canapés and delicious sandwiches that, paired with a glass of wine, made for a perfect and tasty snack.

Mozzi, on the other hand, was located on Via del Toro, a side street off the boulevard not far from the office, and it was a typical old Triestine tavern. They only served wine drawn from barrels lined up behind the counter. On the counter, there were always two inviting morsels ready, one with cooked ham and the other with raw. If desired, there were

also sausages, which in Trieste are called "*luganighe de Viena*," sauerkraut, and potatoes *in tecia*.

The lawyer thought for a moment and decided with a smile:

"Let's go to Mozzi. I'm quite hungry."

As soon as he saw them arrive, the innkeeper, who knew both of them well, rubbed his hands on the apron that reached his ankles and, from behind the counter, greeted them respectfully in Italian to show more respect:

"Good afternoon, lawyer, and good afternoon to you too, Dr. Fonda,"

but then added in the Triestine dialect, which was much more congenial to him:

"What can I get you today? I've got a new cooked ham ready on the morsel."

Like all Triestines, Bruno readily used his dialect and, knowing the lawyer's tastes, who had declared a certain appetite, replied in kind:

"*Pepi*, bring us two portions of cooked ham with some horseradish and half a white wine while you warm up some sausages with the sauerkraut."

And they settled at the table.

They enjoyed their meal while the place filled up. This was the hour for card players. Men of all ages and social classes sat at tables in groups of four to challenge each other at *tressette* or *cotecchio*. The stakes were only the liters of wine on the table, shared by all, along with the chance to mock the losers.

Bruno, as well as the lawyer, enjoyed the genuine atmosphere of the old Triestine tavern where social class didn't matter, but only the desire to escape for a few hours from daily troubles counted.

Indeed, on the doorpost of the entrance hung a small chalkboard on which a chalk-drawn arrow pointed inside the tavern and was topped by the word "wine." The other arrow, however, pointed outside and bore the inscription "cruel world."

They returned to the office to summarize the situation, and Bruno pointed out:

"This engineer Crisanti... I'll try to take a discreet look at his bank accounts, but I don't think I'll find anything here in Trieste. If he claims to be broke, his assets are likely well hidden abroad."

The lawyer nodded and added:

"Please exercise the utmost discretion. I suspect he has money, and quite a bit of it."

Bruno returned home in the evening and prepared something to eat in his kitchen, which was normally poorly stocked with supplies, as it was his aunt who prepared the real meals, but he didn't want to disturb her at that hour. She had always refused to hire a maid because she enjoyed personally preparing treats for Bruno since her secretarial work didn't occupy her too much.

He was sitting at the kitchen table eating two eggs with ham, which were the best specialty in his repertoire, when he heard the door connecting the two apartments open.

"Hi, Aunt," he said when he saw her enter the kitchen, but he immediately noticed that something was wrong.

"Did something happen?" he added.

"Nothing serious, just some very strange things that I can't explain."

She replied in a hesitant tone. Bruno knew that his aunt wasn't particularly anxious, so that tone intrigued him greatly.

"What things?" he urged her to continue, and after a long sigh, she explained:

"Shortly after you left this morning, the phone rang, but there was no one on the line. I thought someone had dialed the wrong number, but the same thing happened four times today, the last time two hours ago. Just as I picked up the receiver, there was absolute silence, and after about ten seconds, the click of the line disconnecting."

Bruno looked at her and replied:

"Well, a series of wrong numbers like that is strange... but I don't think there's anything to worry about."

"You know what I thought?" she said almost shamefully:

"That it might have been one of your lovers, maybe a married one, looking for you, and upon hearing a woman's voice, she hung up."

Bruno smiled and, looking at her affectionately, said with irony:

"Dear aunt, I train all my lovers well and forbid them from calling me at home."

He concluded with a chuckle.

His aunt still seemed hesitant but decided to explain:

"Then there's more..." she paused and continued:

"They rang the doorbell three times today. I didn't open; the intercom was silent, and every time I looked out the window, I saw no one."

Bruno tried to reassure her, hiding the subtle concern he felt:

"Maybe it's just kids playing pranks, ringing the bell and running away; don't be scared. I used to do that as a child."

She thought for a moment and replied:

"I'm not scared at all," she lied, "it's just that the two things together are a very strange coincidence. Well, I've told you everything, and now I'm going to bed. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, aunt," he returned the greeting and stayed in the kitchen to think. In fact, the two incidents together were very strange. The person who had called was most likely the same one who wanted to speak to him personally. It was also odd that they hadn't asked for him, and if they didn't want to be recognized, they could have given a false name. Why remain silent for about ten seconds and then hang up? A maniac would at least have let out some sighs or whispered some obscenity. A prank call to scare a

woman? Possible, even more so when combined with the various doorbell rings.

It didn't seem to pose a great danger, but he decided to stay alert in case someone wanted to bother his aunt.

The next morning, while they were having breakfast together in his aunt's kitchen, which had a much better food supply, dipping a piece of homemade cake into his coffee bowl, Bruno said:

"I thought about what you told me last night, but even though I don't find anything concerning, I'd prefer you to keep the office CB on. Today I'm taking the Mini Cooper, which has the radio on board, and if those strange things happen again, you can alert me right away. I'll stay in the city anyway."

His aunt nodded, looking at him with an almost grateful expression, but Bruno, to his surprise, sensed a certain concern in her that he deemed unjustified for those seemingly insignificant incidents.

For several months, he had installed an antenna on the roof of the building to communicate with his transceivers on the so-called Citizen Band, the CB, which, widely popular in the United States, was starting to gain traction in Italy as well. It wasn't yet regu-

lated and was officially illegal but was tolerated by the authorities. It was used only by a few radio amateurs who enjoyed exchanging playful messages for pure fun. He was perhaps one of the few who considered it a valid communication tool that could replace the telephone when it wasn't available. He had installed them in both of his cars, which he kept in the garage under the house, and one in the office.

Between the two staircases adjacent to the houses on Ireneo della Croce Street, right in the middle was the access to the old air raid shelter used during the war, which had been out of use for almost thirty years. About ten years prior, part of the shelter had been transformed into a garage for racing cars for a few years and then abandoned for good.

Thanks to his connections, Bruno had managed to rent it again for a nearly symbolic fee since no one knew what to do with that old, useless, and dilapidated structure.

It had thus become his garage where he parked, first and foremost, his jewel, a red Alfa Romeo coupe 2600 with a 6-cylinder engine, a speedster that could reach nearly 200 km/h, which he had purchased years earlier and chosen with Giulia. Next to it was



parked a Mini Cooper 1300, fast and maneuverable. Brown in color and without any embellishments or decorations that revealed the powerful Cooper engine under the hood, it had the appearance of an anonymous little city car but was very suitable for tailing or potential chases in the city. Then there was the white Fiat 127 that his aunt rarely drove.

That morning, he chose the Mini and headed toward the city center. He wanted to consult some notarial deeds, particularly deeds of donation and sale, deposited with Notary Cagnoli, whom he knew well from his internship at his office right after graduation. The elderly notary had been a close friend of his father's and had a particular affection for him, which Bruno counted on to review some documents that were not exactly officially accessible.

There was traffic that morning, and upon arriving at Piazza Goldoni, he saw that the cars heading toward Corso Italia were all stopped. He slipped the Mini into a parallel street and then turned left, trying to reach Piazza della Borsa, where the notary's office was located. He noticed that something serious must have happened in the square because access from the side street he had taken was blocked by the police.

He managed to park the Mini somehow and got out, heading on foot toward the square, but he was stunned when he saw several police cars near the entrance where the notary's office was located. There was also an ambulance and a fire truck. He tried to approach the entrance but was blocked by an officer who kindly but firmly told him:

"You can't get any closer, sir."

Bruno tried to explain:

"I'm Dr. Fonda, and I need to see Notary Cagnoli about a rather urgent matter."

The statement had no effect on the officer, who repeated:

"You can't do that, sir, but perhaps it's best to speak with an official."

He stood there for several minutes but had a terrible premonition when he saw the black mortuary van approaching, making its way through the crowd of curious onlookers that the officers were trying to keep at bay.

As the van stopped in front of the entrance, he saw Superintendent Giuliani walk out, head down, in his direction, probably to reach a nearby police vehicle. They had attended the same course at university

and had maintained a certain friendship, even though they didn't see each other very often.

Raising an arm, Bruno shouted:

"Carloooo!"

The other saw him and slightly diverted to reach him:

"Hi Bruno, what are you doing here? Something terrible has happened!"

The bad premonition in Bruno's mind grew stronger, and he said to his friend:

"I was going to see Notary Cagnoli, but they stopped me..."

The other looked serious:

"Bruno, I'm sorry... but it's about him. He was found dead this morning along with his secretary. Murdered without a doubt," and shaking his head, he added:

"A mess... a pool of blood... unbelievable."

Bruno was frozen, and his friend continued:

"I can't explain it to you now. Come to my office tomorrow morning. I know you were very close, and maybe you can help me with the investigation."

"I'll definitely be there, Carlo."

They parted with a handshake, and Bruno headed back to the Mini. He decided to return to Candler to inform him of the tragic event and reconsider those documents he was supposed to consult with poor Cagnoli.

He entered the office with long strides, heading straight for Candler's office door. The blonde with the ponytail looked at him and immediately decided not to make the slightest attempt to stop him. When he swung the door wide open, the lawyer jerked his head up from the paperwork he was examining, a look of astonishment on his face.

"Cagnoli has been murdered!" Bruno said, his face dark.

Candler jumped up from the red leather chair, something he rarely did, and said alarmed:

"What? Are you joking?"

Bruno relayed the few details he had learned from his superintendent friend and added:

"I'm going to the police station tomorrow morning to find out more."

The lawyer sank back into the red leather chair, which protested with a sinister creak, and said:

"Bruno, in a few days, calmly, we need to figure out how to proceed without knowing the contents of those documents... after this news, neither you nor I feel like doing that right now."

He was leaving when the blonde with the swollen eyes whispered to him:

"I'm so sorry, Bruno... it's terrible."

She had left the door open and had heard everything. He responded with a half-smile of thanks and exited.

Cagnoli represented for Bruno a family friend, an almost paternal figure that connected him to his dearest affections, long lost. His disappearance added to a long list of tragic losses that Bruno had faced throughout his life. However, what he felt was not so much sorrow but a deep anger, an emotion he had learned to manage over time.

Aunt Alina remained with her mouth half-open trembling when she heard the news. Notary Cagnoli was also a dear family friend to her. She commented only:

"Murdered, then... it's a terrible thing."

She embraced Bruno with her head on his shoulder, murmuring:

"Oh my God... my God... my God..."

The next day at nine, he left home, reminding his aunt to keep the CB on, and went down to the garage. He was deeply affected by the notary's death and, at the same time, strongly irritated, feeling the need to vent his anger somehow. He got into the Alfa, not considering that it wasn't the most suitable car for navigating the city traffic, but he longed to hear the roar of that engine.

He turned on the CB and sped off, making the tires scream. He ran a couple of yellow lights, overtook and cut off some drivers who were obeying the speed limit, earning a few insults.

He stopped the car just before the entrance of the Central Police Station, at the end of Via del Teatro Romano, and parked with two wheels on the sidewalk. The officer at the door looked at him questioningly, and as he passed by, he said in a firm tone:

"I need to see Superintendent Giuliani; he's expecting me."

The officer didn't bat an eye and nodded in agreement. In the lobby, he addressed the desk officer:

"Good morning, I'm Dr. Fonda, and I have an appointment with Superintendent Giuliani."

The officer picked up the phone and, after a brief exchange with the colleague on the other end, said:

"Come in, Dr. Fonda; I'll take you to him."

Carlo Giuliani welcomed him with a handshake and, in a serious tone, invited him to sit down:

"Sit down, Bruno,"

and immediately got to the point:

"The initial findings from the forensic team tell us that the secretary was killed first. A single shot to the forehead fired from very close range, with an old Colt 45 semi-automatic, most likely a M1911A1, one of those modified. To muffle the sound of the shot, they wrapped the weapon in the scorched pillow we found on the floor near the body. I don't know if you know that type of gun... the shot blew her head apart."

Bruno nodded and replied:

"I know that gun and the effects of a shot of that caliber. It was the standard weapon of American officers during the last war. I believe there are still quite a few in the hands of the underworld today."

Carlo nodded in agreement and continued:

"In the notary's office, the scene was completely different. They didn't kill him right away; they tortured him first. He was tied to the chair, gagged, and all the nails from his hands were missing. They finished him off with a shot to the forehead as well."

He paused, staring at Bruno, who had a strange expression. His cold eyes seemed to be waiting for more details before unleashing a violent rage, but he didn't. Carlo hardly recognized the cheerful study mate he had known at university.

In an impersonal tone that sounded almost artificial, Bruno asked:

"What time did it happen?"

"From an initial assessment by the medical examiner, it seems that both died between 9 PM and midnight last night. We're questioning the tenants on the upper floors in case someone heard the shots to get a more precise idea of the time of the crime."

After a brief pause, he added:

"There aren't many in the building since the two floors just above the office were under renovation, and the two shops below were closed at that hour."



Carlo leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs, waiting for Bruno's reaction, who commented:

"It's strange that the secretary was still in the office at that hour, don't you think?"

The superintendent replied:

"I noticed that too. However, the murderer or murderers could have entered the office at a time when the secretary was still working and then killed them later."

Bruno noted:

"The secretary was killed without torture. This makes me think that the murderer was convinced she knew nothing about what was being sought. She might have been killed first to force the notary to talk. It would be interesting to speak with someone who heard the shots."

"I agree with your hypothesis,"

Carlo replied,

"A maniac would have also inflicted harm on her,"

and after a pause, he added:

"What was the purpose of your visit to the notary?"

Bruno had no intention of hiding anything from his friend and replied immediately:

"I'm working for lawyer Candler, whom I imagine you know..."

and, at his friend's nod, continued:

"He has initiated a lawsuit against a certain engineer Crisanti for a claimed compensation, and it seems justifiable, from his client, Ettore Ravalico, a construction contractor. We're talking about a significant amount, and I wanted to check some documents related to asset transfers in Cagnoli's archive, as Crisanti claims to be broke. I also have the task of verifying that his financial status aligns with his actual standard of living."

Carlo thought for a moment and asked:

"What amount are we talking about?"

Bruno smiled:

"The total compensation would be two billion lire, which Ravalico would be willing to negotiate to reduce the litigation time, which, if too long, would further harm him."

A whistle of surprise escaped the superintendent upon hearing the amount in question, and he said:

"I don't see a connection to the murder, but I can't exclude it either. I'd like to hear this engineer

Crisanti, but officially I can't summon him without mentioning you."

Bruno replied firmly:

"That wouldn't be a problem for me, but I would suggest first thoroughly searching Cagnoli's entire archive. Maybe you'll find a document related to him that justifies his interrogation."

He paused for a moment as if to gather his thoughts and continued:

"I'm already keeping an eye on him, so it would be preferable if you didn't mention me. You'd put him on alert if he has anything to do with the crime."

"You're right,"

Carlo said, rising and extending his hand,

"now excuse me, but I need to hear the reports from the agents who questioned the neighbors. Let's keep in touch."

Bruno returned the handshake and nodded.

Once he got back in the car, he was furious. He remained still for a few minutes, trying to calm down while the officer at the door watched him. Perhaps, however, he was paying more attention to the car than to him; there were few of that type around. He tried to rid himself of the useless fury that had over-

taken him. He had no targets to hit, and it would have been much wiser to think calmly rather than let himself be overwhelmed by anger. At that moment, he desired revenge more than justice.

After several minutes, he decided to return home and did so, driving normally through the heavy traffic of that hour. He was happy to have regained his usual composure and felt ready to act. He was entering Via Battisti when the CB crackled, and he heard his aunt's voice:

"Bruno, can you hear me?"

He grabbed the microphone hanging from the dashboard and replied:

"I hear you, aunt. Is there any danger?"

"I don't think so, Bruno... but I'm scared... when will you be back?"

"I'll be home in ten minutes."

He answered in a calm voice. He wasn't scared; he just had a strong desire to act, even though he didn't yet know how.

He parked the car in the garage and ran up the stairs. His aunt was waiting for him at the door of

the office where the CB was installed. As he reached her, she threw her arms around his neck, saying:

"Bruno, I was so scared."

He hugged her tightly and quietly asked:

"Tell me what happened."

She began to recount, still shaken:

"Two phone calls this morning. Then they rang once. I was about to call you on the CB when I heard a knock at the door. I was terrified and called you. I shouted loudly into the microphone: 'Are you here in a minute? Good, I'll wait for you,' remember?"

"Yes," Bruno replied, "and I was surprised because I told you ten minutes, so I understood something was wrong."

She, holding onto him even tighter, continued:

"Right after I spoke with you, I went to the peephole in the door and saw a man walking away toward the staircase, and he went down. Then I heard the sound of the front door slamming shut."

Bruno took her by the shoulders, sat her down beside him on the couch, and, holding one of her hands in his, asked in the most possible reassuring tone:

"Describe him to me."

After a long sigh, she replied:

"I couldn't see much from the peephole, but he seemed like a tall, slender man wearing a dark overcoat and a hat of a similar color. I also thought he was wearing sunglasses. I saw him for a moment, mostly from behind. I can't tell you anything else, I'm sorry..."

Bruno kissed her forehead, saying:

"You were very brave, aunt. I will stay home for a few days. You don't have to worry about anything anymore."

Then, to ease the tension, he said with a smile:

"I'm starving; do you have something to eat?"

She broke into a wide smile and jumped up, responding in kind:

"Come here; I'll take care of it, dear."

While eating, they chatted about trivial things, and Bruno did everything he could to make her forget the morning's incident. After a couple of hours, he retreated to his office while his aunt stayed in the kitchen tidying up.

He needed to think. First and foremost, he had to keep an eye on Crisanti, and then he wanted to get to the bottom of the matter regarding the mysterious

visitor who had frightened his aunt. He needed help and knew whom to ask.

Edi Rustia was a private investigator and had been Bruno's friend for a long time. He was the one who had given him the idea to open an investigation agency. He was a few years older than Bruno, and they had met by chance through mutual acquaintances, quickly becoming friends. They were united by their adventurous military past. Bruno had gone through a lot during his time in Comsubin and then spent almost two years at sea on the destroyer *Artigliere*, traveling around the world. Edi had enlisted in the paratroopers and participated in several missions abroad, in Palestine in '58, in Kashmir in '59, and in Somalia in '60. After his discharge, his adventurous nature had also led him to work as a mercenary in Africa for a few years. He was the type who loved action but also knew how to be discreet and operate in the shadows. Bruno relied on him for delicate tasks, especially when there was a risk that the requested work might border on illegality. Edi was very respectful of the law, but in case of necessity, he didn't hesitate to slightly ignore it or interpret it, with a lot of leniency, to his advantage.

Bruno tried to call him on the phone but without success. He must be out tailing someone, he thought, smiling to himself. He tried again every hour until around 8 PM, when he heard Edi's voice answer.

"Hi Edi, it's Bruno; I need you. Are you free tomorrow?"

The deep voice on the other end replied:

"Hi Bruno. You know I'm always free for old friends. What do you need?"

Bruno, in a joking tone, replied:

"Well, since you're unemployed, you should come to my place tonight so I can explain what you need to do tomorrow."

Edi had the impression that the joking tone masked something else and received confirmation when Bruno added:

"Come with public transport or a cab, making yourself as inconspicuous as possible because you'll be spending the night here with me. Don't forget your toothbrush, and above all, don't come in your car. I'll explain everything in person tonight."

Edi replied with an "OK" and hung up. Those mysterious preliminary instructions intrigued him,



and he was already imagining some fun assignment suited to his tastes.

He arrived around nine, and as soon as he entered, Bruno asked him:

"Have you had dinner?"

"Of course," he replied, laughing, "I had a delicious can of tuna in the kitchen, and I managed to eat it all before heading out."

Bruno turned toward his aunt's kitchen and called out:

"Aunt, can you feed an unemployed man?"

"Bring him here," she replied.

After he stuffed himself with various delicacies, she went to bed, and the two of them retreated to the office. Bruno told him everything that had happened, including details about the murder of Cagnoli and his secretary that the police had not released to the press.

Edi listened attentively and commented:

"They ripped out all his nails and killed him... most likely, he didn't reveal what they wanted to know. Either he had nothing to say, or he resisted; otherwise, they would have left him some nails be-

fore killing him. I've witnessed treatments like that in Africa, and few can withstand them."

Bruno nodded and replied:

"Well, you know, Cagnoli wasn't the weak notary he appeared to be. He fought in the First World War with the *Arditi* troops, and one evening while we were enjoying two Cognacs, he recounted several episodes from when he commanded a unit of *Caimani del Piave*. You've probably heard of those guys."

"Yes, of course," Edi replied, "I met a couple of them who were already of a certain age, and they were all tough guys."

Bruno moved on to the instructions for the next day:

"I'm staying home tomorrow, and maybe for a few more days. I want to catch that mysterious visitor. You'll go out, pretending to be me, wearing my overcoat and a hat pulled down over your eyes, protected by dark glasses. You'll take the Mini from the garage and discreetly check the places Crisanti frequents. We'll keep in touch via the CB."

He handed Edi a folder containing photographs and addresses of the places the engineer frequented.

While Edi was flipping through the folder, Bruno asked him:

"Are you armed?"

Edi looked up, surprised:

"Not really... do you think it's necessary?"

"I don't know," Bruno said, "but better safe than sorry. Follow me."

