

An excerpt from

Roman Rendezvous

...As was his habit – for the good of his health – Hemo carefully avoided looking out of cab windows in Rome. Instead he usually tried passing the time contemplating a film he'd seen lately. Last night, watching a spy thriller on the hotel TV, he'd been specially struck by the amount of footage they devoted to walking feet. Usually in well-polished black shoes. Walking along pavements, going up steps, down steps, strolling along paths, passing park benches and then, mysteriously linking up with another pair of black shoes and the two pairs walking side by side along the river bank. What they never showed in these films – and quite rightly – were the minor hindrances on the way. Till the first pair linked up with the second. For sure they wouldn't have shown the technicians' strike at Fiumicino today, a strike that paralyzed the moving stairways and walkways so that passengers had to carry their own luggage from the runway to the exit gate. All he had done today was fly from Zurich to Rome – no walking along river banks, not alone nor with anyone. Only what he really needed right now was to take off his dusty shoes and socks and soak his feet in the bidet at the apartment. One thing you could count on at that place was the hot water.

They stopped at Piazza Marconi. He paid the driver, stepped onto the sidewalk and set off northwards, turning left at the second junction into Figurini. What a glorious day! The welcome warmth of the winter sun penetrated down to the marrow of his bones. The tall trees along the avenue, though not yet in leaf, emanated a fresh invigorating aroma. If only a man could just stay outdoors, just walk around on a day like this! Gaze at the fountains and buildings of this fascinating city simmering with history! Instead of creeping into that dismal den. Ah, here it came - the familiar gut spasm. Only to hope for the best – he sighed. Five thirty. Five thirty ... meeting Filfil at the Hilton... debriefing. After that just relax, take it easy, go look for coffee cups with a pink lotus pattern.

The caretaker of the apartment block was absent from her usual post, leaving behind only Lucky Luciano – a complacent one-eyed ginger cat who evidently shared responsibility for the building and what went on within. Passing through the red marble entrance, he was surveyed by one-eyed Lucky who then, dissembling any interest whatsoever, got down to cleaning the end of his tail, no doubt mentally noting the time of this occasional tenant's visit. Hemo entered the lift and ascended to the fourth floor.

Apartment 432. Bracing his nostrils he entered, closing the door quietly behind him. Then he just stood. Rooted. What was this?... A tangy fragrance reminiscent of the orange groves in full bloom at home. The carpet! Clean. No overflowing ashtrays, no cigarette butts! The furniture had been polished and he noticed for the first time flower boxes on the window ledges with colorful geranium. Wherever you looked you could not miss it: the hand of a woman. A vase of flowers on the coffee table, on the sideboard a bowl of realistic plastic fruit.

It was only when he entered the bedroom and saw women's clothes hanging in the closet that he understood. Of course! They'd brought in a young couple to take care of the apartment. Finally done the right thing! He went into the adjoining bathroom and saw to his satisfaction not only toilet soap but a pile of folded towels smelling of lavender.

The refrigerator in the kitchen, filled with soft drinks, vegetables, cheeses and what have you, looked brand new. He brought out a Coca Cola and drank lustily. As though in a dream he returned to the living room, picked up the phone and dialed a number. From down the corridor he could hear the shrill voice of the caretaker yattering with one of her cronies. The phone was picked up at the other end by someone with a young voice. Unfamiliar. Hemo gave his code name and asked for Bruno.

"Yes?" the local boss came on- line.

"Ahlan. Got someone new there, I see."

"Tell me... Where are you speaking from?"

"From here, the apartment - and I want to tell you how -"

" - From where?" Bruno squeaked in an emphatic whisper.

"I told you: From the apartment. - Where d'you think?"

"W...what apartment?"

" In Figurini, of course. Hey, what's wrong - ?"

"- How d'you get in?" the voice vaulted to soprano.

"With the bloody-key-what-the-hell-?"

"- Get out! Out!!!" now came panic. "We gave back the keys two weeks ago why didn't they-?"

