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The Ballad of Mila

Written by Matteo Strukul

Published by Angry Robot

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EXHIBIT A

An Angry Robot imprint
and a member of the Osprey Group

Lace Market House,
54-56 High Pavement,
Nottingham,
NG1 1HW,
UK

www.exhibitabooks.com
A is for Azzurri!

An Exhibit A paperback original 2014
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A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

UK ISBN: 978 1 90922 372 1
Ebook ISBN: 978 1 90922 374 5

Cover photograph: Melissa Iannace, from the set "Mila in Bloodstained Delta"
(directed) by Lyda Patitucci; design by Argh! Oxford
Set in Meridien and Franklin Gothic by EpubServices

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0.

Chen narrowed his eyes: two thin cracks onto which red liquid dripped. Blood was falling from deep cuts in his forehead, a veil that blurred his vision.

The promise of death.

Zhang, the guy standing in front of him, was the one who had inflicted the wound.

Zhang looked at him, smiling, holding a butterfly knife, its blade red with Chen's blood. Zhang burst out in nervous laughter while taking in all the details of the little shop.

He smelled the spices, moved his gaze to the coloured boxes and cans of food. Packets of Lungkow noodles with their bright red dragons; the yellows and reds of Quick Cooking; grey boxes of flour for making Salapao steamed buns; the transparent packaging of the Wai Wai rice noodles and the Yan Long, made from sweet potatoes.

He smiled once again, satisfied. As if all those things belonged to him. He licked his upper lip, a merciless light in his eyes.

"Got yourself a really nice shop, Chen, don't you?"

"Ye... Yes..."

Zhang flicked the double handle of the butterfly knife again. The short blade flew through the air like a hungry tongue, swinging fast in a macabre, shining dance. He seemed to want to buy time before getting down to business. He took all the time he needed, making sure that fear seized the very bones of the small, skinny man in front of him.

On the Formica counter where Chen had set up the cash register and jars of brightly coloured candies, there was a bunch of red sword lilies. Their long stems formed a green lozenge. Their petals, strong and thick, expelled a strong perfume, a pungent fragrance.

"Have you seen them?" asked Zhang, lifting his chin and indicating the lilies with a simple movement.

"Yes..." whispered Chen in a weak voice.

"You know what they mean, don't you?"

"Sword..."

"Yes, sword and blood. Death, you ungrateful bastard! It's futile to try to avoid my rage and the revenge of your lord, Guo Xiaoping, the Dragon Head of the Talking Daggers! Xin and Lao both know you have to die."

Xin and Lao, crew-cut and specs, had just tied his hands behind his back. Slices of the shop's neon lighting bounced off the dark lenses partially hiding their eyes. But, still, Chen could feel their gaze digging into his face.

Zhang exhaled through his nose. "And all because you're late with your payments again this month," he told him. "Do you want to keep what you're earning, thanks to my uncle? You become greedy, Chen? Do we need to ask your permission to have what you owe us, you little freshwater crab?"

Chen's mouth was sealed, fear holding his words in. He lowered his eyes. Silent tears made their way through the blood and ran down his cheeks, his thin face, his high cheekbones.

"I don't think I heard you," prompted Zhang.

"Of course, Guo doesn't need to ask for what he's owed..."

"Ah, that's better," sighed Zhang. "Seems you're not as stupid as you'd like us to believe." He walked to the colourful tins of Shiitake-Poku mushrooms and the green cans of Aroy-D bamboo shoots. Moved the knife to his left hand and his right swept across the shelves.

A cascade of tins crashed onto the floor. A sudden, deafening noise. Zhang booted the cans away.

He turned back towards Chen.

"You want to keep everything for yourself, right? Damn you! You forgot, my uncle sees everything you do. Guo Xiaoping is the Mountain Master. And he sent me as a reminder. I treat infected wounds. The Talking Daggers are like the body of a great dragon. A body can't work unless each limb, each organ, each atom does exactly what nature instructs it to do. Chen, your nature is to pay Guo what you owe him."

As he spoke, Zhang got closer. He smiled a crazy, wide grin. Whirled the knife in front of the old man's face, then quickly stuck him in the stomach.

The blade went deep. Four times. It entered the flesh, ripped, and came out dripping, ready to bite and tear again.

Since his hands were tied, Chen couldn't even clasp them to his stomach. He saw his innards leaking out, unable to do anything, his eyes nearly popping out with the pain. His legs slowly gave way. Xin and Lao helped him down as he slumped to the ground. He slithered quietly, in a pool of blood and inner organs.

"Ew! Disgusting..." hissed Zhang. "You look like a gutted fish! And all because you wouldn't listen to us, you stupid greedy bastard!" Then he raised his eyes, stared at Xin and Lao.

"Clean everything up. Tomorrow this shithole of a shop will have a new owner."

"What'll we do with the corpse?" asked Xin.

“I saw a bathroom in the back. Chop him up in the tub, then call my uncle. He'll give you an address. Pack the pieces of the old man up in plastic bags, put them in the car boot and drive there. Get in through the gate and drop everything in the cellar. Stuff all the pieces in the furnace at the end of the hall and burn everything. Here's the keys. I'll go check on that idiot, Longhin. I gave my word he's good and I can't afford him to fail. My honour's at stake.”