He stood up, followed by Edi, and opened the door to a storage room inside which there was a heavy metal safe with a combination lock.

His passion for weapons had begun during military service. In Comsubin, one had to be a sharpshooter, and then often at sea, he would go to the stern with other colleagues to shoot overboard at makeshift targets. After his discharge, he continued his shooting practice by attending the shooting range in Borgo San Sergio, where he was known as an excellent marksman.

When he opened the two heavy doors, Edi whistled in admiration. On the back wall hung his extensive collection. All the weapons had undergone

meticulous maintenance, resembling a display in a gunsmith's shop.

At the bottom of the cabinet were stacked numerous boxes of ammunition, sufficient to withstand a long siege.

Edi's first comment was about a Remington 870 pump-action shotgun, below which were about ten boxes of single-ball and 9-pellet cartridges. Smiling, he asked:

"Do you use this to demolish walls?"

Bruno returned the smile and invited him:

"Pick a pistol."

Edi approached and examined them closely. After staring longingly at a Smith & Wesson 29 revolver, a rare version with a 10 in. barrel that fired .44 Magnum cartridges, he chose a Beretta 34 9mm that looked brand new, along with a shoulder holster, and pocketed a box of ammunition. Then he asked Bruno:

"All of these are properly declared, right?"

Bruno replied with a smile:

"Yes, all except the Uzi, which I received as a gift, not exactly officially."

In front of the guest room, they said their goodnites, and Bruno retreated to his. He didn't fall

asleep immediately because he began to formulate hypotheses on how to deal with the mysterious visitor without frightening his aunt too much. Then he fell into a deep sleep.

At 8 AM sharp, Edi left the house and descended the stairs to open the garage. Turning his back to the street, he lingered with an excuse at the metal door to make himself noticeable to any potential mysterious visitor. After opening it, he got into the Mini, immediately turned on the CB, and slowly drove down the boulevard. In the rear view mirror, he noticed an old white Fiat 850 about fifty yards behind him, which at the moment didn't raise his suspicions.

He proceeded slowly to the intersection with Via Rossetti, where he turned right and, at the end of the street, turned left, accelerating along Via Battisti. At the end, he turned right and slowed down. In the mirror, he saw the 850 appear in a hurry and then slow down in turn.

Good, he thought to himself, I've got you. He drove normally until he reached the Roiano neighborhood and parked in front of a bar. He saw the 850 pass him and slow down in search of parking.

Edi quickly exited the parking lot with a swift U-turn and, taking full advantage of the Mini's maneuverability, quickly left the neighborhood, heading at a brisk pace toward Miramare. He absolutely had to avoid letting the pursuer realize that it wasn't Bruno behind the wheel.

Bruno was enjoying his coffee in his aunt's kitchen and was giving her instructions:

"Open all the windows facing the boulevard to air out the rooms and make yourself as noticeable as possible. When he calls, if he speaks, answer; otherwise, wait for him to hang up and then put the phone down."

Alina was calm knowing that Bruno would stay home and went to throw open the windows, humming as he closed himself in his office. He was in the storage room with the doors of the safe open when he heard Edi's voice on the CB. He replied, and his friend briefly described the situation:

"I had a Fiat 850 on my tail since I left. I lost him for good in Roiano, and he didn't realize you weren't driving."

"Good, Edi,"

Bruno replied, satisfied,

"you can proceed as I told you. I believe your pursuer will come to me now."

The other voice said, chuckling:

"Take it easy with the artillery."

He closed the communication and returned to the storage room, where he chose a Glisenti 7.65 and slipped it into his pocket after checking that the magazine was full. It was an old Italian-made weapon, almost identical to the Luger P08, lightweight, accurate, and reliable.

At noon sharp, the phone rang.

His aunt, who was in the other office, answered on the third ring, and he heard her say:

"No, I'm sorry, he's not in the office. You'll find him tomorrow."

Then she peeked through the door and said:

"He was looking for you. He has a foreign accent... it sounds Spanish."

"Good,"

Bruno said,

"when he rings the doorbell, go open it and let him in; I'll be behind you, don't worry."

His aunt nodded and disappeared into her office.

At exactly noon, the doorbell rang, which had a different sound from the intercom down at the entrance. Bruno's doubts about the visitor's intentions vanished. The phone call had served to ascertain that his aunt was alone at home, and the visit evidently wasn't a courtesy call. He maintained a cold calm, and his strong desire to act intensified.

His aunt opened the door and took two steps back with wide eyes. The stranger entered silently, closing the door behind him, and as he took a step toward his aunt, he felt the cold barrel of the Glisenti pressing against his neck. He let out a word of annoyance and surprise in his language:

*"Me cago en..."*

Bruno turned to his aunt:

"Go to the kitchen and close the door."

Then to the stranger, pressing the barrel harder against his neck, he said in a low, threatening voice:

"If you have any weapons on you, I advise you to take them out very slowly and drop them to the floor; otherwise, I'll have to search you while you're unconscious."

He took a few steps back, keeping the gun pointed at his head, and waited. A few seconds later,



a short barreled S&W 38 special and a folding knife fell to the floor. The voice said:

"I have nothing else."

"Good," Bruno said, "now walk to that room at the end of the hallway and sit in that chair."

He stood in front of him, remaining a few meters away to avoid any potential reaction attempts, and warned him:

"Be careful what you do. If you think I wouldn't shoot you, consider that you entered my house threatening me with a gun, and I had to defend myself by shooting you. Even some of my police friends know I'm an excellent shot, so the hole I'd make in your forehead wouldn't surprise anyone."

The other nodded silently, and Bruno continued:

"Talk to me about what you're looking for and who sent you."

The stranger looked at him silently with an impassive air of defiance, and Bruno, keeping him in his sights, grabbed the CB microphone:

"Edi, are you there?"

After a few seconds, his friend replied, and Bruno continued:

"Listen, I have this piece of shit in front of me, still alive. He won't talk, and I don't need him anymore. I need your help to get rid of the body."

The voice on the CB responded:

"I'm on my way!"

He turned to the stranger, who now looked much more worried than before:

"If you don't tell me what I want to know, you won't be of any use to me. So you could end up in the middle of the Gulf with a block of cement tied around your neck. They'd find you after years. Start by telling me where you're from, since you're not Italian."

The stranger looked him in the eyes and understood that he was facing someone resolute who might even resort to torture to get the information he sought. He didn't fear torture but decided to buy time and said:

"I'm from Costa Rica."

At that moment, Edi entered, keeping the man under gunpoint, and said to his friend:

"Take everything he has in his pockets and make a photocopy of everything that has writing on it, then put everything back where it was."

While his friend searched him, tightening his carotid with one hand and remaining behind him, Bruno had an idea. He would leave everything in the hands of the police, knowing that Carlo would surely keep him informed of developments. He picked up the phone and dialed a number:

"Hello, this is Dr. Fonda, and I'd like to speak with Superintendent Giuliani."

When they connected him, he continued:

"Hi Carlo, I have a nice gift for you. I have a guy from Costa Rica who broke into my house brandishing a 38 special... now he's sitting here in front of me, but I was forced to threaten him with a weapon. His is on the floor near the front door,"

and after listening to his interlocutor, he added:

"Okay Carlo, I'm waiting for the patrol; it's all yours, thanks, bye."

While Edi was putting everything back in the stranger's pockets after photocopying what he had found, the stranger turned to Bruno:

"You're making a big mistake calling the police."

The response came in a calm but grim tone:

"Yes, I know; I should have shot you in the leg and left you sitting there bleeding on the street."

It was Edi who kept the intruder under gun-point while Bruno examined the photocopies, waiting for the patrol's arrival.

## Chapter 2.

Bruno was surprised to find, among the items in his pockets, the crumpled note from the Costa Rican. It was a detailed exploded view of an Uzi submachine gun, the same model as the one he had in his closet. He recalled that Edi had placed two small screwdrivers on the table, taken from the unknown man's pockets. Had the man intended to disassemble his Uzi? It didn't make sense. Still, Bruno remembered that his weapon had come from Costa Rica.

During a crossing with the *Artigliere*, they had docked in Puerto Limón on the Atlantic coast, where they stayed for a couple of weeks. One of the first evenings in port, Bruno entered a nearby tavern. While sipping a beer at his table, he was approached by an elderly local man named Jesús Ortega, and they struck up a conversation. The old man spoke almost perfect Italian, and soon they became friends, meeting every evening to drink and engage in endless discussions.

On the last evening before the ship's departure, Jesús arrived with a canvas bag, saying, "I brought you a gift since you're leaving tomorrow."

"And why do I deserve a gift?" Bruno asked, smiling.

The old man returned the smile, saying, “You know I’m a widower, with no children or friends. I really enjoyed our chats.”

Bruno opened the bag to find the Uzi, surrounded by four full magazines. Stunned, he looked at the old man, who insisted, “Please accept it. I don’t need it here; we don’t even have an army, and I wouldn’t know what to do with it. It could be useful to you.”

And so, after that meeting many years ago, the Uzi ended up in his collection.

He pondered that encounter for a long time. The man had seemed very old then, and now he was probably dead. Bruno couldn’t find anything that connected him to the visitor aside from the Uzi. The screwdrivers... perhaps the man had wanted to disassemble it, but why? One disassembles something because they believe it contains items of interest. He thought of conducting a test. He placed the Uzi on the small table in the storage room where he usually cleaned his weapons and wondered: which part requires a screwdriver to remove? Obviously, he thought, it must be the grip panels, which he had never disassembled.

Driven by curiosity, he unscrewed and removed the two grip panels. Under the right one, he found a half-centimeter strip of wax paper lying in the available space beneath the grip. The paper was folded a couple of times,

and once unfolded, Bruno found himself staring at a microfilm.

“Bingo!” he thought.

He grabbed a large magnifying glass and began examining the frames. It was impossible to understand anything; there were glimpses of texts and drawings, but they were completely incomprehensible. A microfilm reader was needed, so he called Edi to tell him about the discovery. His friend responded immediately, “I have a portable reader; I’ll bring it over in a couple of hours.”

Edi arrived as promised, carrying a bulky sports bag, and placed it on the office desk. He took out the portable viewer and assembled it in a few minutes, positioning the retractable screen against the wall. Bruno inserted the microfilm, consumed by curiosity, and began scrolling through the frames.

Neither of them understood anything. It seemed to be a technical description of some equipment, accompanied by diagrams and rather complex mathematical formulas. The texts and captions were in an unknown language that resembled none they knew. They spent a long time reviewing all the frames, but in the end, they surrendered, rather disappointed.

Bruno, resigned, said, “I wonder why old Jesús wanted to give me the Uzi. I don’t believe he didn’t know

about the microfilm; that means he wanted to get rid of it.”

Edi, thoughtful, replied, “First, we need to find out what’s on the microfilm. I have an idea.”

Bruno raised his eyebrows, looking at him expectantly for a good idea, and Edi continued, “I know someone who can help us. He works at the Theoretical Physics Center in Miramare and is a brainiac. It’s probably better if you meet him in person instead of calling him. I’ll go right away because I’m curious to uncover this mystery.”

He left everything on the desk and hurried out.

The next day, Edi entered Bruno’s house accompanied by his friend, a lanky young man with huge glasses for nearsightedness. After the introductions, they sat in Bruno’s office next to the viewer.

Federico Brandi was a promising student who had been personally invited by Professor Abdus Salam, the founder and director of the Theoretical Physics Center in Miramare, for his extraordinary knowledge of physics and mathematics. Despite his young age, he was held in high regard by all the scholars at the Center.

The two friends watched impatiently as the young man scrolled through the frames. Sometimes he would go back to examine one more closely before moving on to the next. At the end of the viewing, the young man finally spoke but disappointed their expectations:



“I can’t understand the content because I don’t know Latvian, and I would need to have it translated. There’s a student from Riga at the Center who could do it.”

He paused for a moment and then continued in a serious tone, “But I have the impression that there’s dangerous stuff here...”

“Dangerous?” Bruno asked, surprised, and the other clarified, “Some formulas refer to the behavior of certain radioactive isotopes. I see some mentioned like Deuterium, Tritium, Uranium-235, which usually have military applications.”

Edi interjected, “Are you saying this is a project for an atomic bomb?”

“It doesn’t seem like a project,” the other replied, “but it could be a variant of a project and an explanation of the phenomena involved in it. I would need to understand the texts in Latvian to be more precise.”

Edi took the young man to the Center and quickly returned to Bruno, asking him, “What do you think?”

“I want to know exactly what this is about before passing everything to Carlo. I’m personally involved because it’s evident that they somehow traced back to old Jesús and the fact that he gave me the Uzi. They must be people with considerable resources to have managed to find me after so many years.”

“Yes,” Edi replied, “and I also believe they are extremely dangerous people if the content of the microfilm concerns devices for military purposes.”

Bruno nodded and retorted, “I don’t trust carrying the microfilm around. It’s better if Federico sends us the Latvian friend to translate the texts. For safety, we’ll copy the texts from the microfilm, excluding the formulas, which we’ll copy separately, and we’ll have the copy translated. Then we’ll hide the microfilm. Call Federico to ask him to send us his friend just for the translation, and later we’ll meet with him for the interpretation of everything.”

He paused for a moment and then added, “Also promise him a fee for the translation.”

Edi nodded and added, “We also have a lot of copying work to do... we should get started right away.”

Edi called Federico at the Center and arranged for his Latvian friend to visit the day after tomorrow. They immediately got to work, copying the texts in Latvian with the utmost precision and, on a separate series of sheets, only the formulas and graphs, leaving blank spaces to insert the translated texts.

On the appointed day, Andris Ozola arrived. A tall blond young man with an athletic build and a friendly demeanor. He spoke perfect Italian and immediately got to work. Around noon, Aunt Alina, who had taken a liking to him right away, asked him what he wanted to eat. After

he replied that he was too busy to eat, Andris saw a tray arrive at the desk where he was working, the contents of which would feed an entire family. As she returned to the kitchen, Aunt Alina, winking, said to Bruno, "He's young and needs to eat, poor thing."

He worked for three days, lovingly fed by Aunt Alina. Every evening, Edi would take him to the Center and pick him up the next morning. On the last day, he showed up with a bulky scientific dictionary that he consulted for a long time. He finished the work in the late afternoon and handed the sheets to Bruno with a smile: "All done. I checked all the scientific terminology in Italian, and it's perfectly correct."

Bruno gave him the generous promised fee in five-thousand-lira banknotes, thanking him. Aunt Alina warmly bid him farewell with a smile as he left with Edi, who was taking him back to the Center.

When Edi returned, they immediately got to work reassembling the original document, inserting the translated texts into the appropriate spaces. They took a short break to eat something and continued until late at night. Once the work was finished, they decided to go to bed without trying to understand anything. The next day, Federico would return.

When the young scientist entered the office, immediately after greeting him, Bruno said seriously, "Before I let you examine all the documentation that will now be

perfectly understandable to you, I want you to assure me of your utmost discretion. Especially if, as it seems, there is information that could become dangerous in the hands of ill-intentioned people. I can assure you that after understanding who is interested in the microfilm, I will pass everything to the Police, and they will take care of it.”

He paused, looking him in the eyes. Federico, returning the gaze, replied, “Don’t worry, Dr. Fonda, once I communicate my opinion on the content, I will completely forget about this episode in which I was involved only because of the friendship I have with Edi Rustia. I want to return a favor I received from him in the past, which was extremely important to me.”

Bruno read sincerity in the young man’s eyes and added, “Of course, you will be adequately compensated for the help you are giving me.”

Federico sat at the desk and began examining the translated content of the microfilm. Bruno and Edi left him alone and retreated to the other office.

They hadn’t received any news from Carlo, and they were both curious to know the status of the investigations. After all, there were no valid reasons to link the murders of Cagnoli and his secretary with the microfilm. The superintendent still knew nothing about the microfilm, while Bruno had a feeling there was a connection, and Edi agreed with him.

After a couple of hours, Federico announced that he was finished, and the two friends returned to the office. They were both eager to know. Bruno simply said, “So?”

The young scientist began to speak in a very serious tone: “My first impression was wrong. This is a detailed project for building an E-bomb. I believe part of the content comes from Edward Teller’s personal notes, but I can’t explain why the text is in Latvian if he was Hungarian and then naturalized American.”

Both of his two interlocutors were enormously surprised, and Bruno asked, “An E-bomb? What is that, and who is Teller?”

Federico tried to explain in the simplest way possible: “The E-bomb is an electromagnetic pulse bomb that serves to disable any electronic device within its range. It doesn’t harm people but only machinery. No radios, no radars, no weapon controls. If the power is sufficiently high, the electromagnetic bomb also blocks electric motors and internal combustion engines. No planes, tanks, trucks. War goes back to how it was in the last century.”

He paused, noticing the enormous astonishment of the two, and continued, “Edward Teller is a physicist considered the father of the H-bomb and still works in the United States. Until now, the destructive effect of electromagnetic pulses was observed as a consequence of the explosion of an H-bomb. Here, however, a completely

new, simpler, and cheaper system for producing these pulses is described. A very powerful E-bomb could prevent the enemy from using any other weapon. It's a non-lethal weapon but deadly because it practically disarms the enemy."

Carlo Giuliani was in his office, carefully rereading, for the umpteenth time, the minutes of Rafael Rojas's interrogation. The Costa Rican hadn't said much and hadn't yet requested a lawyer. It was very strange that he hadn't done so because it would be unusual to appear before the GIP<sup>1</sup> for the confirmation of the arrest without a defense attorney.

He had refused to answer the reason that had led him to enter Bruno's home armed and had limited himself to providing only his personal details, verified by the passport he had with him, declaring that he was in Trieste for tourism and that he was staying in a hotel near the train station.

These statements irritated Carlo, even though he didn't show it. For the moment, the man was under arrest for illegal possession of weapons. Carlo had justified the arrest with the flagrant offense. But without a complaint from Bruno, he couldn't accuse him of breaking and entering and armed threat.

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1 Preliminary investigations judge

Carlo wanted to keep him as long as possible, but he wasn't sure that the GIP would validate the arrest, so he was waiting to add some other more serious charges.

From an examination of the passport, he noticed that Rojas had five entry stamps for Latvia, which was Soviet territory, for which he had obtained a regular entry visa in Costa Rica. The lengths of stay in Riga were always just a few days, which surely weren't dedicated to tourism, Carlo thought.

He decided to call Bruno to ask if he was willing to file a complaint. His friend replied that he was more than willing to do so and that he would come to the police station the next day.

As soon as he entered, Bruno had the air of a good citizen turning to the authorities for a crime he had suffered. Carlo was slightly surprised by such a rather detached attitude and said to him, "I'll take your complaint. I need to be able to accuse him of something more than just possession of weapons to get the arrest validated."

Bruno looked at him with a slight smile and replied, "I believe I can give you something more than just armed threat."

He waited for Carlo to write down the text of the complaint under his dictation and signed it. Then he added, "There's more..."

He began to recount in minute detail the story of the Uzi, the discovery of the microfilm, and what he had uncovered. Edi Rustia could confirm everything, should it be necessary, before a magistrate. Carlo let him speak until the end and then reached for the small envelope with the microfilm that Bruno was handing him, saying, "I want to be honest with you, Carlo, I had the microfilm translated by discreet friends, and this is the result."

He handed him a folder with all the translations while Carlo raised his eyebrows in surprise and asked, "What is it about?"

Bruno, in a serious tone, replied, "Bad business. It's the project for building an E-bomb."

Carlo carefully placed the folder in a drawer and said to him in a worried tone, "Really bad business..." and added, "you are illegally in possession of that Uzi. In my report, I'll have to find a way not to mention that fact and let the discovery of the microfilm pass in different ways. Rojas wasn't present at the time of the discovery, so the official version can be another and more favorable for you. We'll think about it when the time comes. For now, I have enough arguments to get the arrest validated."

Bruno commented, "The E-bomb is much more concerning than my Uzi. There could be terrorists involved in this story. Given Rojas's trips to Latvia, wouldn't it be wise to alert the Services?"



“I will definitely do that. I have a good friend from the Digos here in Trieste. I don’t have the means to move in a matter like this, but he does. I just need to verify that Rojas has nothing to do with the murders of Cagnoli and his secretary.”

Bruno looked at him seriously, “I want to make sure of that too. Do you have any news on that?”

“From the testimonies of the neighbors, which seem quite reliable, the first shot was heard at 9:30 PM, while the second was around 11. Both times are consistent with what the coroner estimated.”

Bruno commented in a somber voice, as if speaking to himself, “Poor Cagnoli... they must have tortured him for an hour and a half.”

“If Rojas is involved,” Carlo added, “he must surely have accomplices. I’ve put two of my best investigators on the case. I want to reconstruct every little move of Rojas from his arrival in Italy. From the first checks, it seems he arrived in Rome from Costa Rica ten days ago, and as soon as he landed at Fiumicino, he took the first flight to Trieste. The accomplices, if they exist, must be in the city.”

Bruno thought he had overlooked the other work that might be connected and asked, “Have you heard from Crisanti?”

“I haven’t heard from him for the moment,” Carlo replied, “because among Cagnoli’s correspondence, I

found a telegram from a law firm in San José, announcing the visit of one of their officials to Italy next month for business related to a donation. My team is still sifting through everything to see if Crisanti's name comes up in any documents. In any case, we are monitoring the notary's phone lines, simulating a regularly functioning office."

Bruno nodded and, after advising his friend to stay in touch, left.