"The telephone ..." Hemo's voice tapered off.

Was this someone's idea of a joke? - Wouldn't be the first time such things happened. But not with the likes of by-the-book Bruno.

"- Zik! You hear me? Skidaddle! Now! God help us - they'll call the police... Go!"

"All right," Hemo addressed the faint buzz at the other end.

What all right? How all right? How to get out, with those two biddies standing there?

First rule: prevent intrusion. He dismantled the telephone receiver and with a tiny instrument, detached the wires inside, then reassembled it, wiped the telephone clean with his handkerchief and put it back in place. Circulating the room he practiced a few paces, desperately attempting to get into the mode of those distant Judo moves. The telephone, true, had been neutralized, but how the hell do you neutralize a person without killing them first? And how do you ensure that the victim, if he survives, won't report to the police? The best strategy of course is persuasion. Persuade whoever it is that there's been a regrettable mistake: his "cousin", the previous tenant, forgot to tell him he'd moved out - and he'd come in from out of town and in all innocence opened the door with his key. Or words to that effect. Baloney! If the old girl didn't get lost before the tenant returned...? If it's a man, let's hope he's an old sop - not hard to handle. And if it's a woman...? hopefully

Marylin Monroe... He brought out the brown wig and his spectacles and hurried to the bathroom mirror. Fitting the wig on his head he adjusted it as aesthetically as possible. "Clown!" – he told himself, and put on the glasses.

How in God's name she slipped in without him hearing the click of her key...? Just seeing her at the door he vowed to make an appointment for a hearing test the minute he got home. The woman scanned him with a pair of green eyes. Cold eyes narrowly spaced but somehow with no look of surprise in them. Her red hair was stylishly bobbed. The close-fitting black leather suit she wore emphasized her athletic contours. A basket-ball player...? Her face, somewhat masculine with a jutting chin, looked rather bored and a bit cross.

"Bon giorno," said Hemo with a confident smile that bore no relation to the void that had replaced his knees.

A head taller than him, she looked down and without a word stretched out a long arm for the phone. Finding it dead she replaced the receiver. Why didn't she go out to the corridor and call the police? He closed his travel bag, donned his jacket, picked up his coat and started making for the door. Her tensile body barred the way.

"Una momento!" – her husky voice rang out.

Slowly, her face softened into a half smile as she began gushing in Italian. Hemo, concentrating on her purple lips, tried to follow her drift. From her gesticulations and intonation plus a word here and there, he gathered that the villain of this whole piece was one Giovanni. How could Giovanni give the client the key without telling her first!? But the gentleman must not fear. He probably expected a Thai girl, not someone like her, so maybe he got a shock? No worry, she assured him, she was big – but "suava". "Gentle" – she translated for his benefit.

"Mi Gina," she said, back to business. Delicately but firmly she released his grip on the travel bag handle and placed the bag on the floor. She then thrust out her large hand, palm up:

"Money!" she commanded.

"Money?" – he mouthed voicelessly.

"Ducento mile liretta Italiaaani," she lilted.

"Me no money Italiani," he responded, cursing his own recklessness.

What if the lady insisted on getting paid in Italian currency? She could call the cops! But Gina turned out to be flexible:

"Deutchmarki?... yen giapponese?... franco svizzeri?... dolari americano?... sterlina inglese...?" she trotted out melodiously – in her previous incarnation surely an opera singer.

She produced a pocket calculator.

"Swiss franco," murmured Hemo.

"Ducento venti," Gina completed the calculation. "Pronto."

Her eyes painted to tone with her lips, she sized him up then glanced at her watch. With a suggestion of threat in those green eyes, she said something which he took to mean "Giovanni could be here any moment."

Hemo reluctantly produced some banknotes from his inside pocket and counted out two hundred and twenty Swiss francs. There go a few good meals – the thought crossed his mind. When, if ever, would he see that money again? Would he be reimbursed? Or would it be on him? Whatever. Meanwhile why not just lie back and enjoy? What else was there to do?

