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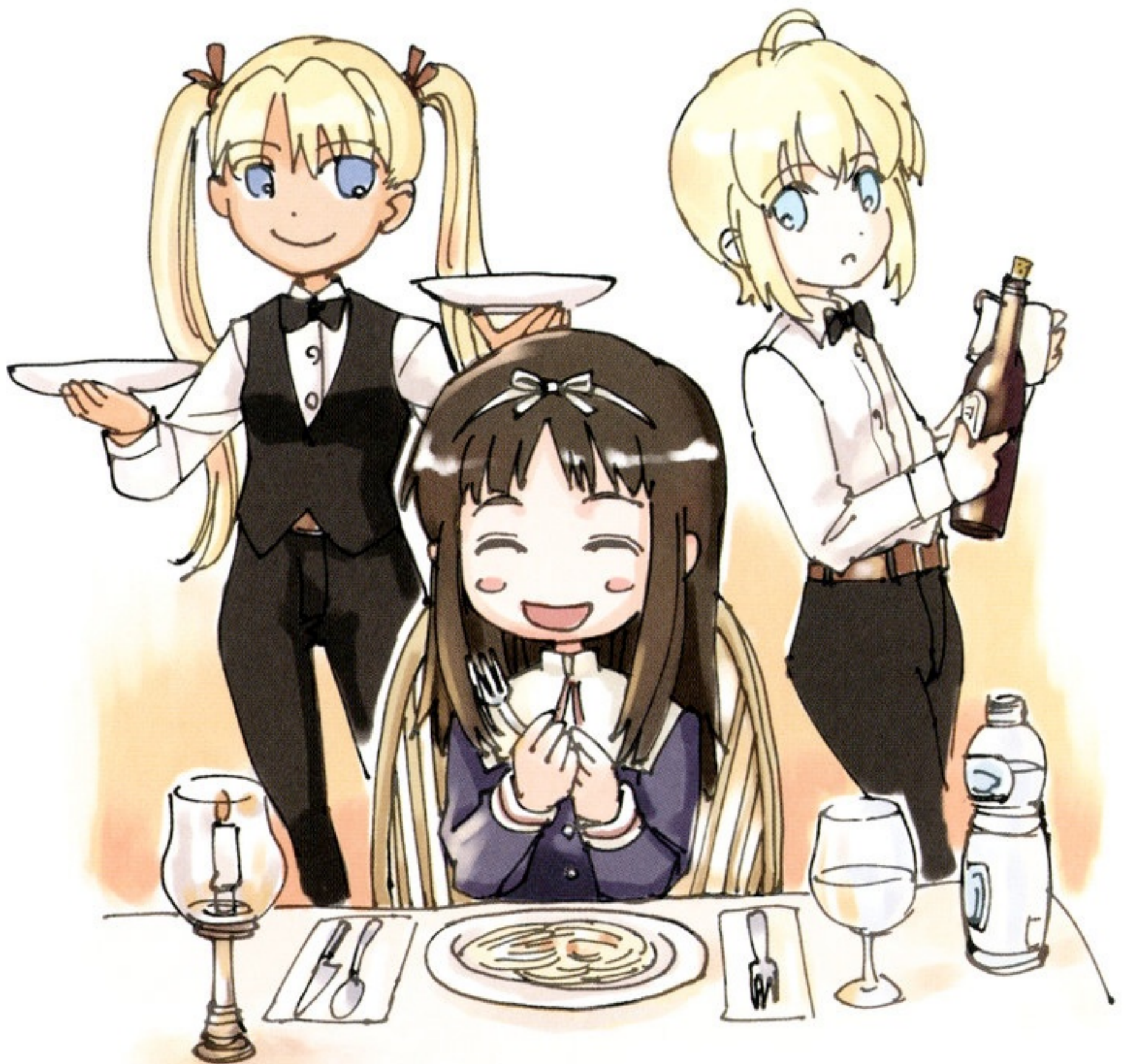
A COLLECTION OF GUNSLINGER GIRL STORIES

CHRIS WALLACE



1

LA PRINCIPESSA DELLA PASTA



The skies were clear and the temperature cold when Triela stepped outside and made her way to the garden areas, dressed in long pants tucked into her brown boots and a sweater over her button-down shirt. Even though it was now November, the gardens had adapted with the seasons and were now growing a mix of winter vegetables along with cover plants to allow the soil to recharge for the spring planting.