Returning to his office, he decided to focus on Crisanti. He reviewed all his notes, and the Costa Rica information popped up again. The confidential information that lawyer Candler had, the source of which he couldn't reveal even to his friend Bruno, referred to a phantom transfer of funds in favor of Crisanti coming from that country. It couldn't be ruled out that this fact was connected to the telegram Carlo had found in the correspondence of the murdered notary.

When Bruno asked Candler where he had learned about these funds, the lawyer apologized and told him that despite their friendship, he couldn't reveal the source. He justified himself by saying that it wasn't a lack of trust in Bruno but a solemn commitment made to the person who had confided the matter to him. Bruno accepted the explanation, although he was a bit surprised.

Crisanti was a well-known figure in the city with a controversial reputation. He had been a member of the city council in the past and also a promoter of several initiatives that had garnered the favor of most citizens. He lived, rent-free, in a prestigious apartment in Piazza Venezia, owned by his ex-wife, with whom he was divorced and had no children. Rumor had it that he had recently suffered a financial collapse of unclear contours, caused by a large real estate investment that had unexpectedly turned out to be a failure, for which he had to answer to Candler's client, who demanded compensation. Only a few gossips insinuated that it was a disguised attempt at fraud.

Several years earlier, Crisanti had been involved in a sordid pedophilia case along with other well-known figures in the city, but he had subsequently been exonerated.

All in all, he was a very controversial figure but could count on important friendships in the city and also in Rome at the political level, so he had to be treated with extreme delicacy and discretion.

The next day, he decided to take Aunt Alina out for dinner, intending to combine business with pleasure. When he proposed it to her, she let out a little squeal of joy: "Oh yes... it's been so long since we went out together, but I need to get ready to go out with a handsome young man like you. I'll be ready by eight."

Bruno made a reservation for two at Pepi Granzo, a typical restaurant right in Piazza Venezia, on the banks, just a few dozen meters from Crisanti's residence.

At exactly eight-thirty, Bruno parked the Alfa Romeo in front of the restaurant entrance, ignoring the no-parking sign. It was a Tuesday, and the place wasn't very crowded. Aunt Alina had pulled out her best outfit for the occasion and had even found time to have her hair done by a nearby friend. She was radiant when they sat at the table, her back to the wall and her face toward the room, the place that befits a lady, while Bruno sat across from her, facing away from the room.

The waiter arrived immediately, and they ordered a fish dinner. Bruno also asked for the local delicacy, the "gransievola," since it was in season. While Aunt Alina sipped some chilled white wine waiting for the dishes to arrive, Bruno took a photograph from his pocket and handed it to her, saying with a smile, "Let me know if you see this person enter."

Aunt Alina looked at him in surprise: "You're quite the rascal, you know, you brought me here for work..." then, with a charming smile, she added, "but I'm still happy about this invitation because it's been so long since we went out together."

Then, lowering her voice, she added with a conspiratorial air, "I'll keep it under the napkin to compare it with everyone who enters."

The conversation fell silent right after the arrival of the gransievola, and they were both very busy with the delicacies that Pepi Granzo was known for.

It was ten o'clock. They were the only ones left in the restaurant, and after coffee, they were sipping a Pelinkovac when Aunt Alina whispered, "There he is, he just walked in with two other people."

Bruno thought that fortune favors the brave, but sometimes also the stubborn like him. He didn't turn around to avoid drawing attention but noticed from their chatter that the group was settling at a couple of tables away from theirs. Without turning, Bruno strained to hear their conversation, and his attention peaked when he caught fragments of dialogue in Spanish. He placed a tiny recorder on the table next to him, with a very sensitive directional microphone, disguised in a Marlboro pack, and set an old Zippo lighter on top of it. Aunt Alina quietly alerted him every time the group looked their way. The fake pack contained only two cigarettes; Bruno took one out and, turning toward the center of the room, casually glanced at the group. He loudly asked the waiter for an ashtray and lit the Marlboro while the recorder captured everything.

Around midnight, Crisanti asked for the bill, and Bruno did the same, along with another Pelinkovac. They all exited almost together, and Bruno stopped near his car while the others crossed the square. He lit a cigarette

while Aunt Alina got in, but he only had time for a few puffs before the group disappeared into the darkness of the doorway leading to Crisanti's apartment.

He stayed in the car chatting with his aunt, keeping an eye on the door for half an hour, but saw no one come out. He deemed it pointless to continue the stake-out and decided to return home while his aunt, sitting beside him, yawned openly.

The next morning, before even listening to the recording, he called Carlo: "This might be useful to you... last night I was at dinner at Pepi Granzo, and two tables away, there was Crisanti with two guys speaking Spanish. What a coincidence."

On the other end of the line, Carlo remained silent, waiting for more, and he continued, "He paid the bill with a Diners Club credit card. I wonder if your Digos friend can trace which bank account it's associated with. I'd really like to know, and I think you would too."

After a few seconds of silence, Carlo's response was very brief: "Got it. I'll get in touch."

He hung up. Bruno was sure it shouldn't be difficult for the Digos friend to trace the bank account from which that credit card drew funds after identifying the number from the restaurant's accounting.

He then began to listen to the recording. The two were speaking with Crisanti in Italian with a noticeable

Spanish accent while, among themselves, they exchanged a few words in Spanish. The fact that they used “vos” instead of “tú” and their clear and very understandable pronunciation indicated that they were from Central America and most likely Costa Ricans.

The conversation was rather banal but provided Bruno with two very interesting pieces of information. Crisanti offered to host them since they were now only two and suggested they leave the hotel. The other even more interesting snippet of conversation was when one of the Costa Ricans, in a low voice, said to the other in Spanish, “Alejandro, listen... it must be that Rafael...” and the other immediately interrupted him, irritated, “Don’t say names, *coño!*”

It was proof that the two knew Rafael Rojas, so Crisanti was also involved in the microfilm affair, and one of them was named Alejandro. They were most likely all staying at the Hotel Regina, across from the train station, where Rojas had claimed to be staying as well.

Carlo Giuliani would be thrilled to check the hotel’s guest list. While he was wondering if there was also a connection to Cagnoli’s murder, he was seized by a dull and almost uncontrollable rage. He tried to calm down, and after several minutes, he managed to regain his composure and coolness. He began to think about how to verify such a possible connection with the two murders.

The matter had become even more complicated, and he needed Edi, but first, he had to speak with Carlo again. He called his office, but an agent told him that he was out of town and would return the next day. He didn't want to take any initiative before hearing from him, so he let the day pass, reflecting on what he had learned so far and trying to rationalize everything. On the corkboard in front of his desk, he began pinning notes with the names of all the characters involved, trying to find a logical connection between them. In the evening, he decided to let his boiling brain rest, but he couldn't think of a better idea than to have dinner again at Pepi Granzo. When he proposed it to his aunt, she responded with a broad smile, "Bruno, it would be too much honor for me to have two invitations so close together..." but then she became serious and added, "joking aside, I'm a bit tired and would prefer to stay home if you don't mind and if you don't really need me."

He reassured her that he would gladly go alone and added, "Maybe I'll have the chance to make some romantic encounters."

As he was about to leave, his aunt commented from the kitchen, "It's about time you found yourself a nice girl, especially a serious one."

Bruno left smiling. He felt a deep affection for the woman who had been like a mother to him and intended to continue being so.



He parked the Alfa Romeo around nine, in the usual no-parking spot, thinking that at that hour, the locals would all be home in front of the TV watching Canzonissima.

The place was quite crowded, and he found a table for two at the back of the room. The waiter was the same as the last time, and he handed him the menu with a broad smile. He refused it, returning the smile, and ordered only the gransievola and a bottle of white wine. The delicate flesh of that delicious crustacean and the refined bouquet of the ribolla gialla, served at the ideal temperature, infused him with a certain cheerfulness. At the end of the meal, he had a strong coffee and a Pelinkovac.

He was savoring the aroma of the absinthe emanating from the liqueur when he saw Crisanti enter. He was alone, and after looking around, he took a seat at a table for two, similar to his, on the other side of the room.

Bruno's brain resumed functioning at full speed. If he had chosen a table for two, it meant the two Costa Ricans had left. Here was another topic to develop with Carlo. He ordered a second Pelinkovac and lit a cigarette, casually looking around. When he saw Crisanti struggling with some scampi alla busera, he decided it was time to leave.

As he exited, he passed close to Crisanti, but the latter didn't notice him at all as he was busy avoiding the

splashes of sauce that normally come from that dish. He got back into the Alfa Romeo, which, as he had predicted, showed no parking violation notices under the windshield wiper, and headed home, thinking about his meeting with Carlo the next day.

He parked the Alfa Romeo with two wheels on the sidewalk just before the entrance of the police station, completely ignored by the guard at the door. He quickly walked up the ramp of stairs leading to the upper floor and reached the superintendent's office. The door was wide open, and he entered directly.

Carlo Giuliani welcomed him with a slight smile and a handshake: "Sit down, Bruno, I have quite a few updates, and I imagine you do too. Please start."

Bruno nodded and began, "Well, I also have a recording made at the restaurant," he said, "while they were at the table with Crisanti, one of the two Costa Ricans mentioned Rafael but was immediately silenced by the other. This means they know each other. That evening after dinner, they went up to Crisanti's place, where he offered them hospitality. Instead, last night I was again at dinner at Pepi Granzo, and I saw Crisanti dining alone. I believe they have left."

He took the disguised recorder out of his jacket pocket and handed it to his friend: "Have a copy

made of the recording. It won't be a producible piece of evidence in court, but it's always useful."

Carlo frowned and replied seriously, "I had hoped to find them still at Crisanti's because I had decided to interrogate them and confront them with Rojas. We have verified that at the Hotel Regina, they were staying in three different rooms: Rafael Rojas, Manolo Gutierrez, and Alejandro Jesús Ortega. Rojas is still registered and has his luggage still there, but we have notified the reception that he is under arrest. The other two left the hotel yesterday morning, and I thought they were at Crisanti's. I will have my colleagues check all possible flights to Costa Rica, but I also fear they have already left."

Bruno nodded and asked, "What about the credit card? Have you found out anything?"

"It wasn't difficult. They had just set up to accept that credit card and had received very few payments with that system. We immediately obtained the number, but it turned out to be linked to a foreign bank account. Marco Russo, the Digos officer I mentioned to you, is taking care of it."

He paused and explained, "He's an experienced guy, very capable, from Naples, been in Trieste for

thirty years,” and added with a smile, “and he doesn’t know a word of our dialect.”

Bruno stood up to leave but stopped: “Did you say one is named Jesús Ortega?”

“Exactly, his name is Alejandro Jesús Ortega,” his friend replied with a questioning look, and Bruno added, “How strange... the man who gave me the Uzi is named or was named Jesús Ortega.”

Carlo commented, “Ortega is a very common surname throughout Latin America, and Jesús is even more so.”

“Yes, I believe so,” Bruno replied and left the office.

The next morning, Bruno received a phone call: “Good morning, Dr. Fonda, this is Russo.”

Bruno was in a good mood that morning and felt like responding, “Good, and I’m Italian,” but simply said, “Good morning to you,” waiting.

The other continued, “I just spoke with Carlo Giuliani on the phone, and I believe a conversation with you would be useful. I would be available right away if that works for you.”

Bruno was very interested in speaking with this man and replied, "I'm in the office all day... whenever you want."

The brief response was, "I'll be there in half an hour."

Marco Russo was a short man in his fifties, rather chubby and almost completely bald. The few short gray hairs framed his head, leaving the top completely bare. His small, perfectly round glasses for nearsightedness gave him the appearance of an insignificant clerk. He was the classic individual that no one notices.

When he began to speak, Bruno noticed a different light in his eyes, and as he continued his discourse, his anonymous appearance faded, making him appear as a different, authoritative, and charismatic person. He started with a question: "You're a private investigator, right?"

At Bruno's nod of assent, he continued, "I took a look at our files regarding you, and I would like to ask how and how much you are involved in this matter."

Bruno leaned back in his chair and decided to consider him a useful ally. After a few seconds, look-

ing him in the eyes, he replied seriously, "I had a long-standing, even affectionate relationship with notary Cagnoli, who was a family friend. The news of his murder deeply affected me, especially due to the brutality with which it occurred. The intrusion of Rafael Rojas into my home greatly disturbed me, and I confess, I would have liked the opportunity to defend myself by shooting him. This desire grew even more after discovering the microfilm hidden in my Uzi. It was an unacceptable attack on my privacy and security, as well as that of my aunt. Furthermore, the fact that they have saddled me with that microfilm without my consent is unacceptable. As a law-abiding private investigator, I am naturally inclined to seek justice, but I cannot deny that a thought of revenge crosses my mind."

The light in Russo's eyes seemed to intensify, and he replied in a serious tone, "The matter of the microfilm is quite serious and has prompted me to involve the central command in Rome, which has authorized me to proceed with the investigations. We have confirmed that the two Costa Ricans staying with Crisanti left the country a few days ago, while Superintendent Giuliani still has Rafael Rojas in custody, and he will likely be able to hold him until the

trial thanks to your complaint. What is strange is that Rojas is still waiting for his trusted lawyer, who should be arriving from abroad, but so far, he hasn't shown up."

He paused and continued, "For several months, Rome had unconfirmed information that an unidentified foreign organization was interested in the E-bomb. Until now, there have been no investigations due to a lack of concrete evidence, and even now that we have the microfilm, it's too little to get those in Rome moving, while for me, it's more than enough."

He concluded with a half-smile and remained silent, waiting for Bruno's comments, who returned the smile and said, "I understand that convincing the higher-ups isn't a simple task. I, on the other hand, have decided to take a vacation, and I was thinking about Costa Rica, a country that seems very peaceful to me."

Russo's face lit up even more as he said, "Perfect, then. I'll let you know how to contact some of our friends in San José, who could make your stay more comfortable."

Then he added, "From what I hear from those at the Borgo San Sergio shooting range, you handle weapons quite well, right?"

Bruno replied with a slight smile, "Well, at Comsubin, it was mandatory to know how to handle all the weapons in service."

"Better that way..." Russo concluded, returning the smile.

They had understood each other instantly, without the need for words, and Bruno liked that seemingly insignificant little man, who seemed to prefer pragmatic solutions, free from bureaucratic obstacles. Russo was indeed a pragmatist and saw in Bruno a person capable of maneuvering independently, just like one of his agents. The idea that he could operate independently in Costa Rica intrigued him and proved advantageous for him as well.



### Chapter 3.

It was five in the morning, and Bruno was on the sidewalk in front of the departures entrance of the Ronchi dei Legionari airport. The flight to Rome was scheduled to take off in over an hour. He lit a cigarette from a new brand he had seen advertised on the black Lotus Formula One cars. The aroma of the Virginia blonde tobacco from John Player Special cleared his still sleepy mind and pleasantly surprised him.

Edi Rustia got out of a taxi almost in front of him, dragging a small trolley behind him. They had both decided to travel very light. They exchanged hasty greetings and headed together toward the boarding area.

The travel itinerary included the Trieste-Rome leg and then Rome-Miami. There were no direct flights from Italy, so they would look for a way to reach San José, the capital of Costa Rica, once they arrived in Miami. After about an hour of flying, they landed at Fiumicino, and three hours later, they took the flight to Miami.

After a smooth crossing, they landed at Miami International Airport and immediately went to the information desk in search of a flight to Costa Rica. The attentive hostess at the information desk, a bit hesitant, pointed them to only two airlines:

"You could try Pan Am or perhaps better Avianca. I don't think there are any other airlines for that destination."

At the Pan Am counter, they were told right away that the next flight would be the following week and that it was already fully booked. At the Avianca counter, there was a line of about ten people, and they joined it. They could hear that the first person in line, a big man with enormous mustaches, was loudly arguing with the hostess, protesting because his reservation was not showing up and there were no other available seats.

They began to worry when approached by a young man with olive skin who had been watching them for a few minutes, leaning against a column a few yards away. He was clearly a Latino, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, with a wide-brimmed straw hat with the sides rolled up, reminiscent of classic cowboy hats. He addressed Bruno in broken English with a strong Spanish accent:

"Do you want to go to Costa Rica?"

"Yes," Bruno replied. "Do you have any solutions?"

The other nodded and said quietly,

"It will cost you 500 bucks, and we leave in an hour. The landing will be in a field near San José, but from there, there are rental cars."

"Okay," Bruno replied, and the young man gestured for them to follow him. Staying a few meters behind him, Edi bent down for a moment and pulled out an elongated package from his boot, handing it to Bruno with a quiet gesture:

"It's a ceramic knife, put it in your pocket; I have another one. You never know with these strange airlines,"

he added with a smile,

"I think they are traffickers who make extra money on the return trip, secretly from their bosses."

They followed the young man outside the airport and got into a large white pickup truck that drove off and took a secondary entrance nearby. The driver showed a badge to the guard, who immediately raised the barrier. They reached a hangar a few hundred yards away, in front of which sat an old military

green DC-3 Dakota with the U.S. Air Force markings hastily painted over. The young man introduced the two new passengers to the pilot and left with the pickup.

In silence, Bruno handed five hundred-dollar bills to the man who didn't even remotely resemble a commercial airline captain, and who pocketed the money while cheerfully commenting in Spanish:

"I like gringos who have a lot of money. Welcome aboard."

The old DC-3 took off at the scheduled time after a long taxiing on the runway and a symphony of creaks inside the fuselage. The seats had been reduced to twelve, and the remaining space was free for transporting goods, most likely not entirely legal. During the flight, the roar of the two propeller engines was deafening but reassuringly steady. Bruno and Edi were the only two passengers on board, apart from the two pilots in the cockpit.

Edi recounted that he had flown many times on that type of aircraft when he was in Africa. It was a very common vehicle for military use because it was versatile and very maneuverable. He had also

parachuted several times from that type of aircraft during some missions. Bruno commented that he personally preferred water to air, and as Edi burst into a hearty laugh, he added,

"I would rather be on the Artigliere in a force ten sea than parachute from a rattling contraption like this."

After about five hours of flying, accompanied by vibrations and creaks of all kinds, the plane descended in altitude and prepared to land on a long strip of dirt. The maneuver was executed perfectly as the pilot stopped the plane right in front of a long wooden shack next to a rudimentary hangar. The airport obviously had no name, and the young man in jeans and tank top sitting behind the desk in the office where they entered, greeted them with a cordial but generic, "*Bienvenidos a Costa Rica!*"

Bruno asked if it was possible to rent a car, and the other replied in English with some Spanish inserts: "*Claro que sí, señor.* But you need to pay a deposit of five hundred American dollars, which will be refunded upon return of the vehicle."

Bruno lied:

"I don't have that amount in cash, but I could pay with American Express; is that possible?"

The other smiled and replied,

"*Seguro!* All gringos pay with that."

Bruno handed him his brand new Diners club card, which he had requested from his bank specifically for the trip. The young man took it with respect and deference and gently inserted it into the sliding machine to print the receipt. After completing the formalities, he led them to the back of the shack where the available cars were parked. There were several, including an old white Cadillac limousine that seemed well-preserved, but they chose a short-wheel-base Land Rover with a canvas top, which appeared to be in perfect condition. Not the most comfortable for long trips, but certainly very reliable and maneuverable in any operating condition.

Bruno also asked for maps, and the young man replied,

"Under the dashboard, you will find all the maps you might need."

He handed them the keys to the Land Rover and added, "It's full of fuel. *Que te vaya bien!*"

Bruno sat in the driver's seat, and Edi opened a map of the area next to him. The young man pointed out on the map where they were, and after tipping his hat in a sign of farewell, he returned to his office.

Bruno started the Land Rover along a dirt road until they reached a paved road and headed east. A timely compass had been added to the dashboard next to an inclinometer, and Bruno thought that, all in all, the services offered by that strange airline were very accurate and efficient.

There was not much traffic, and they covered the one hundred fifty kilometers that separated them from Puerto Limón comfortably in just over three hours. Once in the city, they began looking for a hotel. A passerby, mistaking them for tourists, pointed them to the *Hotel Playa Bonita*, on the beach just a few meters from the sea, which indeed looked like the best in town. It was a two-story building painted blue with white windows, very close to the beach. It had a clean appearance, and they took two adjoining rooms.

As soon as they entered their rooms, both lingered under the shower for a long time to wash off

the dust from the journey. The Land Rover had had its door windows removed and the side and rear tarpaulins lifted to compensate for the lack of air conditioning.

Before going downstairs, Bruno decided to call the number Russo had given him. He dialed it from the room phone, and after a few rings, a male voice answered: "Hola!"

Bruno said in English, "Good morning, I'm Marco Russo's friend..."

After a few seconds, the voice asked in Italian, "Are you alone? Where are you?"

"I'm with a friend at the *Playa Bonita* in Puerto Limón,"

Bruno replied.

The voice paused for a long moment and then responded,

"Stay there. I'll arrive tomorrow afternoon."

And then hung up.

He's not very talkative, Bruno thought as he left the room. He went down to the hotel bar, ordered a beer, and waited for Edi, who appeared a few minutes later. When he informed him about the phone call, Edi nodded and, sipping his beer, asked,



"Where did you meet the old man with the Uzi?"

Bruno tried to remember:

"It was a *soda*, but I don't remember the name..."

After a few seconds, he added,

"Ah, here it is, it was called *La Soda Bonita del Puerto*. It was near the port."

"Good,"

Edi replied,

"now we know where to have dinner tonight."

Around eight in the evening, they got into the Land Rover and followed the coastal road to reach the commercial port. They parked in front of the docks and looked around. There were only two small merchant ships docked, both flying the Costa Rican flag. Bruno recognized the dock where, many years earlier, they had moored the *Artigliere* and tried to remember the route from the dock to the tavern.