"Me permette," she said, politely helping him off with his jacket. "Vene!" – she escorted him to the bathroom where, she indicated, he should disrobe and wash his feet in the bidet.

The stream of warm water splashing onto the soles of his feet lightened him momentarily. Gina disappeared into the bedroom. A moment later she called: "Avanti!"

He checked his watch. Three thirty. At five fifteen Filfil would be arriving at the Hilton. He'd go up to the suite, wait fifteen minutes and finally, concluding that his friend Mr. Higgins would not be coming, he'd leave. Standard procedure. A bleeding mess! Till you organize a meeting! With those damn phone calls and all that!

On the pink toweling bedcover lay Gina, eyes half-closed, wearing nothing but a black leather G-string. Slung round her monolithic neck was a silver chain and on it a large silver cross resting between two luscious breasts. She beckoned him. Hypnotised, he obeyed. He'd been with quite a few women in his time, some before Geula, some since – not that there was anything to complain about with Geula – but never had he experienced anything like this. Perfection! She motioned him to lie beside her on his belly and started massaging some fragrant lineament between his shoulders and into the nape of his neck. She then turned him over, closed in and invited him to take some of the aromatic cream and massage wherever he liked. Not leaving it to his discretion she took his hand and placed in on her thigh. Tentatively he began to massage.

"Piu forte!" she urged. "No be fright!"

But fright he was, and how! Only once in his life had he submitted to a massage. That was at the Dead Sea, and that had been quite enough. Professional masseurs started with the feet. God help him if she should touch his feet! He'd die. He'd literally be tickled to death. He'd yell and scream in Hebrew, the whole building would come running!

"No want massage. Por favor!" he implored, barely able to control the tremor in his voice, but immediately modified his plea: " – Not yet."

She paused a moment, a fleeting suspicion traversing her eyes. Then the doorbell rang.

Gina, all muscle, sprang from the bed and grabbed a bathrobe. Again the bell and a loud knock at the door, this time with an order.

"Operta la porta! Polizia!"

She swept together his clothes, flung them at him and pushed him, with them, into a clothes closet. He heard the receding sound of her slow footsteps – as though just roused from her siesta – shuffling to the front door. "Pronto,pronto!" he heard her call sleepily.

In the darkness of Gina's closet Hemo's prospects looked grim. "Take care, dear, right?" Geula's advice echoed in his ears. When would he see her again? Would they allow her to visit him in prison? With difficulty he managed to wriggle into his clothes. Just one sock missing – must be in the bathroom. What is the problem with Gina? – he wondered. Why was she so alarmed by the knock at the door? But now it was clear why: she was running an illegal business. When the police interrogated her she would claim that the jacket, coat and travel bag in the living room belonged to her husband. Checking the pockets they would come across his passport. "So, madam?" they'd say to her, "your husband is an Israeli?"

Muffled voices could be heard from the other room, then suddenly the closet door was opened and there stood a young man in a raincoat and a black homburg. Hemo stepped out. Pointless to even think of escape.

Without a word the young policeman led him into the other room and deposited him, like a retriever its quarry, in front of his superior. Hemo shifted his look to bypass the figure in front of him and fixed his gaze on the watercolor on the opposite wall: a storm at sea. Gina, pale and strained, stared at the three. The moustachioed superior flourished Hemo's passport in front of his face. "Senior Brik?"

"I-I don't speak Italian," he stammered. "I am innocent."

"We talk at the station," the stern superintendent said in English, handing Hemo's travel bag and jacket to his junior.

Suddenly the doorway was filled with a new person. A mean-eyed hairy mountain of a man wearing a tartan peaked cap.

"Que passa?" the man shouted at the red-head, his mean eyes taking stock of the rest of the cast. Giovanni!?