While Xin and Lao dragged Chen's body towards the bathroom, Zhang produced a red handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped the blade of his butterfly. He did a thorough job. Folded the blade back with a flick of his wrist and slid it into the pocket of his dark grey trousers, then left the minimarket with an elegant stride.

Only after he was gone, did Chen finally die.

1.

It was really cold.

Piles of dirty snow along the road. Mounds of grey stretching all the way along.

Severino Pierobon – known as Two Hundred because the horses he bet on usually gave up in the last two hundred metres – arrived at Le Padovanelle racetrack in his yellow Citroën C2. As usual, he had no trouble finding somewhere to park. Horse-racing was a dying sport, and betting was a daydream for nostalgics.

He'd done everything thoroughly, as usual. Studied all the horses: the results of the latest races, the positions, what the experts said.

Horse racing was important to him. It had been in his blood since he was a kid, when he'd tagged along with his grandpa to Le Padovanelle. Since then, he'd followed the same ritual each and every week. Sometimes he won, but never anything big; just enough to go home with a tray of pastries. He'd stuff himself with them, alone in his kitchen; he ate himself silly because he loved cakes, even though he was supposed to be taking care of himself, having been diagnosed with diabetes.

Severino Pierobon didn't smoke and didn't have sex. He drank grappa and ate cakes. That was it. He was fifty and had no intention of reaching ninety if it meant eating vegetables, cereal and salad. He'd rather die young.

In his hand was a really sweet cappuccino in a plastic cup.

He knew he needed to trust in God. Or whoever. Despite his immense experience he had never been able to devise a winning system: there were far too many variables. But that feeling of uncertainty, of craziness, was exactly what pushed him to keep betting. A drunken feeling, at least as strong as the hope that grabbed him by the throat as soon as he saw the sulkies dashing from the starting line.

He scratched his unkempt beard, thinking that it was the first time he'd bet on a Monday. It had never been that cold in Padua, and the thick snow had caused the Saturday races to be postponed a couple of days.

He passed some time at the bar, then made a stop at the toilets. Suddenly he realised that he had to get a move on. He entered the door to the stands and reached the track-side railing the very moment Gastone Pink broke away from the others. But he'd broken away too early. He'd been hoping to see something now, for once, but no chance: that small, fast horse, chocolate-dark, had reached Bon Vivant first, then taken the lead.

Gastone Pink couldn't help it, it was its nature: he always took the lead early. But he could never hold on to it. That was his biggest weakness. Everybody knew this, even Two Hundred. That's why Alberto Leoni, the driver, was bobbing about in his sulky trying to get Gastone Pink to stay in the lead till the end, for once.

Severino Pierobon shook his head.

Angrily, he threw his crumpled copy of *Trot & Turf* to the ground. Kept watching that damned four-legged chunk of chocolate getting ready to steam on towards the finishing post. He still hoped, in his heart, that maybe Gastone Pink had enough in the tank to crush his opponents this time.

Around him, the Le Padovanelle regulars stared in silence at those twelve shining coats speeding along the sandy track. It was always a beautiful sight, seeing them in action, proud, fast, their hooves beating the rhythm of the challenge.

The chill was relentless. The cold air cut into faces, clouds twisting like white curls of fat in the blue frying pan of the sky.

"Gastone Pink'll fade before the end," someone said. "He's not mature enough yet and Leoni's unable to hold him back. Too bad, he's a really nice horse."

Casual words, comments made just to annoy. Severino Pierobon was already visualising his umpteenth crushing defeat.

But horse racing is not a sport like any other. Believe it or not, it never matches your expectations. And Severino Pierobon, aka Two Hundred, knew that.

Gastone Pink was staying in front. He wasn't tiring. Maybe he'd made an exception, just this once, and was going to hold on. A satisfied grin slowly started to appear on Severino's face.

The seconds passed. Two Hundred felt them rolling through his head. With each one, the image of his horse winning the race became less and less unreal.

The little bay kept eating up the ground with his strong, stocky legs, and he seemed to be enjoying it. He was giving his best and had a decent advantage, ten metres or so. He kept knocking back the advances of the eleven dark devils trying to catch up with him, and ploughed straight ahead, as if on drugs, ignoring the silly humans who had suddenly started shouting. His legs brushed through the air without breaking pace and – unbelievably – Gastone Pink stretched even further ahead.

From his sulky, Alberto Leoni was encouraging him, shouting something nobody could understand. The horse was tearing along like a beauty.

Two Hundred heard himself shouting "Go, go, you little bastard!", the words banging against his clenched teeth, his clenched jaw.

Then... then something happened which he really didn't want to see: a dark, muscular mare, big as an oil tanker, emerged from the chasing group. Two Hundred started to worry. His enthusiasm wavered; he felt a hard, metallic pain in his stomach, held his breath. Stood still, not moving, as if he didn't want to tilt the delicate balance that might bring his horse an unexpected victory.

"Imperatrice will swallow Gastone Pink whole," said a fat, pockmarked woman wearing a commodious coat with a fake fur collar.

But Severino Pierobon decided not to give up. Like Gastone Pink.

"He's going to do it. He's going to do it, for fuck's sake!" he shouted, his voice betraying his tension.

Imperatrice was catching up at the speed of light; she was swallowing the little horse whole exactly like that damn lard-ass had prophesied, but Gastone Pink was still holding onto the lead.

"Come on, come on, don't give up, don't let that big beast catch up, hold on!"