They ventured into the town, and shortly after, Edi exclaimed,

"It could be that one!"

pointing to a long, faded wooden sign that was partially legible, announcing: '*...Soda Bonita del...*'

The interior was not exactly what the sign promised, but much better. The place was modest but seemed clean and well-kept. One table near the bar was occupied by two patrons sharing a bottle of wine and speaking softly to each other. Bruno and Edi chose a table against the wall at the back of the room and sat down.

After a few minutes, the host appeared from a door behind the bar. A skinny man of medium height, in his fifties, with olive skin and jet-black hair slicked back and long at the nape. He sported two large mustaches that seemed disproportionate for his gaunt face and the sharp nose that sat above them.

He approached their table and greeted them in good English, inevitably interspersing a few Spanish words, as everyone seemed to do around there.

"*Bienvenidos señores!* My name is Pablo. Do you want to eat or just drink?"

Edi replied in the same language, joking and smiling,

"Pablo, we are hungry and thirsty. Bring us something good. You decide. My friend and I eat anything."

"*Bueno*," he said with a smile, "it will all be ready in a few minutes."

He returned shortly after with a bottle of locally produced Cabernet Sauvignon, already uncorked, and retreated to the door behind the bar. He reappeared after about ten minutes with a huge tray from which he served two plates piled high with meat, rice, and vegetables; it was a local specialty he called *casado*. They ate heartily, and towards the end of the meal, the host prepared coffee at the bar.

While waiting for the coffee to drip from the *chorredera*, Bruno got up from the table and approached a wall that was almost completely covered with old photographs. Most had been taken in that tavern during the visit of some famous person who was seen in the foreground or during some celebration. He began to observe some of them and stopped in front of one that seemed to be among the oldest. In the foreground was Jesús Ortega, much younger than he remembered, surrounded by other smiling people facing the camera. He returned to the table and whispered to Edi,

"I recognized the old man with the Uzi in one of those photos."

Calling his friend's utmost attention, who didn't have time to comment because the host arrived to serve the coffee. While pouring it into the cups, Bruno said to him,

"Pablo, you know, looking at your beautiful collection of old photos, I thought I recognized someone I believe I have seen before?"

The host, smiling and pleased with the success of his photographs, replied,

"There would be nothing strange about that because many of them are famous people, singers, writers, and even some politicians. Point out which one you think you know."

Bruno approached the wall and pointed to the photo. The host immediately responded,

"That's Rosario Escobar when he was still the owner of this soda, which he sold to my father about twenty years ago."

Bruno, surprised by the response, retorted,

"I must have been mistaken then because I seem to remember him being called Ortega..."

"No, señor, Jesús Ortega was my father. He passed away three years ago, may he rest in peace. The old Escobar, on the other hand, is still alive; I saw him in town last week."

Bruno didn't want to press further to avoid arousing his curiosity and cut to the chase:

"Well, it wasn't an important thing. Instead, I must compliment you on your specialties; everything was very good."

"*Muchas gracias, señor,*" replied the host.

Edi asked for the bill and paid in cash in American dollars. They left the *soda*, followed by the satisfied gaze of the host.

While driving, Bruno said,

"The fact that he introduced himself with a false name makes me think that the old man, when he gave me the Uzi, must have had a very specific plan in mind, but I can't imagine what it is."

Edi, thoughtful, commented,

"A long-term plan if he gave you the Uzi almost twenty years ago..."

"We need to talk to Russo's friend before delving into useless hypotheses,"

Bruno replied, steering the Land Rover back toward the hotel.

Jorge Calero was a close friend of Marco Russo. They had met in Italy and collaborated on numer-

ous investigations that led to the capture of Italian criminals doing business with South American drug traffickers. He was an officer of the O.I.J., a body not very well known to the general public in Costa Rica that discreetly dealt with intelligence. In appearance, he was the complete opposite of Marco. While Marco relied on his unremarkable appearance to avoid being noticed, Jorge, on the contrary, was a flashy type who loved elegance, women, and sports cars. In his fifties, tall and slender, with jet-black hair parted in the middle and two Clark Gable-style mustaches, he looked like a playboy, and no one would ever imagine he was a secret agent.

He arrived in the mid-afternoon in a roaring 7.2-liter Dodge Challenger convertible, a color of yellow that would not go unnoticed even by a blind person. He parked in front of the hotel and climbed the steps leading to the patio where Bruno and Edi were sitting and waiting for him. He addressed the two in a cordial tone:

"Gentlemen, Marco has already informed me of the situation, and I already know everything about you, so it's better that I introduce myself."

Bruno gestured for him to take a seat and, after a brief introduction of himself and the O.I.J., added,

"For some time now, we have had unconfirmed reports of a Central American organization seeking technologies and materials for the construction of an E-bomb. They probably have a buyer."

He then continued, addressing Bruno:

"From what Marco told me, you found a detailed project for the construction of an E-bomb hidden in an old Uzi that was given to you here in Puerto Limón. Is that correct?"

Bruno nodded and added, "Yesterday we went to dinner at the *Soda Bonita del Puerto*, where I met the person who gave me the Uzi almost twenty years ago. There's a photo hanging there that depicts him, but the host told me that he is called Rosario Escobar, while he introduced himself as Jesús Ortega, which is actually the name of the father of the current owner of the soda, who passed away recently."

"It's a strange web, don't you think?"

Edi said, turning to Jorge, who replied seriously,

"More than a strange web, I would say it's a dangerous web. We have been hunting Rosario Escobar for years, but so far, we have not been able to in-

criminate him as the head of a powerful Colombian cartel. It's a ruthless organization that controls almost all the criminal organizations in Central America that do business in the United States. Colombian cartels must go through their established channels for distribution, enriching them enormously. The FBI would do anything to incriminate him and bring him to Miami."

Bruno pondered those words for a moment and replied,

"Then perhaps it's not a good idea for me to go visit him to talk about old times..."

Jorge hurried to respond,

"I really don't think it's a good idea to meet him. He will surely be aware of everything that has happened in Italy, and here incidents happen easily and of all kinds."

He paused for a moment, looking at them, and asked,

"You're not armed, are you?"

Edi smiled and replied,

"All we managed to get through at the airport were two ceramic knives."

"Good for peeling pineapples," Jorge commented as he stood up and went to open the trunk



of the Dodge. He pulled out a wooden briefcase and opened it on the table. Edi let out a thin whistle of admiration at the sight of two Smith & Wesson 39 caliber 9mm pistols with a 14-round magazine. They were weapons used by the U.S. Navy Seals, precise and easy to handle.

"Help yourselves, guys!" Jorge had thought of everything when he invited them: underarm holsters, spare magazines, and ammunition. Once they had everything set up, Bruno turned to Jorge:

"Our main interest, which brought us to Costa Rica, is to uncover the murderers of Notary Cagnoli and his secretary. Are you aware of these crimes?"

Jorge almost apologized. "I don't know anything about it. I thought your presence in Costa Rica was due to the information trafficking regarding the A-bomb."

Bruno shook his head.

"It's very likely that the two matters are connected. I have a list of possible suspects in the crime, or at least those somehow involved. Please write down these names. You should check with your office if they have any files on them and if they are currently in Costa Rica."

He dictated the names that Jorge noted down in a small notebook: Paolo Crisanti, Italian; the others all Costa Ricans: Rafael Rojas, Manolo Gutierrez, Alejandro Jesús Ortega. He pocketed the notebook and said,

"I'll need to check in with the local police command to use their teleprinter. These aren't the kind of inquiries you make over the phone."

He stood up to head to the car and added, "I better do it right away. We'll see each other for dinner at Soda Bonita in the port. Hasta luego!"

As the roar of the Dodge faded away, Edi reflected, almost distracted.

"I'm trying to imagine who the actual perpetrators of the crimes could be. I would rule out Crisanti; even if involved in some way, I don't see him as a torturing killer. Rojas, Gutierrez, and Ortega, on the other hand, could be, although we don't know exactly on whose behalf and for what reason."

He paused, noticing Bruno's silent and puzzled gaze, and continued,

"Even if we found irrefutable evidence of their guilt here in Costa Rica, it would be quite a problem to bring them to justice in Italy. We would have to convince Giuliani, who would need to persuade Rus-

so and his superiors to issue an international arrest warrant for extradition. A rather complicated matter that would take time."

Bruno, breaking the silence, maintained that strange expression.

"You're right; it would take a long time, but on the other hand, I see no alternatives."

After a long pause, he added,

"But Cagnoli didn't deserve that horrible end..."

Edi looked at him seriously and, lowering his voice, replied,

"In Africa, this whole matter would be resolved much more quickly..."

Bruno looked at him in silence, without commenting. They sat in the patio for a long time until Bruno stood up and suddenly said,

"I want to make a couple of phone calls to Italy; I'll be right back."

He headed to the phone in his room and requested the international line. He wanted to make sure everything was in order and called his aunt Alina, who was about to go to bed.

"Hi Aunt, how are you? Any news?"

The woman's cheerful voice revealed her pleasure at receiving the call.

"Oh Bruno... yes, everything's fine, and there's no news. No one has called. How about you?"

"Yes, all good. Write down this number and call me if there are any updates. If you can't reach me, leave a message."

He dictated the hotel number and said goodbye.

With the second call, he tried to contact the police headquarters in Trieste, but the operator told him to call back during the week, as Superintendent Giuliani was out of town for a few days. He thanked them and hung up. He joined Edi in the patio, and since it was almost dinner time, they took the Land Rover and headed to Soda.

The tavern was quite crowded, but they found the table at the back of the room that they had occupied last time. Pablo recognized them and welcomed them with a broad smile.

"Hola amigos! Welcome back to Soda Bonita."

Edi, overly returning the smile, replied,

"Hola Pablo, we're waiting for a friend to have dinner with us. In the meantime, bring us a bottle of your delicious red wine."

The host, pleased with the compliment, served them immediately, and the two began to chat quietly, casually observing the other patrons. Edi joked,

"I bet you're hoping to see Gutierrez or Ortega walk in. That would be nice, right?"

Bruno, smiling, proposed,

"I'll bet ten thousand lira that at least one of them comes in here tonight!"

"Deal, I'm in! That means I'll treat myself to a nice dinner at Pepi Granzo on your tab. Thanks."

The bottle of wine was half empty when Jorge Calero entered with his cocky demeanor. When he saw them, he headed to their table and sat down. He quietly announced,

"Good news, guys."

Bruno signaled to the host and ordered a selection of house specialties and another bottle of wine. Jorge, bringing the glass to his lips and turning his back to the room, whispered,

"Ortega is in Costa Rica."

And, smiling after taking a sip, he continued,

"Fortunately, the police command also had a fax machine, and I had them send me photos of his passport."

Bruno replied quietly,

"I saw him in person in Italy, and I would recognize him too."

Jorge nodded and continued,

"Crisanti and Rojas are unknown to my office, and there are no files on them, while we know that Ortega works for Camacho. So, if he was in Italy with Rojas, it means your engineer Crisanti is in business with Camacho. This makes things even more complicated and dangerous for you."

Bruno interjected,

"Officially, Crisanti is being called into question for a two billion lira compensation to an Italian builder who claims that amount and seems to have the right to it. Crisanti claims and proves that he doesn't have that money, but from unconfirmed reports, we suspect that the murdered notary was handling a large transfer of money in his favor from Costa Rica."

Pablo arrived with a huge tray, filling the table with his specialties and wishing them, "Buen provecho, señores!" As they enjoyed Pablo's delicacies, the silence was broken by Bruno, who, slowly chewing a

piece of meat and staring at his plate, muttered quietly,

"Edi, do you have any Italian lira on you?"

"No," replied his friend, surprised, "why?"

"Because you owe me ten thousand lira..."

Bruno replied.

Jorge looked up questioningly at Bruno, while Edi remained impassive, avoiding looking toward the room. Continuing to stare at his plate, Bruno whispered,

"Alejandro Jesús Ortega just walked in. He's sitting at the table against the wall on the opposite side of the room and is facing us. The table is for four. He's probably waiting for someone."

Jorge showed Edi Ortega's photo for a moment, the only one who had never seen him in person, and he nodded silently. Bruno asked Jorge,

"Does he know you?"

"I don't know, but it's possible, even though we've never met in person,"

the agent replied.

They continued to eat slowly, keeping an eye on Ortega, who had ordered dinner. Bruno noticed that Pablo had lingered longer than usual talking at his table, but he couldn't hear anything from their conver-

sation, which seemed very friendly from the expressions on their faces. When he pointed this out to the others, he added, addressing Jorge,

"They share the same last name; do you think they might be related?"

"I wouldn't rule it out, although it's a very common surname here,"

the agent replied.

They finished dinner, and Jorge turned to the bar, ordering another bottle. They had to stay there to see if Ortega was waiting for someone, and they couldn't do that without a good excuse.

After half an hour, three men entered and sat at Ortega's table. They ordered only a bottle of wine and began to speak quietly among themselves. Jorge pulled a large Macanudo from the inner pocket of his jacket and, holding it between his teeth, turned to the room asking Pablo for an ashtray. This allowed him to take a good look at Ortega's table. He lit the cigar, and Pablo handed him a large ashtray, saying with a smile,

*"Con mucho gusto, señor!"*

When the host walked away, Jorge took a couple of puffs and said quietly,



"Never seen them before, but they look like criminal muscle. Be very careful if they are here for us."

Edi asked,

"Do you think they are here for us two?"

Jorge raised his eyebrows, responding calmly,

"I don't know, but it's more likely they are here for me. I've annoyed quite a few gangs in South America."

Bruno interjected,

"We better leave before they do then."

Jorge nodded and called Pedro for the bill. The host, as always friendly, showed a nearly imperceptible hint of embarrassment, which heightened Bruno's alertness.

Before getting up from the table, Jorge gave them instructions.

"Now I'm going out and heading slowly toward the hotel. You keep an eye on them, and if they leave, follow them. If nothing happens, meet me at the hotel, but park in the back."

The two nodded silently, and Jorge left. After a few minutes, the three strangers left the establishment, while Ortega remained at the table. Bruno and Edi followed suit, taking the dimly lit alley and stay-

ing close to the wall in the shadows, while the three strangers walked leisurely about a hundred yards ahead of them. Arriving at the clearing in front of the docks, they stayed in the shadows of the alley and watched the three get into an old Ford Fairlane, which headed toward the city center.

Bruno and Edi got into the Land Rover and drove along the coastal road to reach the hotel. They passed Jorge's Dodge parked in front of the entrance and stopped at the back. They entered through the back door, and after retrieving their keys, they asked the clerk if Señor Calero was in his room. He turned to the board where all the keys were hanging and replied,

"Yes, señor, he must be in his room because I don't see his key here."

The hotel was deserted at that time of year, and the receptionist returned to his office, most likely to take a nap, ignoring them. Instead of going up to their rooms, they went out to the patio and stopped in a dark corner a few yards from the entrance. A whisper caught their attention: Jorge was sitting in the dark at a table almost at the corner where the patio wrapped around the house. The night was moon-

less, and the dim light filtering through the glass of the entrance door, about twenty meters away, could only illuminate the steps in front of the entrance.

They waited in the dark. After about ten minutes, the Ford stopped next to Jorge's Dodge, and the three strangers got out. They were very tall and stocky individuals, and Bruno quickly assessed them: robust, but surely not in perfect shape for a hand-to-hand fight due to their overweight and excessively protruding bellies. Two entered the hotel, while the third remained on the patio, facing the cars.

Suddenly, a sound of breaking glass was heard from inside the hotel, accompanied by a scream, surely from the clerk. The sounds of the Smith & Wesson slides, as all three chambered a round, blended into the noise. Jorge silently approached the man left on the patio from behind and struck him on the neck with the butt of his gun. Bruno was astonished to see how the agent managed to drag that huge body into the darkness on his own across the entrance.

They remained still in the dark waiting, and after a few minutes, the other two came out with short-barreled revolvers in hand. They had evidently found Jorge's room empty and were looking for him. They

hesitated in the patio, not seeing their friend, who, lying on the ground, just then regained consciousness and shouted,

*"Está aquí, mátenlo!"*<sup>2</sup>

Both turned in that direction, and as Jorge lunged at the man on the ground, striking him with his elbow to the neck, they fired into the darkness at chest height. Edi and Bruno had not agreed on which one to shoot, but the two collapsed to the ground, hit by two bullets each: one to the neck and one to the center of the back, at heart level. Edi always preferred the neck.

Bruno reached Jorge, who was getting back up, while Edi entered the hotel. He came out shortly after saying,

"They smashed his head in. There's nothing more to be done."

They dragged the stranger inside, and Bruno carefully tied him to a chair. They emptied his pockets and, besides a folding knife, found a wallet containing a hundred American dollars. Jorge sat a couple of yards in front of him, straddling a chair, and, looking at his documents, said in a friendly tone,

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2 He's here. kill him!

"*Bueno*, señor Pedro Muñoz. Was it that gentleman Camacho who sent you?"

The other, with a defiant air, shouted,

"*No hablo con tigo, moro malparido!*"<sup>3</sup>

Jorge smiled and replied,

"I'm not good at making gunmen like you talk, but I know someone who is very good at it."

Jorge's hope of finally pinning the boss Camacho seemed to materialize. He stood up and went to the phone, fortunately still working, at the reception desk. He said a few sentences in Spanish and then explained with a smile to Bruno,

"I asked my office to send someone to pick him up and also a cleanup crew. As soon as they arrive, we can leave."

He paused and added with a smile,

"We have a specialist in unconventional interrogations who conducts them without any record."

After an hour, a long Nissan Patrol with the Municipal Police insignia of Puerto Limón arrived, from which five uniformed officers jumped out and rushed into the hotel. After a brief conversation with them, Jorge said to Bruno, smiling,

"We're done here, and we can go. They'll take care of things."

It wasn't wise to stay for the night at that hotel, so they took their luggage from their rooms. Jorge led them to a hotel in the city center, where a sleepy clerk gave them the keys to a suite with three beds. Jorge suggested that one of them, in turn, would stay awake on guard and added,

"Ortega has surely already heard about what happened at Playa Bonita and won't be very happy about it."

Even though a second punitive expedition was unlikely so soon, it would be better to take all possible precautions. Given the danger posed by those criminals, they took turns every two hours until morning.

By mid-morning, Bruno proposed,

"I think it would be appropriate to pay Pablo a visit. I sensed a certain embarrassment towards us after he talked so long with Ortega."

Jorge and Edi both nodded in agreement, and they all got into the Land Rover to return to Soda Bonita.

When they entered and sat at their usual table, Pablo seemed surprised to see them but greeted them warmly. Jorge, smiling, addressed him,

"Hola Pablo, we're hungry. Bring us some Gallo Pinto, queso fresco, and tortillas. And don't forget a generous coffee."

"*De inmediato, señores!*" replied the host, disappearing through the door behind the counter. Jorge turned to the others,

"Better to do it now while there are no patrons."

They stood up and all three entered the kitchen behind the counter. When Pablo saw them, he paled and backed away, leaning against the wall. Jorge approached him while Edi and Bruno looked at him seriously. and said in an exaggeratedly friendly tone,

"If you want to keep running this filthy hole, you should be so kind as to tell me where I can find your dear relative, Alejandro Jesús Ortega. How long

do you think it will take for you to get shut down for good?"

Edi intervened in a threatening voice, "Pablo, we don't have much time to waste."

Pablo, visibly frightened, immediately gave in. Almost stammering, he said only, "Hotel Costa de Papito..." and added nothing more.

Jorge headed to the phone at the counter and made a long call. He returned to the kitchen and said to Pablo,

"Close the soda and don't even think about touching the phone. We'll be here for a few hours waiting for news."

Turning to the other two, he said with a satisfied air,

"I sent a special team to pick him up. They'll call me back when the operation is complete."

As Pablo locked the door and lowered the blackout shutters, the three sat at a table, and Jorge ordered the host,

"You stay seated here with us. We'll serve ourselves."



Edi went back to the kitchen and came out with a tray of tortillas and fresh cheese, while Bruno set up the coffee maker at the counter. Pablo, sitting at their table, watched them eat, lost in his sad thoughts.

After a couple of hours, the phone rang, and Jorge answered, "*Dime...*"

After several seconds of silence, he added, "*Está bien, todo en orden.*"

He turned to everyone,

"They found Gutierrez in the room with him, and they took both of them. They'll go keep the gunman company. Now we can leave."

And then, smiling at Pablo,

"Now you can reopen your Soda Bonita, but be very careful because you'll be getting many visits from the angriest municipal agents, and they won't always be in uniform."

They left, leaving Pablo pale and thoughtful to ponder his misfortunes.

They were all relaxed on the comfortable sofas of their suite, with a beer in hand, when Bruno turned to Jorge.

"I'd like to verify one last detail before returning to Italy. Have you heard anything about Crisanti's credit card?"

Jorge nodded and replied,

"Yes, but it's useless information. That card was requested directly from Diners Club by an International Business Company based in Turks and Caicos called New Management Inc. The card draws funds from a checking account at Scotia Bank in Cockburn Town, the capital of the small archipelago."

Seeing Bruno's questioning look, he continued,

"If you think of going there to try to find out if Crisanti is the owner of that company, forget it. A bank official who reveals such information risks his life. They have very strict laws that no one would ever dream of breaking for any reason."

"I understand," Bruno replied.

"Ultimately, I'm interested in bringing Cagnoli's murderers to justice. At this point, two of the possible perpetrators are already in God's hands and three with your police. The E-bomb is not my problem, so I can return to Italy to check if Crisanti is directly involved in the murder and see what Superintendent Giuliani intends to do with Rojas, who might be in-

volved in the murder. I believe our presence in Costa Rica no longer serves any purpose."