“How is she?” Claes asked as she checked her lavender and rosemary. She’d moved most of her herbs indoors, but those that could survive an occasional mild frost remained outside. On account of the weather she wore a heavy jacket and her blue suede boots over black leggings. She was kneeling on a plastic-covered seat cushion like those used for sitting in stadiums on aluminum bleachers to keep the soil off her knees.

“Awake and alert, but they still won’t let her leave the infirmary,” Triela noted as she took a seat on the edge of the brick. “Though she did absorb the blast of a car bomb,” she added, digging a short trench in the dirt with the heel of her right boot.

“Michele said the doctors don’t think Angelica’s going to survive,” Kara commented from the other patch as she tended to the crops and cover plants. She was dressed in jeans and a sweater with hiking boots. “He says they’re like vultures circling a wounded beast, waiting for it to die.”

“We should do something nice for her, then,” Triela stated.

“If the medical staff won’t let her out of the hospital...” Claes noted.

“We can make her a nice dinner,” Triela suggested.

“We can do more than that. Let’s give her the whole experience. We’ll make a special table for her in the dining room and we’ll do a full meal service. We can dress up as waiters and really treat her.”

“That sounds fun!” Rico said, startling them all, who had neither seen nor heard her approach. “Can I be a waiter?”

“Signore Togni, may I speak with you for a moment?”

Marco turned. “Yes, Kara?”

“A few of us would like to hold a special dinner party for Angelica in the girl’s dining room. Would it be an imposition if you could ask Doctor Belgonchi if she could be allowed to leave the infirmary for a couple of hours one evening?”

“That’s very nice of you, Kara. I’ll speak to the staff for you.”

“Thank you, Signore.”

The “special day” arrived and Priscilla dressed Angelica in a blue and white dress with white stockings and black patent leather Mary Jane flats. Marco lifted her into a wheelchair and they covered her in a blanket and wheeled her over to the girl’s dining room.

Outside the door, a wooden podium from one of the conference rooms had been placed. Behind it stood Triela, dressed in a tuxedo vest, shirt and pants with tie.

“Good evening, Your Highness. We’ve been expecting you,” Triela greeted. “We have your table ready, if you would please follow me.”

She opened the door and led them into the dining room. The lights had been set low and an area had been cleared, with a square table and chair placed in the center. On the table was a single setting of Michele’s fine china and silverware along with glassware and cloth napkins. A hurricane lamp cast soft light over the table from the tall candle inside. Marco lifted Angelica out of the wheelchair and into the dining chair, which he then pushed forward.

“Hi, Angelica,” Rico smiled as she approached with a bottle of water. She was dressed like Triela, but without the vest. She filled the water glass and then placed the bottle on the table. A moment later Kara and Claes came out, both dressed in full Chef’s Whites. Kara was beaming and Claes tried to put on a pleasant face, though she felt dressing up for the part was overkill.

“Welcome to our Ristorante. It’s a pleasure to have you dining with us, Your Highness,” Kara greeted.

“Why does everyone call me ‘Your Highness’?” Angelica asked, confused.

“Tonight, you are the Pasta Princess, Angelica,” Priscilla replied. “And this is a special dinner prepared in your honor.”

“But the hero in the story was a prince,” Angelica said.

“Roll with us on this one,” Claes stated. Angelica nodded and flashed her thousand-watt smile.

“We’ll be over here if you need anything,” Marco said, and he and Priscilla took a table to the side.

“In your honor tonight, Angelica-hime, we have prepared four courses,” Kara noted. “For the anti-pasto, we have Tortelli alla Lastra, followed by a primo of Spaghetti con Vongole e Cozze. The secundo will be Braciola di Pollo and for dolce we have prepared a Pandoro.”

“It all sounds wonderful!” Angelica exclaimed in happiness.

“We hope it will be,” Kara said and she and Claes returned to the kitchen.

They had already prepared the tortelli earlier. They were essentially squares of pastry filled with a mixture of boiled potatoes, onion, carrot, sage, garlic, tomato, pecorino, eggs, butter, nutmeg, oil and salt. The edges were then crimped. All that remained was cooking them, which they did by grilling them on a stone that had been pre-heated in an oven. It was ready within minutes and Claes plated them and handed them off to Triela, who brought them to the table and served them to Angelica.

Next came the primo. The water for the spaghetti was already on the boil and Claes added the pasta. Kara had cooked two cups of canned tomatoes, which she had drained and coarsely chopped with garlic and olive oil, until the tomatoes had given off their juices. She now added a pound each of Manila clams and small mussels with a half-cup of white wine. She stirred and tossed the mixture, watching as the mollusks opened in the steam.