Both horses hit the last two hundred metres. Two Hundred started getting excited; it was nearly over. The frustration that had been building up for years now became electric enthusiasm, a wave of energy strong enough to reach the horse, or at least Severino Pierobon hoped so.

And maybe that was exactly what happened. Gastone Pink kept going even though that furious lioness behind him was getting closer and closer. But he kept the lead with his precision pacing, as beautiful as the sun that had just come out from behind the clouds to watch him. And, with a thoroughly gutsy display, not only did he maintain his advantage but he sped up and won.

Shutting up all those who had said he couldn't do it, including the pockmarked lard-ass. And leaving Two Hundred's jaw gaping next to the railing, blowing white steam into the air of that winter afternoon.

Thanks to that crazy little bay horse, he had finally won a four-horse accumulator. To be precise, he had guessed the exact finishing positions of the first four horses. But, even though anyone would have guessed that Imperatrice, Otto Nix and Capitan Germal would come home in the top positions, nobody would have bet a single cent on Gastone Pink.

That combination was worth 26,645 Euros. Just saying.

Severino Pierobon started stroking his chin.

Heckler & Koch USP Tactical, left-handed threaded barrel. Knight's Armament Company silencer. A small gun, perfect for what he needed to do.

He knew he would use it. Because he had to go all the way. Refusing would be akin to giving up, and giving up is the best advantage you can give your enemy. That's what he'd been told by his boss, Guo Xiaoping, who was quoting Master Kongzi. Guo was a short, mean Chinaman, pointy teeth, the leader of a gang of Asians that had been spreading across the Veneto region.

He had given him fifteen thousand Euros, cash, no problem.

As if he had been a short – and yellow – brother of Rockefeller.

His targets: Marco and Mirco Galesso. Twins from Verona, chartered accountants. They recycled the money earned by the Pagnan family, major league players in the local criminal underworld, through their drugs and prostitution rackets. The Galesso brothers laundered it, investing it in perfectly legal activities through a chain of companies strategically located in tax havens. From there they transferred it all over the place, following the ebbs and flows of the global market. Finally, they hid the money in secret accounts in Luxembourg or the Channel Islands, with such speed and secrecy that the Customs and Excise Police had no fucking idea.

Guo Xiaoping planned to kick the Pagnan family in the ass, just to show that he was serious. He planned to overpower the Italians and wanted to send them a message: *Today I am killing your accountants. Tomorrow, if I want to, I will kill you. And my hired gun is one of your own men, Ottorino Longhin.*

Ottorino Longhin was in his car, where he could keep an eye on the service station toilets without being seen. He was busy screwing the silencer onto the barrel of his Heckler & Koch, only one thought in mind: he mustn't fail. The Chinaman had been very clear about that. Hadn't left him any options.

But as time passed, he felt less and less sure of himself. He kept repeating in his head what he needed to do: stick a card saying "Out of Order" on the toilet door; get in; hide in one of the stalls; wait for those two idiots; shoot them both in the back of the head, twice; get out leaving the card where it was; cross the parking lot; climb into his black BMW 120; get the fuck out of there.

That was, ideally, what he would do. He had repeated it to himself thirty-seven times that afternoon already.

Thirty-seven, he'd counted them.

And then? Then he'd get a further fifteen thousand Euros, a new passport and a flight to Martinica. His wife? An old, fat, acne-scarred bitch addicted to horse racing. That was over. His kids? Two petty criminals who'd sucked his life away like leeches. Over with them too. His old life? Over, as well.

The Pagnan family? No longer any of his business. Ten years of hard, dirty work for that bunch of retards. Husband, wife, their sons, the usual family of distrustful, greedy people from Veneto, always busy pillaging their family business and thus forcing him to produce mountains of cash courtesy of a host of shady activities.

Thus Ottorino Longhin decided to become a turncoat. A local screwing over another local. Typical. All to the advantage of the Chinks. As if those fucking Slant-Eyes needed help putting the already-troubled Italian north-east in a difficult position. The economic miracle had become a mere shadow of its past self. Fucking immigrants, Longhin thought. But they paid well. Cash. And he was already in up to his neck.

So, thank you and goodbye.

But first he needed to kill Marco and Mirco Galesso.

He saw them coming in. Fat, reeking of smoke, clumsy, even more so than usual thanks to their identical grey suits, at least one size too small. Two fucking sacks of shit decorated with Armani glasses with perfectly round frames. Ottorino, he was thin as a rake, his face sunken by poverty, sharp as a knife. He would walk in and blow them away. Just give them time to grab hold of their cocks and then he'd finish them off. He waited a little longer, reminding himself that this was his last hurdle before he could leave his old life behind.

The Galesso twins walked into the toilets, stood in front of the urinals and started chatting.

"You prepared the sauté sauce?" said Mirco.

"Hey, I did everything just right," replied Marco.

"Oil, onions, roasted the rice properly..." continued the former.

"I just told you I did, for fuck's sake! And I added the broth and the Amarone."

"Parmesan to make everything creamier?"

"Christ, Mirco, you really think I'm an idiot? I followed the recipe step by step."

"There's nothing quite like risotto, remember!"

"Actually there's at least one thing: did you see that fucking hot piece of skirt you just bumped into?"

"What piece of skirt?"

"Christ, are you that stupid? The one with a Negro hairdo, the huge boobs and the leather trousers outlining that sweet ass!"

"Ah, that one... right, right, don't get upset. Of course I saw her."