Jorge asked, "What flight did you take to Costa Rica?"

Edi interjected,

"There were no available seats with the official airlines in Miami, and we found an old DC-3 from a strange company that landed us on a dirt runway near Cipresses. It all seemed illegal, but they were very well organized and even rented us the Land Rover."

Jorge smiled,

"I know them. Officially, they deal with import-export, but they are small-time smugglers who have organized themselves to make a few dollars when they return empty to Costa Rica. They are not dangerous and are not linked to the big criminal gangs. We let them operate, keeping an eye on them, because they often act as informants for us."

And smiling, he added, "I'll take you to them because you'll need a recommendation for the trip to Miami. I believe they fly every day, but they never take passengers when they are loaded."

The next morning they set off. Jorge, with the Dodge in front, tried not to press too hard on the accelerator to avoid leaving the Land Rover behind, which could hardly exceed 100 km/h. There was quite a bit of traffic, and they arrived at the small airport around noon.

When they entered the office, after leaving the cars in the back parking lot, the young man immediately recognized Jorge and stood up with a broad smile, extending his hand.

*"Bienvenido, señor Calero. Qué puedo hacer por usted?"*

Jorge, returning the smile, replied,

"These two friends of mine need to get to Miami as soon as possible."

The young man raised his eyebrows doubtfully and raised a hand, signaling him to wait. He picked up the phone and dialed a number. After a brief conversation in a low voice, he turned back to Jorge.

"Of course, there's always room for your friends. The plane leaves at sunset."

Bruno handed over the keys of the Land Rover and asked for the bill. The young man shook his head, opened the drawer, and showed him a hundred-dollar bill, saying,

"Give me another one like this, and we're all set for the trip."

The guy looked at Jorge for approval, and he nodded with a gesture, raising his fist with a thumbs-up.

Jorge Calero must be considered a very important person in that environment, Bruno thought, and he gestured to Edi, indicating his armpit. They both removed their holsters with their guns and handed them to Jorge, under the pleased gaze of the young man. They could certainly have taken their weapons on that flight, but absolutely not on the Miami-Rome one.

They exchanged warm handshakes, and the agent got back into his yellow beast, quickly disappearing in a cloud of dust. Bruno and Edi settled into a back room set up as a bar, where the attentive guy kept them supplied with beers and tortillas until departure time.

Edi commented,

"I must admit this airline has nothing to envy from Alitalia."

And they both laughed heartily.

## Chapter 4.

When Bruno entered, Aunt Alina nearly leaped into his arms, hugging him joyfully.

“Welcome back, darling! I was worried about you, you know?”

she said, her warm smile lighting up the room.

“Are you hungry? I prepared some treats, imagining you’d arrive famished.”

Bruno realized just how much he had missed his aunt's cooking after his time in Costa Rica, and he settled into the kitchen with a hearty appetite. The delicious snacks, combined with the time zone change, soon led him to decide on a nap, so he retreated to his room, ready to recharge.

He woke up in the evening and called the police station, where he was quickly connected to Superintendent Giuliani.

“Hi Carlo, I just got back. When can we meet?”

“Welcome back, Bruno,”

his friend replied.

“Come to the office tomorrow morning; I’m eager to hear all your news.”

His second call was to Edi, and it was brief:

“Tomorrow at ten at the police station, with Carlo.”

“I’ll be there,” Edi replied.

The next day, right at ten, Bruno parked the Alfa Romeo with two wheels on the sidewalk, just before the entrance of the police station. As soon as he got out of the car, he spotted Edi’s military green Toyota Land Cruiser pulling up behind him. Edi was always punctual.

They entered together and made their way to the first floor, where Carlo’s office was located. The door was open, and they walked in without hesitation. Carlo was waiting only for Bruno, and after shaking his hand, he gave Edi a questioning look. Bruno introduced him:

“This is Edi Rustia, a friend who was with me in Costa Rica. He’s also a private investigator and often collaborates with me.”

“Nice to meet you, Giuliani,”

Edi said, shaking Carlo’s hand. Then Carlo added:

“Marco Russo should be arriving shortly. I think it’s useful for all of us to have a discussion.”

In the meantime, Bruno recounted the trip from Miami to San José with that strange airline, eliciting a smile from Carlo, who replied:

“I’ll have to note that down in case I decide to go to Costa Rica.”

Shortly after, Marco Russo entered the office, closing the door behind him and greeting everyone:

“Good morning, everyone!”

Once they were all seated and after the introductions, Marco turned to Bruno and said:

“I haven’t spoken to Jorge yet, and I’d like to hear from you what happened in Costa Rica first.”

Bruno detailed everything, but he was somewhat vague regarding the shooting at Playa Bonita. Marco, sensing something was amiss, interjected:

“You can speak freely; none of us are here in an official capacity. Three people were taken away by the local police, but what about the other two?”

Bruno replied without hesitation:

“They were shooting at Jorge, and we had to take them down.”

No one flinched, and Bruno continued:

“We didn’t find any trace of Crisanti or Rojas. The Diners Club card withdraws funds from an account registered to a shell company in a bank in the



Turks and Caicos. It's impossible to trace the owner since the laws there are extremely strict about protecting anonymity. Jorge told me that a bank official who violates a client's anonymity could risk their life."

Carlo interjected:

"So it's a dead end. We need to find other ways to assess Crisanti's situation in relation to the murder."

Bruno interrupted him:

"Let's not forget that Jorge has Ortega, Gutierrez, and Muñoz in his hands. He's handed them over to specialists in unconventional interrogations, conducted without records and in very private locations. I believe we'll get more information about Crisanti from the results of those interrogations. We just need to be patient."

Carlo countered:

"We would never dream of using those methods."

Marco commented:

"In situations of imminent grave danger, sometimes there are no alternatives..."

Carlo felt slightly uncomfortable hearing that admission. The idea that, in certain circumstances, it

might be necessary to break the law to enforce it troubled him. Even though he secretly agreed with Marco, for a police officer to openly express such a concept, even in front of friends, was always a source of embarrassment.

He pushed the issue aside and changed the subject:

“We’re expecting some lawyers from Costa Rica who should meet with Notary Cagnoli, and we’ve kept the notary’s office active with some of our agents in anticipation of their arrival. We don’t know if these gentlemen are involved in the crimes, but I don’t think so, since they’re coming in person. However, they could prove extremely useful in understanding what assignment Cagnoli was supposed to carry out and, above all, on whose behalf.”

He paused for a moment and, looking at Bruno, added:

“We need a substitute notary who can handle them credibly and extract as much information as possible. You’ve worked in that office, and you’re the only one who can do it.”

Bruno was surprised by the proposal but immediately recognized its validity. After a moment of reflection, he replied:

“I’ll do it, but I need a female agent as a secretary, and I want Edi in the office next door.”

Carlo responded:

“We already have an agent answering the phone pretending to be Cagnoli’s secretary, but I’d suggest involving Russo in this charade as well.”

Everyone nodded, and Russo added:

“I’ll go to my office. I want to know if Jorge has any updates on the interrogations.”

Carlo dismissed them, adding:

“I’ll call you as soon as I have confirmation of their arrival date.”

That evening, Bruno invited Edi to dinner at Pepi Granzo, hoping to run into Crisanti, but there was no sign of the engineer. Nevertheless, they enjoyed a cheerful and carefree evening. In the end, Bruno firmly opposed Edi’s attempt to pay the bill, insisting on settling the lost bet at Sona Bonita.

Two days later, the phone rang in Bruno’s office. As soon as he picked up the receiver, he immediately recognized Carlo’s voice:

“They’re arriving next Monday, and we need to meet tomorrow morning to plan the charade. Let’s

meet at ten directly at Cagnoli's office in Piazza della Borsa. I'll notify everyone else."

The call ended, leaving Bruno to ponder how he would portray the substitute notary. After all, it shouldn't be difficult, he thought, considering he had interned there and knew the customs and procedures well.

Bruno arrived in Piazza della Borsa driving his Mini Cooper just a few minutes before ten. In the middle of the wide pedestrian area, in front of the Stock Exchange building, a police Fiat 1300 was parked, and he parked next to it.

He got out, lit a cigarette, and looked around. He checked his IWC chronograph, which read one minute to ten. He looked up and noticed that Edi was parking his Land Cruiser next to the Mini. Edi's punctuality was always impeccable.

After a brief greeting, they ascended the stairs together.

Cagnoli's office was impeccably organized, exuding an air of perfect order. In the spacious entrance, behind the reception desk, there were two desks. One was occupied by a young woman in her thirties, sporting a short black bob and dressed in a

formal gray pinstripe suit. While she might have appeared to be the efficient secretary of the office, she was, in fact, an inspector from the Digos.

Marco and Carlo stood in the entrance, facing the reception desk. After exchanging pleasantries, Carlo turned to Bruno:

"I propose the following arrangement: you will settle into Cagnoli's office; Edi will take the other desk in front of Marina Rotelli, our inspector; Marco will set up in the second office, leaving the door open. You can keep your real names to avoid confusion during the interviews. Marina speaks perfect English, so she will be able to follow the entire conversation. There are hidden microphones in every room, including the bathroom, which send signals to tape recorders. I don't think my presence is necessary, as it would unnecessarily crowd the office."

He paused for a moment before continuing:

"I almost forgot about the safe. We found it empty but fortunately open, and we didn't discover the combination. I called a specialist who entered a new combination, which I've noted down here."

He handed over a note and added:

"If the need arises to secure something confidential, it would be wise for you to demonstrate the availability of the safe."

Bruno nodded in agreement and replied:

"We need to consider another aspect. It would be advisable to have them stay in a place of our choosing unless they have already found accommodation. Also, we will need a car in case we need to take them somewhere. Mine and Edi's are not suitable, and the police cars are even less so."

Carlo nodded and responded:

"We have a black Alfa Romeo 1900 in the garage. It's from 1953, but it's in impeccable condition and has a civilian license plate. I'll have it checked, but I'm sure it will be perfect!"

Before parting ways, he added:

"When we receive the telegram, we will respond by offering to send one of our cars to pick them up at the airport and to arrange their hotel stay."

Bruno nodded and said:

"Perfect! Edi will be the driver."

Two days later, Carlo called Bruno in the office with an update:

"The telegram has arrived, and we have already responded. Mr. Mauricio Fernandez Pacheco and Mr. William F. Martinez will be arriving in Ronchi dei Legionari next Tuesday at 7:00 PM on the flight from Rome. Our plan is as follows: Edi will be at the airport to meet them and will take them to the Vanoli Hotel, where we have already booked two connecting rooms equipped with microphones. The next morning, Edi will pick them up on foot and take them to the office."

"Perfect!" exclaimed Bruno before ending the call.

At 6:45 PM, Edi was at the airport, in the arrivals area, waiting for the two guests. In his pocket, he had a sign with their names. When the flight's landing was announced, he positioned himself in front of the exit, holding the sign clearly in view.

They were the last to exit, likely due to a thorough customs check. Mauricio Fernandez Pacheco was a middle-aged man of average height, with a distinguished appearance; he wore a mismatched suit with a sports jacket and an ascot around his neck. Despite his face clearly revealing his Latin origins, he would not have looked out of place among the spec-

tators at a horse race at Ascot. His traveling companion, William F. Martinez, was a tall and sturdy young man in his thirties, with an athletic posture and very short crew-cut hair that gave him the look of a former military man.

When Edi saw them approaching, he smiled to himself, thinking that Pacheco was traveling with his bodyguard. He shook hands with both, introducing himself as a member of Notary Cagnoli's staff, tasked with welcoming them.

He led them to the black Alfa Romeo parked in front of the exit and helped them load their luggage into the trunk. The young man settled into the front seat after closing the door for Pacheco, who had taken a seat in the back. Typical of bodyguards, Edi thought.

During the drive, Edi initiated the conversation:

"We have booked two rooms at the Vanoli Hotel, which is located in the city center, just a short walk from our office." He tried to maintain a friendly tone and added:

"They have a lovely restaurant, and the comfort of the rooms is top-notch."

"Very good, thank you," Pacheco replied from the back.



Edi continued:

"Tomorrow morning at ten, Dr. Fonda will be waiting for you in the office. He is replacing Dr. Cagnoli, who is temporarily absent due to health reasons."

Pacheco nodded, and the two remained silent for the rest of the journey. When Edi stopped the car right in front of the hotel, a concierge came out to greet the guests, accompanied by a bellboy with a luggage cart. Edi bid them farewell, assuring them that he would return the next morning at ten to take them to the office.

He returned the Alfa Romeo to the police garage and went up to the first floor, where Bruno and Carlo were waiting.

Bruno immediately asked him:

"How did it go?"

"Everything went perfectly," Edi replied,

"no issues with the hotel and no problems regarding Notary Cagnoli's illness and the fact that there will be his substitute."

"What are they like?"

Carlo asked, to which Edi, with a half-smile, replied:

"Pacheco is obviously a Latino but has the air of a very distinguished English middle-aged gentleman and few words. The other is a big guy who looks like a former military man with a Southern U.S. accent. At first glance, he seems to be Pacheco's bodyguard."

At ten o'clock, the office was perfectly prepared to receive the two Costa Ricans. The secretary sat at her desk, tapping away on the typewriter with nonsensical phrases to pass the time. Marco Russo was in his office, engrossed in reading "Il Piccolo," while Bruno had settled into Cagnoli's comfortable armchair behind the enormous desk. The large conference room stood empty, ready to welcome the guests.

At ten ten, Edi entered, followed by the two guests, and led them directly to the conference room. After seating them in two armchairs around the large rectangular table, he addressed them both:

"Dr. Fonda will join you shortly. Can I get you anything? Coffee or something else?"

Both shook their heads in refusal, but only Pacheco replied:

“No, thank you, we just had breakfast at the hotel.”

Edi smiled slightly and left, closing the door behind him.

A few minutes later, Bruno entered, followed by Marco. The faux notary took a seat at the head of the table next to Pacheco, who had Martinez to his left. Marco settled across from Pacheco, to Bruno's right. Pacheco felt it appropriate to introduce himself:

“I am Mauricio Fernandez Pacheco from the law firm Pacheco, Garcia & Associates, based in San José, Costa Rica. This is attorney William F. Martinez from our Miami office.”

Bruno and Marco nodded slightly, and Bruno replied:

“Pleasure to meet you, gentlemen. I am Bruno Fonda, substituting for Notary Cagnoli, who is currently awaiting surgery. Nothing serious, but it will keep him away from the office for several weeks. This is my senior associate, Marco Russo, an expert in international law.”

He paused briefly, then added:

“Well, gentlemen, how can we assist you?”

Pacheco responded with emphasis:

“Our firm has been tasked with transferring bearer bonds to a beneficiary located in Italy. Both the transferor and the transferee wish to remain anonymous. The bonds are currently held at our embassy in Rome, and once an agreement is reached with your firm, they will be delivered by a diplomatic courier. It will be your responsibility to keep them safe until they are collected by the beneficiary, who will be identified by you according to methods defined in the agreement.”

He paused, waiting for Bruno's comments, looking at him impassively. Bruno, slightly surprised by this unusual procedure, did not let it show and asked:

“May I know the value of these bonds?”

Pacheco's face remained impassive as he replied:

“They are worth approximately 2 billion Italian lire.”

Bruno did not show it, but he was struck by the amount, which heightened his attention, as it corresponded to Crisanti's debt to Ravalico. In an impersonal tone, he replied:

“The operation is feasible, provided we agree on all operational details.”

Then he decided to ask a question that might provoke a reaction from the Costa Rican:

“I wonder why the transferor did not choose to transfer the bonds directly to the transferee or their equivalent value through a bank.”

Pacheco momentarily displayed an expression that betrayed his displeasure at the question but responded in an impersonal tone:

“Our client, with whom we have established relationships for some time, chose this method, and we prefer not to judge his decisions. We only intervene with specific advice in the presence of evident risks, but in this case, we see no reason to do so.”

Bruno stood up and said:

“Well, gentlemen, I must leave you for a few minutes. I will send our secretary, who, along with Dr. Russo, will draft our agreement, which I will sign upon my return.”

He nodded in farewell and left. While the secretary and Marco began working on drafting the agreement, Bruno decided to speak with Carlo and, leaving the office, walked to the police headquarters. He needed to take a few steps to think. This strange pro-

cedure led him to suspect that something illegal was going on, even if it had a respectable facade. The involvement of a law firm and a notary could certainly cover illicit behavior.

He reached Carlo in his office and reported the conversation with Pacheco. At the end of the account, Carlo commented:

“The coincidence of the value of the bonds with the compensation requested from Crisanti could be coincidental, but the procedure is very strange. It could be a tool used by a transferor who does not yet know who the transferee is but wants to keep that substantial sum available in a very short time. Such a transfer via bank would require significant time and costs.”

He added with a smile:

“Imagine how much the intermediary banks would love to hold onto that amount for a few extra days.”

Bruno stood up to leave and replied:

“I’d better return to the office. We’ll wait to read the details of the agreement before drawing any conclusions. Are you keeping an eye on Crisanti?”

“Certainly,” the superintendent replied.

“I have assigned several agents to Marco for ongoing surveillance. He won’t be able to leave his house without us knowing.”

“We’ll catch up tonight,” said Bruno as he left the office.

Bruno returned to the office and entered the conference room while the secretary was typing on an Olivetti Lettera 22 that she had brought from her desk. He looked at Marco and asked:

“Have we finalized everything?”

“Certainly, Dr. Fonda. I will read the text to you as soon as it is completely typed.”

After about ten minutes, the secretary handed the sheets to Marco, who began reading the text aloud for everyone’s approval. Bruno listened carefully to all the details of the agreement and noted some very unusual procedures that would have been acceptable for a notary. It was also established that a fee of one million lire would be paid into the Notary account via bank transfer by telex, within 24 hours of the request, immediately after the withdrawal of the bonds.

After Bruno signaled his approval, the secretary stood up and went into the adjacent room to make

photocopies with the Rank Xerox that had just arrived at the office.

Bruno signed the two copies and, passing the sheets to Pacheco for him to sign in turn, said:

“Attorney, if you don’t mind, I would like all the other attendees to sign the document as witnesses to the agreement.”

Pacheco was surprised by the request but did not object. The secretary manually added to the last two sheets, under the two signatures, the wording: “in the presence of the following witnesses:” and passed it to Martinez and Marco after signing herself.

Bruno handed a copy to Pacheco and said:

“Well, gentlemen, I will await the diplomatic courier, then.”

Pacheco, visibly more relaxed after the conclusion of the agreement, replied:

“You will receive a telegram a few days before the courier arrives. We will depart on the flight to Rome tomorrow evening at 7 PM.”

Everyone stood up, and Bruno added with a slight smile:

“Our car will be in front of your hotel at 4 PM.”



They left the office, and Edi accompanied them on foot to the Vanoli.

The next day, in the afternoon, Edi went to pick up the Alfa Romeo from the police garage and presented himself at the Vanoli Hotel. The two Costa Ricans were in the lobby waiting for him and immediately got into the car while a bellboy loaded their luggage into the trunk. During the trip, no one spoke, and they simply exchanged goodbyes when Edi dropped them off at the departures entrance at Ronchi dei Legionari.

The following morning, Bruno went to Carlo's office to listen to the recordings made in the office and at the Vanoli Hotel. An agent placed a large tape recorder on the desk and turned it on.

During the few minutes the two Costa Ricans were alone in the conference room, they did not exchange a word; on the other hand, no one expected to hear anything interesting. The recording made at the hotel turned out to be rather disappointing, apart from a brief phrase that Martinez directed at Pacheco, which could be significant. They were speaking in Spanish, and Martinez addressed Pacheco

informally, which slightly contrasted with the image the two had given. At one point, Martinez asked:

“Should we wait to notify him? It’s better to wait until they find the thing, right?”

Pacheco replied briefly, as if he suspected he was being listened to:

“Everything is ready. We’ll call him when they find it. They need to give us the green light for the operation. We’ve done our part so far.”

The rest of the recording concerned trivial conversations on insignificant topics. When the agent took away the now useless recorder, Bruno commented:

“It seems they are missing something to conclude the operation. They came to us to prepare a payment, but I suspect that someone does not have the item to deliver in exchange for that compensation.”

Carlo remained thoughtful for a couple of minutes, then said:

“Let’s make a fanciful hypothesis, bringing together all the elements we have.”

As Bruno looked at him curiously, Carlo continued:

“Let’s hypothesize that the item they are talking about is the microfilm and that someone has tasked them with making the payment once the item is delivered to the buyer. This would mean that someone in Costa Rica is, or was, in possession of the microfilm and must deliver it to the buyer, who would then give the green light for the transfer of the bonds. Therefore, Pacheco would be working for the buyer while Rojas would be working for the seller, and we know that Crisanti collaborates with Rojas...”

Bruno remained thoughtful, considering the hypothesis based on various speculations, but not all of them too arbitrary. In a conversational tone, as if commenting on something of little relevance, he said:

“In this hypothesis, Camacho would have been in possession of the microfilm, but why did he get rid of it by giving me the Uzi twenty years ago?”

Carlo replied:

“Let’s leave that question unanswered for now. Let’s imagine that Camacho unexpectedly found a buyer for the microfilm and only now realizes its true value. Then he tasks Rojas and his two accomplices with retrieving it.”

“That would be plausible,” Bruno said, “but we still lack many pieces of the puzzle: how did he obtain the microfilm? Did he examine it and realize its content? Did he actually want to get rid of it because it was too dangerous and gave it to me to get it out of his way? After all, he is a drug trafficker and perhaps did not feel comfortable handling bomb plans.”