Coolly ignoring the new personage, the police officer addressed the woman: "Grazie, signorita. Bon giorno", with which he bowed lightly then sharply swiveled on his heel and, ducking between the door jamb and Giovanni's armpit, slipped out

elegantly, pushing his captive ahead. Junior followed closely, with Hemo's belongings.

Hemo knew that voice from somewhere. Along the corridor he struggled to find its slot. Only when the elevator doors clicked to did he place it - the voice he usually heard on the phone, in Rome: Maestro Bruno. In person!

The Maestro studied the lift's decorative ceiling and stroked his moustache. His subordinate scanned the buttons on the panel and pressed the one next to the bottom. Hemo focused on his bare left foot in its black shoe, shaking his head slowly, fighting to stifle the laughter bubbling up from within. Till they landed on the ground floor all that was heard inside was the quiet thrum of the elevator mechanism. Passing the three curious eyes of the custodian and her loyal second-in-command, Bruno called out affably "Bon giorno signora!" No eye reacted.

The three proceeded in silence till out of thin air a grey limousine materialized beside them. In the driver's seat sat a swarthy man in a white suit with a dark shirt. Bruno instructed his assistant to get in beside Herzl the driver while he and Hemo climbed in the back.

Lighting a cigarette Herzl released the brake. "Where to?" – he asked.

"Wherever you like," said Bruno.

Bruno the Bear, Hemo smiled inwardly. He who had fished out real killer whales – Nazi criminals – from their South American haunts. For him to fish out a tiddler from an Italian hooker's flat was child's play.

"Say, Bruno, what was the hurry?" – he finally had his say, "We were just warming up." Bruno who had once earned the title 'Top student in the course on English humor' was not amused. In any case he was too busy right now trying to remove his moustache without detaching his upper lip in the process.

Hemo gave a deep sigh: "Ahhh, you guys... What a woman! – you never saw anything like it!"

Behind Herzl's balding head Hemo could almost feel the driver's sparkling white smile – which encouraged him to continue relating his adventures with Gina, not without a little embroidery. The kid next to the driver turned round to face him, all eyes, till finally he had to admit that Gina was a bit too tall for him.

"And what do they call you?" Hemo asked him.

"Shmulik", said the youth, removing his hat to reveal a head of curls.

"Shmulik. – You're good – real good!"

"Listen, my friend," Bruno, now minus the moustache, interrupted, "don't do me any of those tricks any more – I'm too old for it."

"Old! What old?" Hemo sank into the comfortable upholstery. "Hey, I also thought I was a bit old for those tricks, and look – I was half-way to the Olympics! Except they sometimes don't give a man a chance!"

The star pupil of the English humor course evidently didn't see the funny side. He was quiet for a moment, putting together his riposte.

"Well I want to tell you, Zik," finally he spoke, slowly and deliberately, his German accent to the fore. "Another minute with that dwarf of hers with the tartan hat and we'd be packing you off to your wife in a garbage bag. Ha ha ha!"

"Very funny." Hemo was beginning to enjoy himself. Passengers and driver alike seemed enveloped in a common, almost family feeling of euphoria. Kind of fun to sit all together in this well-sprung, comfortable brand new vehicle. A small four-wheeled state with Herzl at the helm. Bruno opened the bar, poured Hemo a glass of whisky and one for himself. Hemo knocked his back and asked for another.

"Shmulik," he addressed the young man in front, "Could you look in my bag, there's some socks there –"

"-- Listen." Herzl had something to say. "There's news--"

"– My God!" Hemo, bounced back to earth, "I forgot what I came for!"

"That's just it – " Herzl gave it another shot. "While you were having fun up there I called the guys -"

"- what... who?" Bruno murmured, half-asleep.

"There. Opposite Zik's friend's house."

"Jesus!..." Hemo looked at his watch: almost five. No meeting today! No way. He hadn't even received his briefing. What now? Now he'd have to start the whole damn show afresh... phone calls and all that. From the start. Till, and if, another rendezvous could be arranged! Who had the strength for it? "...He's left his house, eh?"