Triela returned with the empty antipasto plate. “Angelica loved it,” she noted. “And the adults were fans, as well.”

Kara tossed the few mollusks that had not opened and drained the pasta, which she then poured over the sauce. She mixed them together and seasoned to taste. She prepared a plate for Angelica and then handed the pan to Claes, who poured the rest into a large bowl for the adults to serve themselves.

“Oh this looks yummy!” Angelica exclaimed as Triela placed the plate before her. Beside her, Rico removed the cork on a Sauvignon blanc from Collio Goriziano. Rico had been told to pour just a little in first to let Angelica try it to see if she liked it, but Rico just filled the glass about two-thirds of the way. She didn’t really understand the nuances of formal dining; she just wanted to do something nice for Angelica. As such, Triela didn’t bother to correct her, but instead asked Angelica if she liked it.

“It’s very refreshing,” Angelica complimented after a taste.

Back in the kitchen, Kara checked the secundo. Earlier, she had seasoned a de-boned fryer chicken with salt and pepper and in a mixing bowl combined prosciutto, parsley, breadcrumbs, Parmigiano-Reggiano and provolone cheeses, eggs, and basil and rosemary leaves. They’d then coated the inside of the chicken with the mixture, rolled it up like a roast, and secured it with butcher’s twine. They seasoned the outside with salt and pepper and then roasted it for a half-hour, allowing it to rest for 10 minutes after before carving it into medallions and serving.

After the secundo had gone out, Kara and Claes finished the Pandoro for the dessert - an egg and butter-rich bread from Verona baked in a star-shaped pan and dusted with Confectioners’ sugar to represent snow on a mountain. They cut it into slices and served it with a silver bowl of melted dark chocolate and whipped cream.

“This was all wonderful,” Angelica stated to everyone. “Thank you so very much. It made me very happy.”

“Seriously, that was an excellent meal, girls,” Marco added and Priscilla nodded. “And thank you Triela and Rico for your hard work taking care of Angie.”

“We’re glad you enjoyed it,” Kara replied as she sipped an espresso after having a slice of the Pandoro with chocolate and whipped cream. She and Claes had both sampled the meal before it went out, so they were not hungry themselves.

Angelica yawned. “Excuse me,” she said. “I’m so full I’m sleepy.”

“Well let’s get you back to bed, then,” Priscilla said. Marco moved her from the table to the wheelchair and covered her with a blanket.

“Thank you again!” Angelica said, flashing them another thousand-watt smile. All four girls smiled and waved good-bye and then started cleaning up.

2

RESPECT MY AUTHORITEH!



“We’re not going to get into trouble for this, are we?” Claes asked Hillshire.

“No, we’ve already cleared it with the Vice-Comandante Generale,” Hillshire replied. “He’s issued us official credentials and a letter of explanation. The Lazio Regional Command has also been informed as have the Rome provincial command.”

“Aren’t they a little short? Would not maybe the Series 2 girls be a better choice?” Marco suggested.

“Triela is as tall as Petrushka and Claes is not that far behind. We can go with thick-soled shoes to help lift them up a bit more and add a peaked-cap to Claes’ outfit,” Hillshire stated. “And we can tailor the uniforms to ‘fill them out’ a bit more and make them look more natural.”

“Dressing them up as Carabinieri,” Marco muttered, his distaste for the idea evident in his tone.

“We’re not fans of it, either,” Hillshire noted. “However, with the security forces on maximum alert, it’s the only way we can get the girls into position armed.”

“So we’re expecting violence?” Alfonso asked.

“The last time they demonstrated they killed an officer and two soldiers of the 21st regiment,” Giuseppe said, remembering the female officer shot by a drive-by in front of him. “We can expect some of the ringleaders to be there. If we can get a clear shot at them, we can hopefully stop them from inciting a riot.”

“Having the cops shoot their leaders might just incite one,” Nehad opined.

“They are under orders not to fire unless fired upon,” Giuseppe stated. “All they will do is report positions back to Henrietta and Rico who will be in oversight positions with their sniper rifles. They are the ones who will make any shots.”

After she had done her own, Kara helped Claes don the traditional Carabinieri uniform, adjusting the white shoulder and waist belts. Claes’ dress shoes had 5cm soles and she wore a special cap that was a number of centimeters taller than usual. In the holster on her left side she carried her H&K VP70z while Kara’s held her H&K P2000SK.