“It could also be that way. He had it and didn’t find it interesting, or perhaps he didn’t quite understand what it was. Then he changed his mind when he learned that someone was looking for it and was willing to pay two billion for it.”

Carlo continued in an uncertain tone:

“However, I can’t place Crisanti’s role. It’s certain that he is involved with Rojas and the other two, but I can’t imagine how. The legal action against him doesn’t fit well with the rest.”

Bruno replied:

“I would like to know more about Ravalico, and I will try to speak with Candler.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Carlo said and added:

“I don’t think I can get useful information from Rojas, and on the other hand, I don’t feel comfortable breaking the law to achieve results. I hope

Calero has managed to obtain something useful from Ortega and the other two. I will try to reach him tomorrow.”

Bruno left the office, reflecting on that hypothesis. Some aspects seemed to fit perfectly with the known facts, while others appeared too arbitrary and unfounded. He decided to go to Candler, but first thought to stop by home to leave the car, as the lawyer’s office was no more than a five-minute walk away, and parking nearby was practically nonexistent.

When Cristina saw him enter, she whispered to him with a knowing smile:

“He has a client...”

Bruno leaned toward her and, still in a low voice, asked:

“Who is it?”

“Ravalico,” she replied, in a whisper.

Bruno thought it best not to be seen by Ravalico since they did not know each other. He had decided to investigate him to understand the basis of that compensation request. Not being recognized would facilitate any potential surveillance.

He gestured with his hand that he would call her later and left. He walked along Viale XX Settembre, and as he walked, he thought that while waiting to speak alone with Candler, a snack would be a great idea. He turned right onto Via del Toro and entered Mozzi.

The tables were almost all occupied by card players, but he managed to find a small table with a chair in a corner of the tavern. The host approached him immediately and, recognizing him, said with a welcoming smile:

“What can I get you, Dr. Fonda?”

Bruno, returning the smile, replied:

“Pepi, please bring me a plate of ham and a glass of white wine.”

He began nibbling on the ham and sipping the wine while reflecting on Carlo’s hypothesis. If it were true, Ravalico would have a role in the matter, although he could not imagine what it was. If Crisanti was working for the seller, it made no sense for him to give money to Ravalico, who seemed to be working for the buyer. He thought about it for a long time and reconsidered the hypothesis. Crisanti was in contact with Rojas and also with Ortega, but it was not

proven that he was working for them; he had only seen them at dinner together.

A bizarre idea crossed his mind: he could be on the buyer's side, in contact with the seller's representatives. In this way, the hypothesis would make more sense. Then Ravalico would somehow pay the seller through Crisanti, but the ongoing lawsuit would not make sense, and in this case, attorney Candler would play an incomprehensible role.

He finished his snack and asked the host to make a phone call. In the small storage room filled with barrels and scattered junk, there was a payphone hanging on the wall. He called Candler's office, and Cristina answered on the second ring:

"Bruno, Ravalico left five minutes ago, and the lawyer is still in his office."

He hung up, thanking her, and left to return to Candler. When he entered the office, the lawyer was busy reading documents and did not hear him arrive. Bruno cleared his throat and said:

"Hi, lawyer."

The other looked up suddenly:

"Oh, Bruno, I didn't hear you come in. How are you? Any news?"

Bruno sat down across from him and replied:

“All good, but I don’t have any news on Crisanti. In this regard, I have a few things to ask you.”

“Go ahead,” Candler said, “what do you want to know?”

Bruno decided to ask direct questions to see the lawyer’s reaction. If he reacted naturally and amiably as he usually did between them, he would always have time to apologize.

“I would like more details on the dispute between Crisanti and Ravalico. The terms of the dispute, when Ravalico initiated the lawsuit and why, etc.”

Bruno noticed a slight surprise on the other’s face as he raised his eyebrows while he spoke. After a pause of several seconds, Candler replied:

“I can give you photocopies of the documents if you need to delve into the matter, but I don’t understand for what purpose.”

Candler’s first reaction did not please Bruno very much, who replied:

“I would find it useful to have a complete picture of the dispute and to know Ravalico’s strengths against Crisanti. I believe it would help me a lot in my investigations.”

“One more thing...”



Bruno added, after a long pause during which the lawyer showed a subtle nervousness that Bruno had never seen before.

“I don’t want to insist so much as to be rude, but I would like to know who informed you about the arrival of money for Crisanti from Costa Rica.”

Candler’s expression changed. It was evident that the two requests had strongly irritated him, despite the friendship between the two. He reacted with an impatient tone that Bruno had never expected:

“Listen, Bruno, we’ve known each other for a long time, but I can’t accept that you don’t respect my word and my commitments. As I’ve already told you, I have taken on the commitment not to reveal that person’s name, and that’s what I intend to do.”

Bruno was surprised by his friend’s reaction, which perhaps confirmed the vague suspicion that had arisen about him. He did not like that answer at all and quickly thought about how to react. Accepting the refusal and waiting for the photocopies of the documents, not chosen by him, would not bring him any advantage. He felt freer to act by deciding to abandon the assignment. Keeping calm, he leaned toward the desk and replied in a very calm tone:

“I understand, Giulio. I respect your determination, but I am forced to irrevocably withdraw from the assignment now. I am sure you will respect my determination to choose MY methods of work.”

He stood up and, after a nod of farewell, left the office, leaving Candler in a state of silent reflection. Passing by Cristina, he gave her a smile, and as he stood in the doorway of the office, he said:

“Goodbye, beautiful secretary!”

She looked up from the typewriter and, continuing to type quickly, replied with a smile:

“You’re particularly gallant today, Bruno.”

Two days passed without Bruno receiving any news. Neither Carlo nor Marco had contacted him, and it would have been useless to call them, as they would have made sure to inform him if they had any interesting updates. In the meantime, he thought of exploring a completely different avenue.

Around ten in the morning, he called Candler’s office. Cristina answered on the first ring, and, confident that she recognized him by his voice, he simply asked:

“Are you alone in the office?”

She, surprised, recognized him and replied:

“Oh Bruno... yes, I’m alone. This morning the lawyer is in court, and I think it will take a while.”

“I would like to talk to you... would you come to dinner with me tonight?” he asked, simulating a hesitant tone.

After a pause of several seconds, her voice rang out with a cheerful tone that concealed a certain irony:

“Are you trying to seduce me?”

But after a little laugh, she added:

“Sure, I’d love to come.”

“I’ll pick you up at your place at eight,” he replied, hanging up.

Aunt Alina, who had listened to everything from the other office, only asked:

“Is she a serious girl?”

Bruno felt obliged to reassure her:

“She’s very serious, aunt, don’t worry, she’s a good girl.”

The voice from the other office simply replied:

“Finally!”

At eight o'clock sharp, Bruno stopped the Alfa Romeo in front of the door of the building on Via Giulia where Cristina lived. She was just coming out

at that moment, and without even turning off the engine, he opened the door for her to get in. As he shifted gears to head towards the riverside, he cheerfully said:

“I see we are both extraordinarily punctual.”

She smiled, and he added, looking at her:

“Do you like fish?”

“I love it,”

The destination was obvious. At Pepi Granzo, not only was the fish delicious, but it was also close to Crisanti's residence, which increased the appeal of that restaurant.

Bruno parked the Alfa Romeo in his usual spot, in a no-parking zone, right in front of the entrance. It was a sort of unspoken playful challenge between him and the traffic wardens. Sooner or later, the ticket would arrive, and he would pay it without hesitation, in exchange for the satisfaction of having committed that small harmless infraction countless times, which at that hour would cause no inconvenience to anyone.

The restaurant was not very crowded, and he chose a table for two, against the wall, so as not to have to, out of chivalry, turn his back to the room.

After all, Bruno always harbored a slight hope of seeing Crisanti walk in, even though that was not the purpose of the dinner.

Cristina was radiant, and when the waiter approached with the menus, she said to Bruno with a smile:

“Order for me too; I eat anything.”

Bruno immediately returned the menus and ordered from memory, as he was almost a regular at that place.

As they sipped some *ribolla gialla* while waiting for their dishes, Cristina, without showing it too much, was very curious to know the reason for the invitation. Bruno decided to get straight to the point.

“I need your help...”

At her questioning look, he continued:

“I imagine you are aware that I am investigating the murder of Cagnoli and, in some way, helping the police. Superintendent Giuliani is a dear friend of mine, and I collaborate with him. The death of the notary, to whom I was very emotionally attached, has deeply affected me, and I am determined to bring his murderer to justice and, if there is one, also the mastermind behind it.”

He looked into Cristina's eyes, who had become serious and was listening attentively. He continued:

"It would take too long to explain all the details now, but I fear that Candler, hopefully inadvertently, is protecting someone who is very likely involved in the crimes."

The young woman was petrified. She knew Bruno well, and the doubt that arose in her turned into a disturbing shadow in her mind. Looking back, she had noticed small oddities in the office, but she had not paid them the proper attention. Now, every gesture and every word from Candler seemed to take on a different meaning, as if a veil of mystery had lifted, revealing an unsettling truth.

She recovered from the shocking news and asked:

"I really hope you're wrong, Bruno, but I want to help you. What can I do for you?"

Bruno looked at her sympathetically, imagining how much it cost her to offer him her help. He replied in a voice almost subdued:

"I'm interested in Ravalico. If Candler is involved, it might not be intentional. I need to know

everything possible about Ravalico: copies of documents concerning him, letters, faxes, etc.”

He paused, looking her in the eyes, and added:

“I can’t thank you enough for the help you’re offering me.”

She responded with a slight smile, and Bruno decided to change the subject, steering the conversation toward lighter topics to alleviate the earlier discomfort. They talked for a long time until a waiter began putting chairs on tables and cleaning the floor. Bruno, smiling, said to her:

“Either we escape right now, or they’ll make us do the cleaning!”

She smiled back at him; they stood up and left arm in arm, like two sweethearts.

## Chapter 5

Bruno sat in his office, poring over the scant information he had on Ravalico. He read and reread the documents, hoping that familiarity might reveal something new and useful.

His concentration was shattered by the ringing phone; it was Marco Russo.

"I have news from Costa Rica. When can we meet?"

"Right away," Bruno replied. "Where?"

Marco's voice was laced with concern:

"I'm at the police headquarters."

Bruno assured him he would be there soon and hung up.

He managed to park the Mini on Via del Teatro Romano, not far from the police headquarters, and rushed inside. Marco's office door was open, and Carlo was waiting for him, as well. They exchanged greetings, and as soon as Bruno settled into the chair near Carlo, Marco began:

"Jorge called me this morning. He managed to get Ortega and Muñoz to talk. I don't know how, and I didn't dare ask... but I can imagine. In Costa Rica,



they have much more freedom than we do. He's been hunting those criminals for years. For now, they're accused of murdering the hotel doorman and are being held in a secure location by their intelligence agency."

Bruno's questioning look prompted Marco to continue:

"They were the ones who killed Cagnoli and the secretary after torturing the notary. They needed to recover some documents and an audio recording that were evidence against Ravalico and Rojas, which the notary threatened to take to the police and expose the two-billion-lira plan that was in motion. However, they found nothing from the notary."

Both men waited for Bruno's reaction, who had his jaw clenched and was staring into space. After a long pause, he asked in the impersonal tone he unconsciously adopted when angry:

"Is there a chance they will be extradited to Italy for trial?"

Carlo intervened, trying to calm Bruno:

"In theory, yes," he said in a measured tone,

"but it would be a lengthy procedure. Even with a confession, which I doubt they would repeat in Italy, the trial could drag on indefinitely. They could claim they were tortured and confessed under

duress. Our judges would initiate in-depth investigations with uncertain outcomes."

Bruno knew Carlo was right, but the anger he was suppressing was intense, even as he controlled it. Marco attempted to persuade him:

"Why not let Jorge handle it?"

After a brief pause, he added with a bitter smile:

"After the interrogation, he won't let them go. If he implies to his superiors that they are communist activists, he would have all their support and even that of the CIA, with whom they collaborate closely. After squeezing them for all they're worth, neither of them will survive... that happens often there."

Bruno's jaw relaxed slightly. He thought Jorge would deliver justice in his own way, and that was fine with him, but he also craved revenge. He took a long pause, staring into space, and said:

"I want to be there..."

Marco nodded and replied:

"I think Jorge will be pleased to see you again in Costa Rica."

Bruno's jaw was completely relaxed when he said:

"Tell him to wait for me."

Marco nodded with a slight smile, and Carlo interjected, changing the subject:

"I'm keeping Rojas under pressure, although it will be difficult to get him to talk without offering something in return. Anyway, he's in isolation at Coroneo and can't have contact with anyone. Jorge has gotten Ortega to sing, and now we know that Rojas was tasked with collecting the two billion from Ravalico through Crisanti at the same time as the delivery of the microfilm. Ortega didn't know who the final recipient was that Ravalico represented."

He paused and then exclaimed:

"You didn't know, but there were two micro-films!"

"Two?" Bruno exclaimed.

Carlo explained:

"Camacho had a copy made and entrusted it to a certain Pedro, one of his trusted men, who hid it in the Uzi many years ago. The weapon was later used to kill police officers in San José, and Camacho, unbeknownst to Pedro, gave it to you to dispose of, not knowing that the microfilm was hidden in the grip of the stock. He could have disposed of it in a thousand other ways, but maybe he wanted to have some fun,

perhaps putting you in trouble. If someone had asked you about the weapon's origin, you would have said it was a gift from Jesús Ortega, who would obviously deny everything if questioned. When Camacho encountered another buyer, he asked Pedro to bring him the microfilm he had entrusted to him and only then discovered where it had ended up. At that point, he tasked Rojas with tracking you down and retrieving the microfilm."

He paused and continued:

"I had asked Jorge to track down that Pedro, but it seems he was found semi-charred in an old car on the outskirts of San José. Camacho must not have forgiven him for that hiding place."

"I understand," Bruno said, "and the envelope containing the evidence was given by Cagnoli to Candler for safekeeping, not knowing that the lawyer works for Ravalico. I don't know how involved he is, but he is certainly involved in some way. I'll take care of him when I get back."

The two looked at him slightly worried, but they were sure that Bruno knew how to handle things without breaking the law, or at least he would do so according to what his desire for revenge would allow.

Bruno left the office and headed home. During the journey, he mulled over the situation that was slowly becoming clearer. Crisanti and Ravalico were heavily involved, and Rojas had ordered the two henchmen to kill the notary and his secretary. The torture had been futile because Cagnoli no longer had what they were looking for. With hatred, he thought of Rojas. He had to find a way to make him pay because, after all, he was the murderer, even though everything had been ordered by Camacho.

When he got home, he hurriedly greeted his aunt, who was watching TV, and retreated to his office. He called Edi, who answered after a few rings:

"Hi Edi, it's Bruno."

His friend's voice responded with an almost cheerful tone:

"Hi Bruno, any news?"

"Do you want to come back with me to Costa Rica?"

Bruno replied with another question.

Edi's voice became even cheerier:

"Of course! You know I love that country."

A few days later, they took the Trieste-Rome flight and, after a few hours, boarded a flight to Miami. The problem of reaching San José was not there as it had been the last time because, upon exiting, they were approached by a young man who asked them:

"Are you Mr. Fonda and Mr. Rustia?"

At their nod of assent, he added in English:

"Please follow me."

The large white pickup looked the same as the last time and took them to the DC-3 Dakota waiting in front of the old isolated hangar. The pilot wasn't the same either, and when Bruno went to give him the money, he refused, saying:

"No, sir, it's all taken care of."

They landed on the same dirt runway, and when they got off the plane, they saw the yellow Dodge Challenger parked near the office shack.

When they entered, Jorge had his back to the door and was chatting with the young man they had already met, who greeted them warmly:

"Welcome back to Costa Rica, gentlemen!"

They all piled into the Dodge, and Jorge drove away from the airport, kicking up a cloud of dust be-

hind them. As he navigated the road at a brisk pace, he turned to Bruno and asked,

"You came back to complete your revenge, right?"

Bruno fell silent for several seconds before responding grimly,

"That's true... but those two are just the material executors of the massacre. I want Rojas and Camacho too."

After a long pause, Jorge countered,

"Well, let's start with those two. They've been squeezed like lemons and told us everything they knew. Now they're not pretty to look at."

Edi, sitting in the back seat, asked,

"I heard you're part of a group of vigilantes..."

Jorge immediately replied in a calm tone,

"You're used to it in Italy, and you have your own problems with organized crime and the Red Brigades, but here it's different. We don't have a large concentration of criminals; we're a transit country. The big criminal organizations come from Colombia and Bolivia and often collude with politicians in Central America. We have a politically stable government that wants to distance itself as much as possible from the military dictatorships of our neighbors. Our

group is trying to clean up the country to prevent unhealthy criminal groups from taking root. To do that, we can't respect the rules if we want to fight those who don't. We need the same freedom of action as our enemy."

He smiled at Bruno, who was sitting next to him, and added,

"Few in the government know about our existence, and those who do officially ignore us, leaving us with our hands free. When something shocking happens that stirs public opinion, they imply it's the CIA's fault, which often collaborates with us."

Jorge took a secondary road that wound up a hill. They found themselves in an uninhabited area, with no buildings in sight even on the horizon. When they reached the top of the hill, they discovered a slightly undulating plateau. In the center was a kind of farm made up of several low buildings with flat roofs, grouped around an area enclosed by a fence. In front of the open gate stood two men who could have been mistaken for farmers if they weren't holding M16 assault rifles.



Jorge stopped the Dodge at the gate and addressed one of the two men who approached the car:

"*Hola Ramon, todo bien?*"

The other man smiled and replied,

"*Todo es perfecto. El gringo de la CIA está esperando por ti.*"

Jorge waved and drove inside, stopping in front of a large building that resembled an agricultural storage facility. The interior was almost empty, with a table, a couple of pieces of furniture, and some chairs in the center. On one of the chairs sat a young man, shaved almost bald, tall and sturdy, wearing camouflage gear, who was staring at two men in front of him, tied up and gagged in chairs. On the table next to them was a canister and some wet towels.

Jorge addressed the man in camouflage:

"Hola Sean, these are my two Italian friends I told you about."

Sean stood up, nodded in greeting, and shook Bruno's hand, saying in good Italian,

"I'm Sean McCallum; you must be Bruno Fonda, right?"

Bruno nodded, a bit surprised, and Sean continued,

"I was with Comsubin in '58 along with a group of Navy Seals to refine some underwater techniques, and I heard about you having just boarded one of the destroyers sold to Italy by our government. I know you were an instructor for a while before you left and were considered something of a legend among the trainees back then."

He concluded with a smile. Bruno appreciated the memory of those years and returned the handshake enthusiastically. He had been involved several times as an instructor in joint training with American special forces.

Jorge interjected,

"How are our two friends doing?"

Sean replied in English, glancing at the two men, whose bloodied faces barely allowed them to breathe as they stared at the floor,

"They have nothing left to give us, Jorge."

Bruno looked at them and felt a brief pang of pity. They must have been tortured for days until their will was broken, reduced to mere shells of men resigned to reveal everything they were asked just to make their suffering stop. Then he remembered

Cagnoli, who had no nails and a hole in his forehead, and thought only of revenge.

Sean left the room and returned a few minutes later with a syringe in hand. He looked at Jorge questioningly, who nodded briefly, saying,

"Yes, proceed."

The man injected the contents of the syringe into the necks of both prisoners, who slumped in their chairs within seconds.

Jorge said to Bruno,

"We try to be as humane as possible."

Sean opened the large door, and shortly after, a pickup truck drove in. Two men got out and loaded the bodies into the back of the vehicle, heading toward a corner of the fence where a backhoe and a tractor with a small tank trailer, used for spreading fertilizer, were parked.

Everyone stopped at the door to watch. The backhoe began to dig, and soon the two bodies were laid in the hole. A tube was lowered from the tank, and a steaming liquid poured out.

Bruno asked, "What are they doing?"

Jorge replied casually,

"It's acid. Tomorrow they'll cover the hole."

There was nothing more to add.

They said goodbye to Sean and drove away in the yellow Dodge. During the trip, Jorge said,

"Let's go to my place. Tomorrow, if you want, you can return to Miami and catch a flight to Italy, but first we need to talk."

They remained silent for the entire journey. Jorge was used to these operations, but an execution like that always left a sense of sadness in his soul, even though he was convinced he was in the right and that it was a necessary thing. Bruno was lost in his thoughts, while Edi seemed the least affected of all; he had seen worse in Africa.

Just before San José, Jorge entered the open gate of a charming isolated villa and stopped in front of the entrance. It was a building that clashed with the landscape: wooden, two stories, with a sharp roof that made no sense in a country where snow was only seen in postcards. But evidently, it suited his playboy appearance.

They got out of the car, and a woman appeared at the door. In her forties, very attractive despite wearing camouflage pants and a green military t-shirt. Her long raven hair fell over her shoulders and

down to the middle of her back. She smiled and invited the group inside.

Jorge introduced her with a smile:

"This is Pilar Fonseca, the most beautiful woman in the world and the most dangerous too."

She shot him a glare:

"Stop acting like a fool, Jorge."

Then, turning to the two guests, she asked, "Something to drink or eat?"

Edi quickly replied,

"We could use some beers, right Bruno?"

Bruno nodded, and she went off toward the kitchen.

Edi turned to Jorge with a mischievous grin:

"You have a beautiful wife..."