"Aha," Herzl, deftly navigating the narrow thoroughfare as though born in Rome confirmed, " -- but he's not alone."

"What?"

"He's got an escort. Two Iraqis – maybe Persians – on his tail," said the driver.

"Could our guys describe them?" Bruno woke up.

"They said Iraqis or Iranians, to them they're all the same. Around age thirty...? And," he turned to face Bruno. "they said one had a shaved head and wore glasses and the other's got dark hair with a white stripe down the middle."

"Abu Simbal," murmured Bruno, nodding.

"What do you know about Abu Simbal?" Hemo sat up.

"Not much. Except he's a Palestinian terrorist wanted by the Italians.

"How d'you know that?"

"From the Italians. They asked us what we know about him."

"And what did we say?"

"How do I know? We passed the question on. So far no answer."

Hemo kept quiet. His man was marked. With Allah's help maybe it would end up all right. Maybe the Italians would manage to apprehend the assassins before Abu Simbal whipped out his lethal weapon. "No point calling the desk now," he sighed. "I don't need to be told it's too late. We just stay away."

Filfil would be killed by a gun fitted with a silencer. Like they'd done with those two diplomats in Bangkok. Nobody to stop them. His friend's suspicion would become reality - as Hemo's gut had been telling him these last few days. There'll be nothing much for the Italians to bother with, just examine the large body sprawled on the carpet, go round the blood-spattered furniture in the hotel room collecting bone fragments and bits of brain, then establish the hard fact. Photographers would be called in, the press would arrive, and tomorrow morning millions of eyes would slide across the picture before turning to the sports page or the stock exchange. And would anyone at the office shed a tear?

"Right, where now?" Herzl lit a cigarette.

"You choose," - Bruno turned to Hemo who was looking out of the window. Over in the piazza, at the other side of the traffic crawling along at funereal pace, tall fountains shimmered against leaden skies. Rome would always be Rome, the city all roads led to. For Filfil - the terminal. How much time did he have left, this extraordinary individual? The man he'd been meeting every two weeks for the last few years. How long? - this tall antiquarian - the Bedouin poet - till his light was snuffed out.

"I dunno..." he sighed, his heart like a stone in an empty jar. "I could do with binoculars."

"Here," said the driver, handing him the binoculars he kept in the glove compartment.

Why should a free desert creature whose only crime is that he dared visit greener pastures have to be killed? It didn't make sense. But you still have to file your report - they're waiting for it.

"Let's find a lookout by the Hilton. I want to see..."

Silence.

"Are you sure that's what you want?" Bruno studied him with anxious eyes.

"Sure...? ... This morning when I spoke to him we were going to meet at five thirty this afternoon. ...Sure?.. Now I'm sure of only one thing - that I'll never see him again."

"Listen," said Bruno, "I don't think we should hang around there. Not right now. In any case it's covered. Herzl can pick a restaurant and we'll go eat."

"I'm starving!" Shmulik announced.

"The kid's hungry," said Bruno, "worked hard. OK Herzl?"

"No problem," said the driver, "then afterwards maybe Zik will go back to that broad for his pound of flesh." He laughed at his own very clever remark.

It took a moment of silence till a resounding guffaw issued from Bruno's throat. A joke – English or maybe a Welsh kind of joke. Shmulik wasn't sure what to do.

Hemo kept quiet. "All right," he said finally, "a restaurant."

He would suppress his feeling of revulsion and go along with them. Later on he'd visit that store on Via Veneto and look for those coffee cups with the lotus pattern that Geula needed. Then he'd phone her and hear how work on the kitchen was progressing. She'd ask him how his day went and he'd say Okay. He'd probably see her in a few days. Hopefully he'd come home with those two cups. And another little gift. Planned for Filfil. An antiquarian book of seventeenth century English poetry bound in soft leather, that neither Hemo nor Geula could read very easily. But Geula, who loved beautiful rare things, especially books, would be happy to have it.