"Christ Almighty, sometimes I wonder if you're a queer."

"Hey, no woman ever complained. God's gift between the sheets, me..."

"Yep, of course you are! You're standing here jerking off over a risotto. You realise that's not normal?"

"These things need to be done carefully!"

"Yeah, whatever. Me, I like pussy."

"What's up with you? I just asked how you prepared the risotto. No need to insult me!"

"Hm. Right, OK, let me take a piss in peace."

And as he was saying "peace" the door to the toilets opened. Ottorino Longhin appeared like a puppet in a theatre.

He smiled as they opened their mouths. Then without even taking aim, he emptied the magazine of the Heckler & Koch.

Tumpf, tumpf, tumpf.

Tumpf, tumpf, tumpf.

Within four seconds, Marco and Mirco were human jam. They crumpled onto the floor, which was already soaked with their blood.

Ottorino Longhin had gone a little over the top. But it was all good. He removed the empty magazine and dug out a new one from his leather jacket. Now he needed to get out and scarper at the speed of light.

Severino Pierobon stopped at the Limenella Nord service station.

Even though he'd already gone at the racetrack, he needed to take a leak. Urgently. Maybe it's the adrenalin kicking in after the win, he thought.

As soon as he'd parked he saw a patrol car. A couple of cars had crashed in the parking lot and their owners had called the police.

Whatever. He closed the door of his Citroën and ran towards the toilets. He was running hard; he was afraid he'd burst. The chill didn't help. It was late January, the coldest time of the year; his full bladder and the cold air formed a deadly alliance against his urinary tract.

On the wooden toilet door, the paint flaking, he saw a sign saying "Out of Order". But he was fucked if he was going to piss his pants. Without thinking twice he headed towards the door, which opened that very instant.

Severino's impetus made him crash into a man who was hurriedly barging out. He found himself grabbing him and, a second later, lying on the tiled floor.

"Fuck!" shouted Longhin, venting his frustration at finding himself in the arms of the living dynamo that had crashed into him. Now they were swimming together in the Galesso twins' blood.

"Shit!" shouted Two Hundred as soon as he saw the slaughterhouse in which the two bodies – torn apart by bullets – were floating. He saw splatters of blood all around. Felt like throwing up. Brought a hand to his mouth to hold back a retch and tried to stand up, but his old Clarks skidded in the blood and he lost his balance. He managed to stand up and make his

way to the door, filled with a terror that held him by the throat. He felt a warm liquid trickle down his legs. He was pissing himself.

Longhin saw the man dash towards the door. He dashed after him.

When Longhin and Two Hundred burst out into the parking lot one after another, the former shouting with his eyes bulging out of their sockets and the latter's face white with fear, they ended up about fifty yards from where the policemen stood, completing their reports.

One of them heard shouts and turned around. Just in time to see Longhin raise his arm, aim and fire.

Tumpf.

Two Hundred felt a sharp pain in his thigh. Suddenly his legs became as steady as cake mixture. He crashed to the ground, bleating like a wounded calf.

Before the policeman could utter a word, Longhin was standing over Severino, aiming the Heckler & Koch at his head.

"Don't move or I'll put a hole in his brain," he shouted at the cop.

"Put the gun down" the cop replied as he unholstered a .9 Beretta.

"Don't shoot or he'll kill me!" shouted Two Hundred just to make his presence known. Sure his opinion would have some weight in the current situation.

The situation was: bad guys, one hundred points. Good guys, nil. Victims, exact score unknown, but pretty low.

Anyone within twenty yards seemed to realise that it was not a movie set. Guns, shots, blood: all real.

After a few moments in which silence froze time, men, women and children started shouting in unison, as if they had arranged it, and started running around like headless chickens.

The policemen didn't move.

Two Hundred was shivering. The blood oozing from his right thigh had turned his jeans dark red.

Not knowing what to do next, Longhin opted for some sound effects. He thought that covering the screams of terror with the roar of his gun might be a good idea. He removed the silencer and started shooting.

Bang, bang.

Bang, bang.

Bang, bang.

A round of lead sweets for all, windscreen blown to pieces like broken mirrors, tyres hissing as they collapsed. Amidst all the bullets and screaming, Longhin grabbed his bleeding hostage by the neck and walked towards the small shop in the service station.

Inside the shop, seven people.

A cashier, her head awash with platinum blonde curls as if someone had poured a tray of cannelloni over her. An elderly German couple, the man skinny and nervous with pale blue eyes, the woman fat, as big as an aircraft carrier, but with a charming shepherdess-like face. Two children, a boy and a girl, holding hands, the former with a humungous bubble of snot hanging from his nose. A guy with sleek hair, muscular under a Jacquard-style sweater.

And her.

A bombshell: medium height, red dreadlocked hair, green eyes; sheathed in leather trousers and a tight jacket perfectly highlighting her curves. Breathtakingly hot.

On the left a small table covered in coffee cups, empty glasses, two-day old croissants.

Longhin loaded a new magazine. Then he did something that some might consider obvious.

And quite cruel.

He fired.

A bullet from his Heckler & Koch hit the huge German woman in the middle of her vast belly.

Her husband shouted "*Scheisse!*" and used his hands to try to stop the blood that was flowing from his wife's gut as if a pump was sucking it out of a ship's hold.

Two Hundred stared at the scene, numbed by his blood loss. His jeans, wet with blood and piss, were sticking to his leg.