Jorge hurried to clarify,

"No, you're mistaken, there's no sex or love between us. We live together like two comrades in arms. She's part of the team and is also an excellent bodyguard."

Bruno chimed in, smiling,

"Congratulations on your splendid bodyguard, then..."

Pilar entered and distributed beers to everyone, then settled on the couch next to Jorge, also with a beer in hand. Her military demeanor and deliberately masculine mannerisms couldn't hide her extraordinary beauty and femininity. Bruno was surprised to notice that she wasn't wearing a bra under that rough military t-shirt, which her nipples seemed to be trying to poke through. He shook off that thought and turned to Jorge:

"You said you wanted to talk..."

Jorge looked him straight in the eye, and after taking a generous sip from his beer bottle, spoke seriously:

"I know that the death of the two gunmen isn't enough for you. You also want the masterminds, for your justice, but perhaps more for your revenge. I understand you."

He paused to take another sip of beer while Pilar followed the conversation with interest and continued,

"Camacho won't be easy to catch. I've been hunting him for years. For Rojas, though, I have an idea."

The questioning looks from Bruno and Edi prompted him to continue:

"As long as he stays in Italy, you won't get anything from him, and I think it's extremely difficult to have him killed in prison, like the mafias do in the United States. The only way to get him to talk is to bring him here to Sean."

He leaned back on the couch, finishing his beer. Then, holding out the empty bottle to Pilar, he said in an exaggeratedly affectionate tone,

*"Mi querida, otra cerveza por favor, mi amor."*

The woman stood up, but before heading to the kitchen, she shot back, annoyed,

"You know you're more of an idiot than usual when you have guests, right?"

Edi interjected doubtfully,

"That would be an excellent idea, even if it's not easy to implement. Right, Bruno?"

Bruno remained silent, pondering how such an operation could be carried out. To everyone's surprise, Pilar chimed in:

"You just need to find a way to get him out of prison for a transfer or some other excuse. When he's out, we'll pick him up and take him to a military airport where you'll have prepared a plane for the crossing."

She paused, looking at each of them in the eye, and concluded,

"If you want, I'll come with a team to retrieve him."

Bruno was considering all the probabilities of success for such an operation. Pilar was staring at him, imagining the workings of his mind as he sought a satisfactory solution. She found him interesting, even though she didn't know much about him. Jorge had told her he was a former Navy officer who had been with Comsubin, and that was very attractive to her.

After a long pause and two beers, Bruno finally decided to speak:

"A kidnapping is impossible; it would cause an uproar, especially from the leftist newspapers. If they sniffed that intelligence services were involved, they'd raise hell for months. We need to convince the judge that it's a matter of national security and get authorization for the transfer to a military prison, which would no longer be under his jurisdiction. An armored vehicle could pick him up from Coroneo and take him to Verona, the nearest military prison."



He paused, observing Edi, who nodded and suggested,

"We'd need a C130 Hercules ready in Verona, capable of going directly to Costa Rica."

Bruno, still doubtful, tried to summarize the details of the operation and replied,

"First of all, we need SIFAR to convince the judge to authorize the transfer to a military prison. And that's not the most difficult problem; Marco Russo can surely handle that. Once in Verona, we need to find a way to get him out to board a plane. Officially, that would be extremely complicated. SIFAR would have to decide to extradite him and find a way to hand him over to a foreign agent who would pick him up from prison and take him to Costa Rica. It would require an extradition request from a Costa Rican authority."

He paused and, looking at Pilar, added,

"Here you could be useful. With the right credentials, you could pick up the prisoner and take him away."

With a half-smile, he concluded,

"Would you be up for a little trip to Italy?"

The woman smiled back and replied,

"No problem, Italy is beautiful, and by the way, I've already done operations like this!"

Jorge interjected,

"I should be able to get a similar request from our command."

Then, turning to Pilar, he added,

"Do you remember that extraction in Beirut in '63?"

Pilar furrowed her brow and nodded seriously,

"I remember it very well, but I hope this one is much simpler. I lost a man that time."

Jorge concluded, addressing Bruno,

"Let's focus on taking care of Rojas. I'm sure Sean will uncover many things that will lead us to Camacho."

Bruno nodded,

"I agree. We'll leave tomorrow."

Then turning to Pilar, he asked,

"Are you coming with us alone?"

She took a moment to think and then replied,

"I usually work in a team of three, but if you two are available, we can avoid bringing two more of ours to Italy. In the documents, you could appear as

contract security personnel for our military authorities. It's not the first time we've done this."

Edi chimed in with a smile,

"I never imagined I'd be back doing the kind of work I did in Africa for several years."

Pilar looked at him, surprised,

"Oh good... a mercenary is just what we need."

The beers were finished, and they all retired to their rooms upstairs.

The next day, Jorge took the three of them to the usual airport, and in the afternoon, the DC3 flew them to Miami. They found a night flight to Rome and subsequently boarded for Trieste. Once they arrived at Ronchi dei Legionari airport, Bruno suggested hosting both of them at his home. It wouldn't be appropriate to put Pilar in a hotel, as it would create unnecessary logistical complications. So, he called home to inform them of the arrival of two guests.

His aunt's cheerful voice answered with joy:

"Welcome back, darling! Two guest rooms are ready, and I'll prepare something to eat. You must be starving."

Bruno hung up, smiling at the thought of his aunt's reaction when she saw Pilar. Upon arriving

home, Bruno entered first, and his aunt threw her arms around him with a squeal of joy. Noticing Pilar behind him, she was momentarily taken aback, mouth agape, but quickly recovered, leaving Bruno and approaching her with a smile:

"Please, make yourself at home! Let me take your suitcase."

She reached for it and, noticing it had wheels, added in surprise,

"Oh, how convenient... come, let me show you your room,"

completely ignoring Edi and Bruno.

The two dropped their bags in their rooms and sat at the large kitchen table waiting. After about ten minutes, Bruno was about to go look for her when they finally arrived. His aunt, all beaming, entered followed by Pilar, announcing,

"Pilar really likes our house, you know Bruno? Now sit down at the table; everything is ready. You sit here, dear, next to Bruno. You'll have so much to talk about, right?"

She began serving her specialties, filling the table with enough food to feed three large families. Pilar spoke Italian fairly well, occasionally inserting a Spanish word, while the aunt, knowing a bit of Span-

ish, helped herself with a few Italian words. They understood each other perfectly.

Bruno signaled to the other two that it wasn't the right time to discuss the purpose of their trip, so the conversation remained light and cheerful, much to the aunt's delight as she chatted with everyone, especially Pilar. In the end, not much remained on the table, and due to the hearty dinner and the time difference, they decided to retire early to their rooms, postponing the operation preparations until the next day. Before retiring, the aunt took the opportunity to approach Bruno, whispering,

"That girl is so beautiful..."

Bruno imagined that his aunt had taken her for his girlfriend, but he didn't want to disappoint her right away and replied quietly, with a conspiratorial air,

"Yes, she really is beautiful."

He wished his aunt goodnight and retreated to his room. Once in bed, he lay awake for a long time sorting through the various aspects of the operation, which he told himself must not fail. Finally, fatigue, perhaps more mental than physical, overcame him, and he fell into a deep sleep without dreams.

The next morning, the aunt left early and took her white Fiat 127. Bruno saw her from the window as she drove slowly down the boulevard, heading toward the center. He was sure her intention was to explore markets and fishmongers to stock up and pamper her guests. Good, he thought, we'll be freer to talk. He didn't want his aunt to learn about their plans, which were not exactly in line with the law.

They all gathered in Bruno's office to assess the situation. Pilar began,

"Jorge will be working to obtain some sort of extradition request, in which you two will be named as contract security agents under my command. The request must necessarily come from the O.I.J.; otherwise, our judiciary and yours would get bogged down in endless disputes."

She smiled at Bruno and added with a subtle challenge,

"Do you mind being under the command of a woman?"

While Edi smirked, Bruno returned the smile and replied,

"Not at all. Being under the orders of a commander who knows what she's doing doesn't bother me at all, regardless of her gender."

Edi suggested,

"Now we need to hear from Marco and I'd say also Carlo. They'll need to work together to obtain the transfer to the military prison, and only SIFAR can resolve the matter."

Smiling, he added,

"I don't think it'll be easy to take the bone from the GIP's mouth, but the motivation at stake, national security, should help."

Bruno called Carlo Giuliani to briefly update him on the situation without going into too many details. If what they were planning to do had leaked, it would have been a field day for journalists who would have filled the pages of 'Il Piccolo' for months. Carlo assured him that he would meet him and Marco the next morning at 10.

They spent the entire day examining every detail, and Pilar proved to be very helpful in this type of operation, suggesting, to Edi and Bruno's surprise, some precautions to take. The transfer from Coroneo to Peschiera was to be carried out with a police van from the Carabinieri, specifically from a unit with military police duties, thus not under the jurisdiction of ordinary magistracy. The van was to be accompanied by a security vehicle, and following

that, there would be a civilian car with the three of them on board. Since they would not yet have authorization to take custody of the prisoner, which would later be provided by the military authorities of the Peschiera prison, the escorting Carabinieri needed to be informed of their presence.

They spent the whole day studying the plan in minute detail. They only took a brief half-hour break for a quick snack, disappointing Aunt Alina, who had prepared a sumptuous lunch. Bruno consoled her by promising that they would surely enjoy all her specialties for dinner. Indeed, when they finished, they were faced with a variety of dishes worthy of a fine restaurant and enthusiastically dedicated themselves to each course.

After dinner, Bruno suggested a walk along Viale XX Settembre to digest the abundant meal. At that hour, many Triestini had the same idea, and as usual, the Viale was crowded with passersby. Pilar was pleasantly surprised by this special boulevard, lined with cinemas, shops with their windows still lit, and countless bars, ice cream parlors, and buffets, almost all with outdoor tables under the trees.

It was a common habit to stroll while alternating directions several times upon reaching the end of



the boulevard. The Triestinians called these walks 'swimming pools,' and inevitably, after a certain number of 'pools,' it was customary to stop at the tables of some bar to chat and observe the passersby.

The three followed the Triestinian tradition to the letter and, after a few 'pools' settled at the outdoor tables of an old Central European-style café. Bruno asked Pilar with a smile:

"Commander, what would you feel like indulging in now after that monstrous feast?"

She looked around and replied:

"I would be very tempted by something like that..."

pointing to a stout middle-aged woman at a nearby table who was vigorously spooning from a huge glass bowl full of coffee 'affogato'.

When a waiter in a white jacket and bow tie approached, Bruno ordered:

"One coffee affogato for the lady and two Jack Daniel's single barrel with ice for us."

He glanced at Edi, who smiled and raised his fist with a thumbs-up.

They remained chatting in complete relaxation almost until closing time for the bars. The next day would be a busy one.

At exactly ten o'clock, Carlo and Marco arrived, and they all gathered in Bruno's office, where he introduced Pilar and explained the reason for her visit to Italy. It was Pilar who outlined the plan to the two officials, revealing that Jorge was already working to obtain an extradition request from the O.I.J.

Pilar detailed the plan developed with Bruno and Edi, waiting for their comments. Carlo was the first to speak, addressing Bruno:

"I'm afraid I won't be much help to you. My relations with the GIP are extremely formal, and I have no authority to request Rojas's transfer to a military prison. I can only offer you logistical support. If you need it, the Alfa Romeo 1900 is at your disposal."

After a brief pause, he continued:

"I know the GIP: he's a very attentive and correct young magistrate. I advise you to have him contacted unofficially by a prominent magistrate before the request for authorization to transfer to the military prison is presented to him. It's essential to anticipate the reasons for such a request, as it is an atypical procedure. It will be helpful to provide confidential clarifications to ensure that the GIP has no doubts about his professional ethics and the implications of

this decision. Mentioning national security at risk will be crucial."

Marco nodded and interjected:

"I'll have to activate the higher echelons of SI-FAR<sup>4</sup> since only they can manage this operation. The fact that Edi and Bruno are not part of the Italian law enforcement should facilitate the situation. SI-FAR will find the most appropriate way to contact the GIP, and once Rojas is in the military prison, they will communicate the confidential extradition request to the Army. The order to the director of Peschiera prison will have to come from a high-ranking officer. I believe they will discreetly involve a Chief of Staff General. In any case, nothing must leak to the press. They know that Rojas is detained at Coroneo awaiting trial, and it would not be unusual for the situation to drag on for years. If anything were to leak in the future, they would have solid justifications, including state secrecy and national security."

Pilar nodded and turned to Marco:

"I will be in command of the team, which will include Edi and Bruno, and we will support the Carabinieri during all transfers. Therefore, I will need a temporary gun permit. I will inform Jorge to send

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you a copy of the extradition request. We are waiting for the authorization to transfer Rojas to Peschiera, and when it happens, we will accompany the Carabinieri's van with the car Carlo will provide us. Once Rojas is detained in Peschiera, we will activate the extradition procedure."

Carlo stood up and addressed Pilar:

"I will arrange for a temporary gun permit. At this point, it seems to me that everything has been defined in minute detail."

Then he turned to Bruno:

"Will you also be on Rojas's flight to Costa Rica?"

"Certainly!" exclaimed Bruno, noticing a bitter expression on Carlo's face. Everyone was aware that Bruno had set aside his desire for justice, allowing his thirst for revenge to explode. Carlo could not agree with him on this, but he also did not feel he could blame him. He felt a bitter sense of helplessness because he should have been the one to ensure justice while he was forced to allow revenge. He thought sadly that, in cases like this, constitutional guarantees and the presumption of innocence should not be guaranteed to dangerous criminals like Rojas.

They parted with a handshake.

## Chapter 6.

The Carabinieri van to pick up Rojas was expected at Coroneo at 11. Bruno, Edi, and Pilar were ready by 9 with the Alfa 1900 parked outside. They had decided that all three would wear the same outfit: military green cargo pants and loose black leather jackets cinched at the waist, which concealed the view of the weapon under their armpit. They were in civilian clothes, but they gave off the appearance of a security team whose look would not surprise the Carabinieri, who had only been vaguely informed of their presence.

The weapons came from Bruno's collection. Bruno chose a Beretta 34 9mm, and Edi took the other of the same type. When Bruno saw Pilar reach for the Smith & Wesson 29 and grab a box of .44 Magnum cartridges with the other hand, he asked her with a half-smile:

"Are you sure?"

Thinking of the strong recoil of that revolver, but she, with a defiant smirk, replied:

"I have an identical one, and I usually train with heavy hunting loads."

Bruno returned the smile and replied:

"Well done, Commander!"

They reached the entrance of Coroneo at 10:30. Edi, driving the Alfa, showed his credentials to the guard and they were authorized to enter. A Carabinieri officer approached, and Pilar explained their presence by displaying their credentials.

Shortly after, the Carabinieri van arrived, followed by a Fiat 1300 from which a brigadier emerged. Pilar approached him and introduced herself:

"I am in command of this support team."

The non-commissioned officer looked at her pleasantly surprised. He did not expect to encounter such an attractive woman despite her military appearance, but he maintained his unflappable composure and addressed her, commander to commander, in a formal tone:

"I have been informed of your presence. We will proceed in close column: our vehicle first, followed by the van, and you at the rear. We will maintain a constant speed of 80 kilometers per hour, barring unforeseen circumstances. We have also been informed that there may be attempts at interception during the journey."

A few minutes later, Rojas emerged from the building handcuffed between two Carabinieri. He shot a dark, defiant glance at Bruno as he climbed into the van, and Bruno returned it with a promising smile.

They exited the gate and set off to leave the city. The Carabinieri's commander decided to avoid the highway segments, still partially under construction, and the column traveled only state roads.

After four hours of trouble-free travel, they arrived in Peschiera del Garda. The prison, an austere barracks built towards the end of the 1800s, was located on an islet surrounded by the Mincio River, where it flows into Lake Garda.

The formalities for accepting the prisoner were completed quickly, and Rojas was placed in strict isolation, as stipulated in the transfer order. Pilar shook hands with the Carabinieri's commander, who was returning immediately to Trieste, and the three of them entered the city to find a hotel, as they would need to wait for the extradition order.

They found three vacant rooms at the Grifone, a very comfortable hotel that had opened just a few years ago in the city center. Once settled, Bruno called Marco on the phone. He was not in the office

and left the hotel phone number with the agent, who assured him he would reach him via radio.

They were having dinner at the hotel restaurant when a waiter approached the table and, with deference, informed them that there was a phone call for Dr. Bruno Fonda. Bruno stood up and headed toward the phone. He immediately recognized Marco's voice, who asked him:

"Did everything go smoothly?"

Bruno replied in a relaxed tone:

"Smooth as oil. No problems. We are at the Grifone in Peschiera waiting."

"Good!"

Marco replied, adding:

"They are still working on it, but everything will be ready within a couple of days. I will leave a message at the hotel when you can pick up the 'package.' I received the documents from Jorge. An agent will leave shortly from Trieste to deliver them to you at the hotel."

Bruno replied:

"Perfect! Marco, I look forward to hearing from you."



After hanging up, Bruno returned to the table. There was nothing left for them to do but wait for the documents and the go-ahead from Marco. There were no obstacles in sight for the operation, so they could relax while waiting.

After dinner, they decided to take a walk in the charming historic center of the town. As they walked, Bruno observed Pilar. She was a beautiful woman in her forties, but she could transform from a tough special forces soldier into a curious, lively girl. She stopped in front of the brightly lit shop windows of closed stores, devouring with her eyes certain objects that particularly attracted her. Then she would turn to him or Edi, commenting with the innocence of a child in front of a toy store.

They strolled until late, then returned to the hotel. Pilar immediately retreated to her room, saying she needed to sleep, while Edi and Bruno stayed at the bar. In front of two Jack Daniel's, Edi, with a mischievous smile, said:

"I think you like our commander."

"What the hell are you talking about!"

Bruno replied, frowning.

"Well, it seemed to me... don't take it the wrong way."

Edi replied, smiling even more openly.

They changed the subject and continued chatting until late, carefully avoiding discussing the operation.

In his room, Bruno did not fall asleep immediately and found himself thinking about Pilar looking at the shop windows. He absolutely did not want to be attracted to her and tried to banish those images from his mind. To manage to fall asleep, he had to resort to the relaxation techniques that the Comsubin used when it was necessary to sleep before an action.

Two days passed in idleness and strolls, and Bruno had the impression that Pilar was addressing him with looks and conversations that were not quite fitting for the commander of the team. They were not overtly compromising, but they were vague allusions that could be interpreted in a thousand different ways. Yet, he was sure she was seeking a physical approach. Deep down, Bruno liked that woman, and he told himself that after the operation, it would not be a bad idea to spend a night with her, but without any emotional involvement. He had nothing left to give in that area.

The documents were delivered by an agent in uniform who arrived with a service car a few hours after the call to Marco. The go-ahead for the operation, however, came two days later with a phone call from Marco that interrupted the three's wait, who were now impatient to act. They presented themselves at the prison and were immediately received by the commander of the facility.

Lieutenant Colonel Gherlinzoni, although close to retirement, was a tall and robust man, still looking athletic. He displayed numerous decorations on his uniform jacket, topped by a small parachute between two wings, indicating his military parachutist qualification.

He welcomed them standing behind his desk, and after Pilar introduced herself by showing her credentials along with a copy of the extradition request, he said in a deep baritone voice:

"I have been informed of the extradition operation by the Chief of Staff, and I was expecting you. Please, have a seat."

He sat down as well and continued:

"I won't hide that I was surprised by this operation, which I consider rather atypical, but the confi-

dential clarifications provided to me by the high command made me decide to offer you my complete cooperation very willingly."

He continued, concluding with an informal tone and a slight smile:

"Moreover, considering the dangerousness of the subject, the sooner we get rid of him, the better."

The three were noticeably pleased with the commander's willingness, and Pilar asked:

"Colonel, how far is the airport, and how do you intend to organize the transfer?"

The officer leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs as if he were about to give a long lecture to students.

"The military airport is in Villafranca, about 20 kilometers away, where a Hercules C130 has been waiting since yesterday with the crew on standby, ready for takeoff."

He smiled, pleased with himself and how quickly he had arranged the flight by interfacing with the airport commander, and added:

"The transfer will take place with a Carabinieri van, preceded by one of ours, and your vehicle will follow at the rear."

He paused for a moment and then asked:

"Are you armed?"

Pilar immediately replied:

"Yes, sir. I have a temporary permit issued by the Trieste Police Headquarters, which I have attached in copy to the documents you have in front of you. My two companions, who are Italian nationals and contracted by our government for security, hold a regular gun permit issued by the Trieste Police Headquarters."

The Colonel, satisfied with the answer, asked again:

"Can I see your weapons?"

All three drew their pistols from their holsters and placed them on the desk. The officer examined them carefully and, curious, picked up the Smith & Wesson. With a slight smile directed at Pilar, he said:

"Powerful weapon... unusual for a woman."

Pilar returned the smile and replied:

"Sir, I learned to shoot from my father when I was only ten years old, and I often train with a similar weapon loaded with heavy .44 Magnum rounds."

The Colonel's smile widened, and he returned the weapon to Pilar. Bruno watched her, and in his mind, the contrast between Pilar, the team comman-

der, and the girl who had just hours before stopped enchanted to look at the shop windows materialized.

The next morning, Rojas appeared in the prison courtyard, escorted by two Carabinieri. He was handcuffed, and a short chain had been applied to his ankles, forcing him into a gait that was both comical and tragic. The prison director had acted with great caution, aware of the prisoner's dangerousness. When he climbed into the van, he no longer displayed the defiant look he had when leaving Trieste. Bruno thought he was finally ready for Sean.