The children were crying.

The German man kept spitting words in a harsh, dark accent, pretty much the same noise an anvil would make spin-drying in a washing machine.

The muscular guy was hiding behind the ice cream fridge.

The cashier was praying, "Please, sir, don't hurt me."

"Down on your bellies!" screamed Longhin. "And nobody do anything stupid or you'll find yourself with an extra hole in you, big as the one I put in the fat woman."

"She needz a doctor or she vill die!" said the German.

"Shut up or I'll kill you, you fucking Nazi."

As everyone went down, the red-haired woman walked towards Longhin and Pierobon. Her green eyes looked like Indian jade; they didn't betray any nervousness, any fear.

"The fuck's up with you?" Longhin shouted at her. "You a Rasta looking for trouble?"

She didn't reply. Kept walking straight ahead, stopped right in front of Longhin, put on a pair of glasses with weird yellow-tinted lenses and opened the front of her jacket to display a white T-shirt.

Under her T-shirt: big, firm breasts.

On her T-shirt, "Girls kick ass".

"If I lie on the ground I'll get my T-shirt dirty, and I'm particularly fond of it," said the girl, her mouth stretching into a grin that meant trouble.

"Are you taking the piss? I'll give your throat a lead tattoo!"

"With a water pistol?" she asked, shaking her head as if to tell him off. "You're going to get hurt. Bad."

Outside, a loudhailer started to croak.

"Drop your weapon and come out with your hands up," the voice of a policeman said.

Longhin kept his gun trained on the side of Two Hundred's temple, Two Hundred who couldn't feel his right leg and was leaning heavily on the counter behind which the cashier was obediently lying on the floor.

The two Germans were silent. Mr Muscle, as motionless as a cowhide rug, was also on the floor, behind the ice cream fridge.

The children were watching the scene unfold, also from a prone position.

The girl stopped waiting.

She planted her feet on the ground and head-butted Longhin. She hit him hard, as if she was hammering a nail into a tree trunk. The blow gained power as it struck. There was a noise like a stick hitting an empty trunk.

Longhin moaned softly; maybe he was trying to scream.

He staggered backwards.

She lunged forward and hit him with her right hand, a chop to the throat, the natural conclusion of a fluid, seamless motion. She had practiced that move thousands of times until it flowed perfectly.

Longhin struggled to breathe. He muttered something, his hands covering his face. The blood started oozing down his chin, down his neck.

The Red Fury jumped in the air and kicked him smack in the groin. Ottorino fell to his knees then crumpled to the floor like a puppet broken by a moody child. She didn't waste any time. Took the Heckler & Koch, grabbed him by the hair and dragged him outside like a pig's carcass.

She dropped him at the feet of the policeman holding the loudhailer. He had been watching the scene, wide-eyed.

"Here you go," said the girl.

"Thank you," replied the man.

Behind them, the flashing lights of ambulances and squad cars.

Two Hundred dragged himself out of the small shop, limping heavily.

He looked at the policemen. "In the toilets..." he started babbling, "...a massacre... in there. And a woman too... in the shop..."

Then he looked at the beautiful woman with the red dreadlocks who was smiling at him.

"I don't know what to say," he whispered.

"Don't worry, there's nothing to say," she replied. "Everything's fine."

They walked together towards the ambulance.

Two Hundred took his winning ticket from his pocket. It was red, blood red.

"What's your name?"

"Mila."

"Here you go, Mila."

"No, thanks. I don't like betting on the horses. I prefer motor racing."

"But this is a winning ticket!"

She looked at him coolly and told him, "So am I."

2.

Great.

She had given her witness testimony to the police.

She was holding the keys of the twins' car. Leaving the toilets earlier she had seen them and had "accidentally" bumped into one of them, taking the keys out of his pocket; that idiot hadn't even realised it. Easier than stealing candy from a kid. Then she'd saved the people in the small shop. So she was coming out of it completely unscathed.

All perfect.

The Mercedes C30 shone in the sun like a shark beneath the waves.

She opened the boot: two black leather cases.

Inside the first: wads of cash, at least two hundred banknotes in each brick. Five-hundred Euro notes. A lot of money.

Inside the second: the same.

She closed the cases and the boot. Got into the car and drove it towards the service station exit. A few yards away the police had cordoned off the area and scene of crime officers were now gathering all the usual evidence.

Zhang Wen was holding his mobile phone. He had just slid a couple of green pills under his tongue.

Zhang personally managed the trafficking of those little pills through a network of very young pushers. That horse tranquiliser was doing well on the Veneto market. At twenty Euros per pill, it helped him make a lot of money.

After visiting Chen's minimarket, he'd changed his clothes. He always had at least one spare suit in his car, in a sealed plastic bag from the dry cleaner's.

While he waited, he found a way to admire himself in the flat surface of a window. He was wearing a tailor-made dark blue suit. Beneath it a pearl-coloured tie and a white shirt. On top, a black jacket that went down to his ankles. Reflective shades and a crew cut completed the image.

He had been swallowing the last sip of a watered-down iced Coke from the pedestrian bridge over the motorway at the Limenella Nord service station, when he finally saw the Mercedes leave the parking lot.

He dashed towards his Porsche Cayenne. Back in the car again, he dialled the number he knew he had to call and started following the girl. After the usual sixteen rings, Guo Xiaoping picked up.

"I'm listening."

"We're screwed," said Zhang, and snorted. He was annoyed that his uncle was speaking Italian to him. They were Chinese, from Wenzhou. Why the fuck did they need to use that barbaric language? Yes, of course, his uncle had told him that it was very useful to learn the language of their enemy, that doing so gave them a precious advantage. They had discussed it several times, and there had been no way to change Guo's mind.

"Why?"

"The police have Longhin! Alive."

"How?"

"Some girl beat him to a pulp and delivered him to them."

"What about the accountants?"

"He killed them."

"So the damage is minor. We need to get rid of Longhin. And the girl. Nobody can be allowed to think they can make me a fool out of me by treating my men like idiots."

"Even if they are big polenta to the Italian north east?"

"*From* the Italian north east," Guo corrected. He was a precise man, he loved discipline and grammar and couldn't stand the fact that his nephew kept using the wrong prepositions after so many years.

"Of, from, to... the Italian north east, it's all the same!"

"No," Guo spat, nearly choking. "It is not all the same. You need to learn! You promised!"

"Promised, promised... in the meantime I'm learning to pronounce R rather than L. And I hate you talking to me this way. You're my uncle after all, and you owe me some respect!" Zhang pronounced the R in "respect" like an angry Spaniard. Perfectly enunciated.

"Right. Back to the matter in hand. Anything else you need to tell me?"

"Yes."

"I'm listening."

"The girl left with the Merc."

"And you didn't follow her?"

"I'm fifty yards behind her, on the motorway."

"Good. Find out where she's going."

“OK.”

“Where did they take Longhin?”

“Padua hospital.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes uncle, trust me.”

“Good! So, while you're following that girl, call Zou Kai and tell him to go to the Padua hospital with some of his guys. We need to eliminate Longhin from the equation before Pagnan's men grab him. The less they know about him selling out, the better for us. We need to hang onto the surprise factor. And even if Pagnan's men fail, that idiot might tell the police something. So we need to be fast.”

“I agree, uncle.”

“Right, that's all from me.”

“Same here.”

In the relaxation room of his house, Guo Xiaoping shook his head. His nephew was still far from adept at pronouncing the Italian language. An amateur, he told himself. Guo strongly believed that it was important to perfect the pronunciation. It was necessary to show he had integrated completely in order to screw up those ignorant nationalists all the more effectively.

In two days, he was taking part in a debate about cultural integration. He had been invited by the president of the provincial SME confederation, a man who considered Guo a rare example of a non-European entrepreneur who had integrated so well into the social fabric that he had become an asset to the local economy.

Guo really wanted to make a good impression. And he was afraid his nephew would do something stupid. He had to make sure Zhang stayed at home, but unfortunately he was sure that the young man would do everything he could to be there.

Guo snorted.

Then he thought back at how he had devised his speech. He planned to start from an historical perspective, explaining how, century after century, the Chinese had always shown respect and gratitude towards the people who had welcomed them. He'd thought of several excellent examples, one of which was about the Chinese workers who helped build the American railroad, sleeper after sleeper, from the east coast to the west.

He felt that he could do a really good job and impress the president, thus becoming a player. And thereby eliminating any doubts they might still harbour about him.

If only his stupid nephew, that dumb-ass loose cannon, would behave himself.

The Mercedes was running like a dream.

The clouds had cleared.

Mila felt like a bird in spring.

She had left the motorway, rejoined it in the opposite direction and was now heading for Marco Polo airport outside Venice.

She planned to leave one of the two cases in a left luggage locker before taking the next step. But first she needed to buy a big holdall, a tennis bag maybe, to put the cases in. Just to avoid entering the airport looking like someone who'd stolen a couple of million Euros.

Soon both the Chinese and the locals would realise that they were being fucked with. Then she'd turn them against each other and dice them, like mozzarella on a pizza. Spring cleaning. She was already dreaming of having to pick them up with a spoon.

The Porsche Cayenne kept following her.

It had to be a total idiot behind the wheel. A car like that was as noticeable as a turd in a bowl of soup.

Mila drove at a steady speed until the motorway ended in Mestre, then she suddenly turned and took the ramp towards Porto Marghera. The Porsche was left behind and disappeared from sight.

After a couple of turns she got to the town centre. She parked the Mercedes in front of a sport shop. A few minutes later she came out with a Nike tennis bag. She opened the boot and put one of the cases in the bag.

She got back into the car and drove to the airport.

The Porsche, which had reappeared meanwhile, parked a short distance behind her.

Mila entered the arrivals terminal and walked to the left luggage area. She picked a locker at random and put her bag inside. Then added the key to her keyring to make it look inconspicuous.

She went back to the motorway, following the same road she had taken earlier to get there. She left the motorway at Padua West and drove the A road towards Castelfranco Veneto until she reached Vigodarzere. Once she had reached Siletto she got to a residential area.

She parked the Mercedes in front of a small, semi-detached house.

She grabbed the remaining case from the boot and entered her home.

She flung off her clothes and left them on the floor, got to the bathroom and entered the shower, imagining the sensation of the hot water on her skin. She wanted to pamper herself a little before having dinner, but most of all she wanted to free her mind. She had a pretty challenging meeting coming up and wanted to be fully fit for it.

After fifteen minutes of what seemed to her a sweet anti-stress therapy, she left the shower and wrapped herself in a white honeycomb robe.