The column set off, and after just under an hour, they reached the military airport in Villafranca. They stopped under a C130, already alerted to their arrival, with engines running and the rear ramp open. The brigadier of the Carabinieri commanding the group had Pilar sign a receipt document while Bruno grabbed the chain at Rojas's wrists, dragging him onto the plane. He made him sit in one of the seats along the wall and handcuffed him to the seat. Rojas had completely lost the bravado that had characterized him in Trieste. Imagining the destination of the plane, he realized that in Costa Rica he would not enjoy the same guarantees he had in Italy.

The three settled into distant seats, keeping an eye on him, even though it would have been impossible for Rojas to attempt anything in those conditions. Shortly after, the plane took off. It was equipped with extra fuel tanks, so there would be no stops for refueling.

The flight lasted ten hours, and just before arriving in San José, Pilar, who had been given command of the flight, entered the cockpit to provide the two pilots with the coordinates and instructions for landing at the small airport near Cipresses. One of the pilots expressed a doubt:

"Are you sure the dirt runway is long enough to land a plane like this?"

Pilar replied reassuringly:

"Don't worry. Land the wheels right at the beginning of the runway, which then continues on flat terrain. You won't have any problems."

The old Air Force pilot, who had seen everything during the war, touched down decisively a few meters before the start of the runway and stopped the aircraft about ten meters before the end. A few minutes later, they were flanked by Jorge's yellow Dodge and a large white double-cab pickup. Before getting off the plane, Pilar smiled at the pilots:

"Be patient. In a couple of hours, a tanker will come to refuel you for the return."

The two pilots, returning the smile, raised their fists with thumbs up and silently waved goodbye. They all exited through the rear ramp, and Rojas was handed over to four agents in camouflage suits, who loaded him into the back seats of the pickup, with one agent on each side. Jorge got out of the Dodge and approached with a smile:

"*Bienvenidos de nuevo, amigos!* It seems everything has finally been resolved. Marco has pulled all his strings in the high echelons of SIFAR."

After shaking hands with everyone, he added:

"Ramon will take our friend to Sean, and we can go home. We will join them tomorrow at our leisure. There's no rush."

They all got into the Dodge and headed towards Jorge and Pilar's house. Once inside, Pilar retreated to her room, while Jorge comfortably lay on the living room couch and said:

"There are two rooms with private bathrooms available for you upstairs. I imagine after ten hours of flight, a shower would be nice, right?"

Edi and Bruno nodded and went upstairs to their rooms. While relaxing under a hot shower,



Bruno began to reflect on the fact that Pilar and Jorge lived together in the same house without having any relationship outside of work, at least according to Jorge, who seemed sincere. He tried to push that thought away, irritated that the image of Pilar looking at the shop windows kept coming back to his mind.

They all had a snack together, raiding the stock of precooked foods in the refrigerator, and shortly after, they all went to sleep. Bruno fell immediately into a deep sleep, without any need for relaxation techniques.

The next morning, he was still in bed in a kind of half-sleep when he woke up hearing a knock at the door. He mumbled 'come in', and Pilar entered, dressed and ready to go out, telling him with a half-smile:

"Wake up, sleepyhead, we are all ready."

Bruno fully woke up and, propping himself up on his elbows, replied:

"Give me ten minutes."

When they arrived at the farm on the hill, Ramon greeted them by opening the gate to let them through, and Jorge headed towards the large ware-

house. Rojas was lying on the table, immobilized with ropes, gagged, and blindfolded. He could only hear. Sean approached the newcomers and, after greeting them, said in a cheerful tone:

"I haven't had a chance to have fun with our friend yet. I need to prepare him before any of you ask him questions and kindly request that he responds."

Pilar intervened:

"I think it will take some time. I would prefer to take a ride outside while we wait. I saw some saddle horses..."

Bruno looked at her doubtfully. He did not understand if she did not want to witness Sean's work or if she genuinely wanted to go horseback riding, since she had no questions to ask Rojas. Jorge and Edi could think about that, so he said to Pilar with a half-smile:

"I'll accompany you. I want to test my riding skills."

"Great! See you later then,"  
exclaimed Jorge, sitting down on a chair while Edi imitated him with another chair.

Bruno and Pilar entered a nearby building set up as a stable, where a long row of stalls housed sev-

eral horses. The cover for that O.I.J. base was precisely the breeding of horses. A man with a straw hat with the edges rolled up, was walking around checking the various stalls. He could have seemed like a breeder if it weren't for the Colt semi-automatic in the holster on his thigh and an M16 ready, leaning against the wall.

Pilar approached him and asked if they could take two horses. The man smiled and replied:

*"Claro que sí, señora."*

He chose a bay and a gray roan and saddled them. The two mounted and set off at a walk. It was evident that Pilar felt comfortable in the saddle, while Bruno appeared rather clumsy. He had ridden many times before, but with an English saddle; that American work saddle, although it seemed comfortable, did not allow him to maintain the position he was used to.

Pilar seemed to have forgotten the purpose for which they were there and had an almost happy look as she cheerfully invited him:

"Shall we try to make them gallop?"

"Better not,"

he replied,

"I haven't yet familiarized myself with this saddle."

And he added:

"Can I ask you a question?"

At her nod of assent, he asked:

"Why did you decide not to be present?"

She remained silent. They had moved quite far from the farm. She stood up in the stirrups and looked around as if searching for something, then replied in the tone of the team commander:

"Because I wanted to get to know you better."

Those sudden changes in her demeanor puzzled Bruno a bit, but they also intrigued him terribly. He could not distinguish which was the real Pilar: the tough soldier or the girl enchanted by the shop windows. Perhaps both were real, he thought.

They rode in silence for a few minutes, then Bruno said with a hint of irony:

"It seems normal for a commander to want to know her men."

Pilar, staring straight ahead, asked him in an almost impersonal voice:

"Jorge described in detail how you and Edi killed those two gunmen in Puerto Limón. You hit them both, you in the back and he in the neck?"

At Bruno's nod, she asked again:

"Was it the first time you killed a man?"

"No," he replied.

There were no more questions, and the conversation ended. They had moved quite far from the farm, and Pilar turned the horse around, launching into a gallop. Watching her gallop with her hair blowing in the wind, Bruno saw another person in her. She was neither the tough commander nor the girl enchanted by the shop windows. She was a free woman, challenging the world on her own. He turned away from those thoughts, which strangely irritated him, or at least he was convinced of that, and urged his bay into a gallop to catch up with her. All in all, the American saddle wasn't bad.

In the warehouse, Sean was taking a break chatting with Jorge and Edi. Rojas, gagged, was quietly moaning, tied up and blindfolded on the table. He was missing his toenails, and there was a lot of blood on the ground. They had not yet asked him any questions; Sean was just preparing him. When he saw Bruno and Pilar enter, Sean said:

"Tomorrow we will start with the questions. For now, we are still in the preparations."

Then, addressing everyone, he added with a smile:

"You can also leave unless you are sadistic maniacs who love blood; for now, your presence is unnecessary."

The next morning, after breakfast, when they were all ready to return to the farm, Bruno turned to Edi:

"I need to make some phone calls to Italy and wait for some responses, so I will stay here. You know what questions to ask and what the right answers should be, right?"

"Of course," replied his friend.

To Bruno's surprise, Pilar said:

"I will go into town to get supplies instead. You have completely emptied the fridge, and tonight we will need to eat."

Edi and Jorge nodded and headed towards the Dodge, which, after a few moments, disappeared with a screech of tires.

Pilar retreated to her room, while Bruno settled by the phone in the living room to call Italy. On the

fourth ring, Aunt Alina's joyful voice came through as she recognized him:

"How are you, darling? Everything okay?"

Bruno, to reassure her, replied, lying with an equally cheerful tone:

"I'm fine, practically on vacation and having fun. And you, all good?"

The voice on the other end became even more lively:

"I'm doing great, don't worry! In the evenings, I often go to play bridge at Caterina's, nearby,"

and, after a brief pause, she added with a cheerful squeal:

"And that dear girl Pilar, how is she?"

Bruno reassured her that she was well, and after another brief exchange of affection, he hung up.

The second call was to Carlo Giuliani, but given the hour, he left a message with the guard to be called back at any time.

He would have liked to call Cristina, but at that hour, she was surely not in the office, and he promised himself to call her back in the evening. He got up and went into the kitchen to make himself a coffee. Like all Triestinians, he loved coffee and was very strict in judging what he drank abroad. It wasn't

quite the coffee from *Portizça*<sup>5</sup>, but he had to admit that the Costa Rican coffee satisfied him greatly.

He was sipping his coffee when Pilar entered the kitchen. She was in commander mode, dressed in military attire, and, in a tone appropriate to her appearance, asked Bruno:

"Would you like to accompany me?"

Bruno looked at her and replied with a slightly ironic tone:

"At your orders, commander!"

She raised an eyebrow for a moment but then smiled:

"Don't be silly like Jorge, please."

They went outside, and at the back of the house, Pilar opened a roll-up door. In the large garage, there was only a red CJ Jeep, completely open with the windshield lowered onto the hood.

Bruno watched her as she drove towards the city with the wind in her hair, completely focused on driving the Jeep, which was perfectly in tune with her. A rugged military vehicle but painted bright red. It was a third Pilar similar to the one he had seen on horseback. Who knows how many other Pilars there

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5 Renowned coffee house in Trieste.



are, he thought, and he realized, much to his chagrin, that he would not mind discovering them all.

After exploring a large market and some shops, they filled the space behind the seats with supplies of all kinds, not forgetting beers and a few bottles of bourbon. As they returned home, they passed in front of the imposing colonnade of the Metropolitan Cathedral. Pilar, casting a quick glance at the monumental neoclassical building, asked Bruno, almost casually:

"Are you religious?"

Surprised by the question, he replied:

"I've never dealt with religion, but I think I'm agnostic. I can't deny the existence of a god, but I can't affirm it and believe in it either, as I have no proof."

Pilar nodded silently and pressed on:

"Are you afraid of death?"

By now, her questions no longer surprised him, and he replied confidently:

"I believe I will be afraid of death a second before I die. In the meantime, I don't deal with an unsolvable problem."

Pilar remained silent, and Bruno added, forcing an ironic tone:

"Commander, how do you find this new little soldier you have under your command?"

She looked at him, frowning for a moment, then, turning her gaze back to the road, burst into a hearty laugh and, suddenly accelerating, replied:

"Not bad, dear little soldier... not bad."

They returned home not long before the time when Carlo's call was due to arrive. Bruno helped Pilar put away the supplies, and as she retreated to her room, he, with a beer in hand, positioned himself next to the phone, waiting.

The phone rang only once because Bruno did not leave time for a second. Carlo's voice had a serious but not worried tone:

"Bruno, I have news, but first tell me if you have obtained information from Rojas."

"Not yet, the real interrogation should start today," he replied, thinking of the bound body on the table with a hint of sadness but also satisfaction for his imminent revenge. Carlo continued:

"We received a telegram from Pacheco's office informing us that a diplomatic courier from the Costa Rican embassy in Rome will deliver a briefcase to notary Cagnoli's office. The instructions and meth-

ods for the recipient of the briefcase to retrieve it will be contained within."

Bruno remained silent for several seconds and replied:

"This means that Ravalico and Crisanti are ready for the exchange with the microfilm, despite Rojas and the others being missing. Camacho wants his money at all costs..."

and Carlo added:

"That's right... two days ago, two Costa Ricans arrived in town, and we are keeping them under close surveillance. I want to catch Crisanti with the microfilm when he shows up at Cagnoli's office to retrieve the titles and the Costa Ricans right after. We will think about Ravalico later."

Bruno thought for a moment and replied:

"When I return to Italy, I also need to clarify Candler's position... I still haven't figured out how and to what extent he is involved."

They said goodbye with the promise to stay in close contact, and Bruno hung up. Many pieces were still missing to fully complete the puzzle. How to fit Ravalico was a fundamental missing piece. The fact that the E bomb project was drafted in Latvian was

another aspect to clarify and could involve the KGB, a rather difficult and dangerous piece to handle.

He set aside for the moment these aspects that could not be resolved immediately and called Candler's office. Cristina's voice answered almost immediately, and as she recognized him, lowering her voice, she almost whispered:

"Bruno, I can't talk right now. I've gathered several documents that will surely interest you."

Bruno replied:

"Cristina, you are a treasure!"

And hung up.

Two hours later, Bruno and Pilar had just sat down at the table in the kitchen, when Jorge entered, followed by Edi. At the sight of the two with plates on the table, the Costa Rican, with a broad ironic smile, exclaimed:

"How are the two hungry lovebirds?"

Bruno did not bat an eye. He knew Jorge by now and knew that there was no malice in his teasing remarks. However, he was surprised to hear Pilar respond in Spanish with an irritated tone:

*"Jorge, siempre sos el mismo idiota."*

Edi burst out laughing, and soon everyone joined him. Bruno laughed too, but inside he felt a

bit annoyed that, very likely, he and Pilar, seen by others when they were together, gave the impression of being more than just teammates. He also noticed that when she adopted a military demeanor, she poorly tolerated mischievous allusions.

While they all dined together, Bruno informed the group about the results of the phone calls he had made in Italy and the still unclear details that remained.

Jorge commented:

"Tomorrow we will have many answers. Our friend Rojas can't wait to tell us everything."

When they entered the large warehouse, Sean was sitting near the table where Rojas was tied up and was looking him in the face, after having removed the gag and the blindfold from his eyes. His technique was extremely refined. He inflicted immense pain without ever killing him and without asking him any questions, until he reduced him to the brink of exhaustion, both physically and mentally. Few could withstand that treatment, and when the interrogation began, there were no more resources capable of hindering the answers.

Sean looked at Bruno and said:

"Our friend is ready to answer your questions."

Before starting, Bruno took a quick glance at Pilar. She seemed indifferent to the terrible scene before her and was waiting for him to begin the interrogation. Sean started a small cassette recorder, and Bruno began with a series of questions.

Rojas no longer had any resistance and was gasping out answers to everything he was asked. He hesitated on a specific question regarding Camacho, but Sean forced him to continue by stabbing the tip of a knife into an open wound on his arm.

After Bruno, Jorge took his turn with another endless series of questions. Rojas's voice grew weaker and weaker, and Sean said:

"I don't think he has anything else interesting to tell us. If you have no more questions, I would end it here."

Jorge and Bruno nodded, and Sean gestured to Ramon, who was cleaning his M16 at the back of the warehouse. He immediately interrupted the operation and exited, leaving the large sliding door open.

Bruno was watching the dying Rojas and thinking of Cagnoli without nails and with a hole in his forehead. A summary justice had been done, and a revenge, not complete, but one that at least partially

satisfied him. Now he wanted to see Camacho take Rojas's place as soon as possible.

Sean took a metal case from a cabinet and extracted a syringe already filled with a yellowish liquid. He approached the table and injected the lethal liquid into the prisoner's neck, who, after a brief convulsion, lay still, no longer suffering.

Shortly after, the white pickup entered, and two men loaded the lifeless body into it to take it to the corner of the enclosure where the small backhoe had already prepared the hole. The two men laid the body at the bottom of the hole, and one of them turned on the tap of the tank from which smoking acid flowed out.

The next day, the backhoe would fill the hole and level the ground.

Back home, they all settled in the living room with a cassette recorder on the coffee table between the sofas. Jorge inserted the tape received from Sean, and when Pilar returned from the kitchen with beers for everyone, he started the recording.

Bruno involuntarily noticed that Pilar did not disdain serving the beers. Despite her authoritative demeanor, it seemed that she felt it was her duty, as a

woman, to take care of the kitchen and drinks. It was another contrasting aspect that intrigued him.

From the recording, it was clear that Rojas knew a lot, almost everything, but there were several details missing from the complete picture. After silently listening to the recording, Bruno decided to summarize the situation by connecting Rojas's account with the knowledge he possessed. He spoke at length, inviting the other three, who listened with the utmost attention, to identify any inconsistencies in his reconstruction of the facts:

Rosario Camacho had a microfilm with the E bomb project, which he intended to sell to the Russians for 2 billion. A copy of this microfilm had been hidden inside the Uzi by Pedro, one of his men, tasked with safeguarding it. Unaware of this hiding place, Camacho had gifted the Uzi to Bruno, intending to dispose of it after the weapon had been used to assassinate some police officers.

Ravalico is a businessman who in the past had built several state-owned properties in Latvia and has friends very high up in Moscow. He has many interests in Central America and learns that the bomb project is for sale. He passes the information to a



KGB friend in Riga, in the Soviet Republic of Latvia, who commissions him to purchase the microfilm.

Ravalico wants to remain in the shadows and entrusts Crisanti with the task of acting as his intermediary. The KGB sends the funds to Ravalico's account at Scotia Bank in Turks and Caicos, which converts them into bearer bonds and prepares the transfer of the bonds to notary Cagnoli. Lawyer Pacheco is tasked with managing the delivery of the titles in Italy for Crisanti, involving a Costa Rican diplomat in Rome, who is also unaware, like Pacheco, of the purpose of the transaction.

Crisanti should retrieve the titles from the notary and physically hand them over to Rojas at the time of the exchange for the microfilm, which would arrive from Costa Rica in Italy with another man from Camacho. Since Crisanti would temporarily possess both the titles and the microfilm, Ravalico, to secure himself, has him sign a private deed in which Crisanti declares himself indebted to him for 2 billion, simulating a fictitious loan. Upon delivery of the microfilm, Ravalico would return the document to Crisanti.

Although Ravalico could have transferred the titles from Turks and Caicos directly to Camacho in Costa Rica, he chose to have the exchange take place in Italy for security reasons. Thanks to privileged contacts, the bank managed to involve the Costa Rican embassy in Rome, allowing the transport of the titles in a diplomatic briefcase.

Ravalico had agreed with the Russians on a price of 2.5 billion, of which 0.5 billion would remain in his account at Scotia Bank.

At a certain point, an Arab terrorist organization contacts Camacho to buy the E bomb project. Camacho asks Pedro to hand him the copy to sell it. The man reveals to him that he has hidden it in the Uzi, and Camacho, furious at the news, has the man killed and then instructs Rojas to retrieve it from the weapon from Bruno.

Notary Cagnoli is assassinated, on Rojas's orders, after discovering the transaction. He was aware of the private deed between Ravalico and Crisanti, deposited with him with Ravalico's order to proceed

with the recovery of the sum at his request, which had aroused his suspicions. Furthermore, Ravalico had informed him that titles would arrive at his office from the Costa Rican embassy in Rome and that they would be retrieved by an agent who would identify himself with a secret procedure described in a document along with the titles. This further detail had heightened his suspicions. Cagnoli had hidden the private deed and the recordings of the conversations he had had with Ravalico in his safe in the office.

During a private meeting that took place one evening on the Audace pier, Cagnoli had asked for clarification on the legality of the operation. An intense argument ensued in which he threatened to inform the police, based on compromising evidence in his possession.

After this meeting, Ravalico feared for the successful outcome of the operation and told Rojas everything, who decided to act immediately, sending Ortega and Gutierrez to recover the evidence in Cagnoli's possession. However, they tortured and killed him without recovering anything, as the notary had entrusted everything to a friend, lawyer Candler.

Rojas attempts to recover the copy of the microfilm in Bruno's Uzi but is arrested and fails to stop the operation. The police grant him only one phone call, with which Rojas tries to warn his two friends at the hotel, but discovers they have already left.

Crisanti, having learned of Cagnoli's murder, cannot block the procedure for the delivery to the notary according to the orders given to Pacheco and thinks that with the agent for the delivery of the microfilm and his retrieval of the titles, the operation can be completed.

Crisanti should retrieve the titles from Cagnoli's office and physically hand them over to Rojas in exchange for the microfilm. After the notary's murder and Rojas's arrest, he cannot know how things have gone, but he imagines that Camacho has sent other men to manage the situation and is waiting for instructions from Ravalico. Camacho, having heard nothing more from Rojas and the others, must have sought other solutions to avoid damaging the transaction. Rojas could not know anything after his ar-

rest, but knowing Camacho, he is able to formulate very plausible hypotheses.

After a pause during which they all remained focused on Bruno's reconstruction, he added:

"This reconstruction is based on real and proven facts that we know and on Rojas's account, which we consider equally truthful. There are some details that are not entirely proven but plausible that we should still verify. But essentially, this description of events should guide us on how to proceed."

Pilar raised a doubt:

"Wouldn't it have been simpler for Ravalico to transfer the cash or the titles from Turks and Caicos directly to Costa Rica and then bring the microfilm to Italy, which is much easier to hide?"

Edi intervened:

"Doing the exchange in Costa Rica would have been very risky for Ravalico and his agent. He knew he was dealing with criminals who could, with impunity, not respect the agreements,"

and he added with a half-smile:

"The KGB would have been very irritated if they lost money and the microfilm. Ravalico is a very cautious man. He also took precautions against Crisanti, whom he evidently did not fully trust, making him sign that private deed."

Everyone agreed, imagining the end that Ravalico would have faced in such a scenario.

Bruno continued:

"I believe that now the action should shift to Italy. Based on the news from Carlo Giuliani, the microfilm is already in Italy, and Crisanti is waiting for the diplomatic briefcase."

Looking at Edi, he added:

"It's time to return to Italy."

Then he turned to Pilar:

"I would like another beer, commander..."

"It's in the fridge!" she replied curtly. Bruno could not understand whether she was irritated by the request for beer or by the fact that he was about to leave. He hoped that the first hypothesis was true. He did not desire any involvement of any kind, even though she intrigued him greatly.

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