She went to her shiny kitchen. Washed some strawberries and prepared a smoothie. She smiled; her smile was sweet and cruel at the same time.

Zhang Wen had not understood one single iota of what was going on.

After the call with his uncle, he had followed the girl, but lost her near the Porto Marghera exit. He left the motorway and reached the town, where he had driven around aimlessly until he spotted her leaving a sports shop. Then he followed her, still at a distance, to the short stay parking lot of Marco Polo airport. There he remained in the car, hoping he wouldn't have to wait for long. After about fifteen minutes he saw her walk back to the Mercedes without her sports bag.

Maybe she had delivered it to someone inside the airport, or she'd left it in a locker. He couldn't think of any alternatives. But it looked dodgy. Decidedly dodgy. If that girl was driving the car belonging to Pagnan's accountants, then that bag contained either money or sensitive documents. Anyway, he was close to deciding to put an end to wandering around Veneto after her. He was planning on squeezing all the information he could out of her before putting a couple of bullets in her head and bye bye baby.

Zhang followed the Mercedes again. He parked his Porsche Cayenne half a block after the pretty house the redhead had walked into.

Only then he remembered that he was supposed to call Zou Kai and send him to the Padua hospital to kill Longhin. Shit, he'd fucked up. Guo would murder him.

With trembling hands, he called Zou Kai's mobile. After fourteen rings, Zou picked up. Zhang told him what had happened at the service station. The other man understood immediately that there was a fuck-ton of trouble on its way. He said he would call a couple of friends and then leave immediately, but he was not exactly in the area and it would take him a while to get there. Zhang shouted that he needed to be fast.

He ended the call with the unpleasant feeling of having a dirty conscience.

Immediately afterwards, he phoned Xan Jingyu and asked him to come over, along with Wu Jingjing. He had decided to call for help: after having seen the girl at work, he would rather avoid any further trouble.

As he waited, he got out of the car to stretch his legs. He checked the two Walther PPK 7.65s he kept in his shoulder holsters and started thinking about how best to enter the house.

Fat, salt-and-pepper hair and with a discoloured, nearly platinum goatee, Pagnan had really bad taste, talked too much and was unbelievably greedy: three traits that allowed him to become the undisputed boss of the Veneto underworld.

Over time, he had been diversifying his activities: loan sharking, arms dealing, armed robberies of security vans, drug trafficking – especially cocaine, distributed by his pushers in all the nightclubs and discos in Veneto. And of course the very remunerative activity of money laundering that had allowed his company, Fresh Air, to become the leading producer of air conditioners in the north east. And there was a lot to be earned through Fresh Air as well, via crimes such as collusive tendering and of course tax evasion.

As he'd always been able to afford the best lawyers and accountants, he had managed to stay clear of the law courts. Good relations with politicians, both left and right wing, and attendant bribes and backhanders, allowed him to enjoy total immunity. To the money he invested in corruption, he added a healthy entourage of high-end whores passing for escorts, and oceans of cocaine. All of which almost always helped him get what he wanted. And if ultimately somebody wasn't satisfied with that, he always had the right man ready to close their mouth in a committed and professional way.

Until now, everything had been great for Rossano Pagnan. On the job, at least.

His family didn't give him as much satisfaction, though.

His wife and kids were adept at methodically wasting all the money Rossano earned with his hard work. Each of them followed a strictly individual code of conduct, making sure they invested the family's money in a creatively crazy way.

Marisa, his wife, was the kind of woman who infested the supermarkets: fat, buxom and swollen with coke. She complemented this with a fondness for alcohol that caused her to start drinking vodka from the moment she woke up, just to calm her morning nerves. On Sundays she liked to play Rummy with her friends, betting staggering amounts of money that she regularly lost.

Their oldest daughter, Selvaggia, had had the great idea of going to study law in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Pagnan paid for her studies – several thousand US dollars – and of course a pile extra, such as a Ford Mustang and a Pontiac Firebird. But Selvaggia didn't only like sport cars. She also loved designer clothes: Roberto Cavalli, Vivienne Westwood, Dolce & Gabbana, Jean-Paul Gaultier.

Giacomo, their eight year-old son, spent his time faking various illnesses to skip school and play on his PlayStation, and in his free time he showed his love for their two Rottweilers. Once a week his mother brought him to Media Markt in the Padua Industrial Area, where he bought all the newest electronic devices.

So, Pagnan needed to keep grinding out money not only to satisfy his vast desire for power, but also to be able to keep up with his family's brainless purchases. But he still didn't lose his good spirits; after all, he was happy to be a successful man.

He was wolfing down a portion of thick spaghetti in a Bolognese sauce, his enthusiasm a harbinger of joy. On the table a bottle of Cabernet Franc – half empty – and a crystal glass – full. Before him an enormous fireplace, no fire lit.

Above the fireplace, a plasma TV screen dominated the room as if it was a Caravaggio. It was showing the local news. But what he saw made him gulp down what he was eating.

"Uh... urgh," he grunted. The enormous mouthful was choking him.

A Filipino waiter in a blue uniform decorated with small crimson mushrooms rushed to him and started vigorously patting his back.

Pagnan spat the cud on his plate just as the pictures of the Galesso twins appeared on the screen. A journalist with a colourless face was explaining how they had met their demise in the toilets of a service station at the hand of a madman who was then beaten within an inch of his life by some heroic girl.

"Wine!" shouted Pagnan, and as he did so he saw Ottorino Longhin's face on the plasma screen. It was all too much, even for a man like him. He started to squirm like a carp that had just bitten a hook.

"Fuckingbastarddirtysonofabitch," he belched as soon as he started to breathe again. Then, staring at the Filipino waiter with his piggy eyes, he started to shout: "Come on, you stupid black ape, what the hell are you looking at? Go call Mule, that genius – everything's going balls up! For fuck's sake!"

The waiter nodded and obeyed.

Mule picked up after ten rings.

"Mule! Where the fuck are you?"

"In Monselice, boss. I'm about to get our money from that asshole Schiavon."

"Leave that shit alone and listen to me!"

"Sure, boss."

"Mule, we are so badly fucked that I can't even start to explain. Imagine a turbine going full speed, splashing shit everywhere. But there's only us there. With our mouths open."

"OK boss, I get the idea."

"Someone killed the twins."

"What twins?"

"Mule, get with the programme, for fuck's sake! The Galesso twins, my insurance policy against jail!"

"Oh shit!"

"Oh, finally! That's the first smart thing you've said!"

Mule clenched his teeth and held his breath. He knew well that in these cases keeping a low profile and behaving like a robot was the best way out.

"But it's not over!"

"Ah!"

"We've been betrayed."

"Fuck."

"Yes! Fuck, fuck, a thousand times fuck! And do you know who by?"

"No."

"Ottorino Longhin, that son of a bitch."

"Shit!"

"Right! Shit! Now, Mule, pay attention, pay close attention to what I'm about to say. The news is reporting that Longhin is at the Padua hospital along with the poor assholes he shot like mockingbirds. Genius! He'll be in a private room, watched by the cops, right?"

"Right, boss."

"So, Mule, what I want you to do, and don't fuck it up, is to go to the hospital and don't leave without him, you got it, Mule? I don't know how you'll do it but I want him, I want him alive, and I want him now. We can't run any risks, and we will if the cops have him. First of all, we need to find out who bought him out. Second, we must make sure he doesn't sell us to the fucking cops. Third, I want to torture him with my own hands. Am I clear, Mule? Take anyone you want, someone like Tripe, Schiavo or what's his face, and bring that son of a bitch to me at the bowling alley. I'll be waiting there. Am I clear?"

"Crystal clear."

"Any questions?"

"Nope."

"I'll see you tonight at the bowling alley, then. Don't fuck this up. See that salary I pay you every month? Today you have to earn it, Mule!" concluded Pagnan, exhausted by the poeticism of his long speech. "The news says it was a bloody

mess. Longhin, that twat, lost it and riddled the twins with bullets. We must find out who's behind this, find out and make them pay. Take the guys with you. Understand?"

"Perfectly."

"So one last time: I'll be waiting at the bowling alley."

"Yes boss, I'm going now."

"Yes, right, you better go!"

"One thing, boss."

"What?"

"Well..."

"Come on, Mule, speak! We don't have all day! What's up?"

"Thursday's opening ceremony."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"The riding stables!"

"The riding stables?"

"Yes, the riding stables."

"What the fuck is happening, is there an echo? I got it, the riding stables, what about the riding stables? Mule, we're in deep doodoo, you should already be at the hospital and instead you start a game of twenty questions?"

"Boss, I meant... don't forget the opening ceremony for the riding stables. The mayor will be there and you need to deliver the opening speech."

Pagnan felt a mote of revulsion immediately followed by a feeling of dread that clenched his stomach muscles. Right, the riding stables, that spaceship-looking thing the mayor of Muson had built on the Euganean hills. Rossano Pagnan had donated oodles of money to the municipality in order to maintain the appearance of being a really nice man, always the best guarantee of hiding anything illegal.

Pagnan gulped.

"Right," he said, "you're right, Mule. Good that you reminded me of it, but now hang up and go do what you have to."

"OK boss, see you at the bowling alley."

Pagnan was thinking of that goddamned speech. In order to look good he'd prepared a series of quotations good enough to impress a philosopher, but now he couldn't remember any of them. How had he decided to start again? Something like "Horses are extraordinary animals..." but he'd forgotten everything that followed. His mind wandered to the stack of money he'd donated to the mayor and the parish priest, that dirty old sod who shagged his housekeeper and milked shitpiles of money – "offers" he said – off those who'd bought country houses in Muson. Bastards! Initially it was intended to be a simple riding stable, fences, horses. That was supposed to be it! Then they added a restaurant, a recreation ground, a five-star hotel. What the fuck! How come he had to be their main backer? Still, both out of pride and because it would have probably ended up being a useful move, he'd allowed himself to be screwed over. And now he had to give a fucking speech in front of all those people, restaurant owners, hoteliers, professional people, doctors, lawyers, all people with a lot of money who liked that corner of the hills, who considered it a safe harbour to rest after a long week's work.

To him personally, that stupid idea of building a riding stable up in the hills was trouble from day one. Like that time when, driving home, he destroyed his car after hitting a boar. A furious, hairy beast that some asshole had decided to repopulate the hills with, pretty much handing over one of the nicest areas in Veneto to a bunch of wild pigs that in a few years had bred at a ridiculous rate. Which was one more thing he couldn't understand: they were boars, not rabbits! Still... still he had hit one, and anyway it was Monday, only three days to go, and he couldn't remember a single passage of the speech he was supposed to give.