Triela was attired in the “public order uniform”, which consisted of a tactical shirt and pants with combat boots. On her head she wore a black beret. In addition to her holstered pistol (a SiG-Sauer P232SL), she also had a Carabinieri-standard Beretta SC90 carbine.

“Ready?” Hillshire asked and they nodded. Kara slipped behind the driver’s seat of the Alfa Romeo 159 sedan in Carabinieri livery while Claes took the passenger front seat and Triela took the right rear seat.

“Radio check,” Hillshire said.

“Five by five,” each of the girls responded in kind.

“Proceed to position,” Hillshire ordered.

“Acknowledged,” Kara replied. She started the car and exited the SWA compound. Behind her, Hillshire followed in his Mercedes. They drove into downtown and parked at the intersection of the Via Niccola Salvi and the Piazza del Colosseo along the southern edge of the Parco di Traiano. Hillshire pulled the E350 into a spot in the parking area next to them.

Claes and Triela exited the car, while Kara stayed inside. Crowds of protestors started streaming through the park and off the tram station, though the largest group marched down the Via dei Fori Imperiali after having first organized before the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II at the Piazza Venezia. Kara found this ironic since Emanuele II had united Italy and the PRF wanted to split it apart.

The Carabinieri had closed the Colosseo Metro station and they also secured the major side streets like the Via Alessandria and Via del Colosseo to prevent the protestors from dispersing into the surrounding municipi.

Henrietta and Giuseppe were hidden in the ruins of the Piazza Venere e Roma. From this vantage point they had a clear shot down the entire Via dei Fori Imperiali as well as around the front of the Piazza del Colosseo. Jean and Rico started on the monument to Vittorio Emanuele and as the crowd moved down the street, they followed it from the sidelines.

“What’s your status?” Ferro called over the radio in the car Kara was sitting in. Ferro and Amadeo were in a communications van parked in a little nook on the southern edge of the Parco Ninfeo di Nerone about 200m south of the Coliseum.

“The crowd has been pretty well-behaved. Just chanting slogans for the most part. Neither Claes nor Triela have reported sighting any ringleaders, but with this number of people...”

“Acknowledged,” Ferro stated and switched frequencies to query the other fratelli.

The crowd gathered around the Coliseum and spilled into the Parco Ninfeo di Nerone and the Piazza Venere e Roma. The Carabinieri took up positions around them, hemming them in, but leaving plenty of space between the two sides. There was some tossing of rocks and teargas grenades, but no real violence.

“Everything is still qui—“ Kara began, but the sound of a car engine at near full throttle stopped her.

She followed the noise and saw a small car weaving down the Via Labicana towards their position.

“Wait one,” Kara said. She opened the door and stood behind it. Claes was already watching it approach and Triela, on the other side of the car, was un-slinging her SC90.

On the Piazza Venere e Roma, Henrietta sighted down the scope of her WA 2000, trying to locate the car. She finally acquired it as it reached the intersection with the Piazza del Colosseo.

The car slowed as it approached the checkpoint that blocked the intersection. With the Via dei Fori Imperiali closed to traffic, only vehicles coming up the Via Celio Vibenna and the Via Claudia were allowed onto the Piazza and they had to turn right onto the Via Labicana.

A man leaned out and tossed something at the checkpoint. A moment later, it exploded in flames, forcing the Carabinieri manning it back to escape the heat and flames.

The car then drove through the barricade and gunmen deployed AK-47s from both rear windows and started shooting at the gathered police forces.

Police and protesters alike scattered as the bullets flew. Kara jumped into the car and started the engine. Triela went to take a shot, but she was too far away to be accurate and there were too many people around.

Henrietta opened fire, striking the roof of the car and forcing the gunmen to withdraw inside. The car drove against traffic and banked right onto the Via di San Gregorio.

“Get in!” Kara yelled. Triela dived into the front passenger seat as Claes and Hillshire went for the back. As soon as the doors closed, Kara hit the siren and pulled out in pursuit.

“Ferro, we’re in pursuit of a blue Fiat Idea, license plate AE 139JW,” Hillshire reported.

The little 1.4L I4 engine in the Fiat was no match for the Alfa’s 3.2L V6 and Kara caught up almost immediately. The gunmen leaned out and opened fire with pistols at the Alfa, shattering the front windshield. In back, Claes shoved Hillshire down on the floor behind the seats and lay on top of him as Kara and Triela both ducked under the dash. They popped up and Triela unloaded on the car with her SC90, shattering the back window and hitting both gunmen.

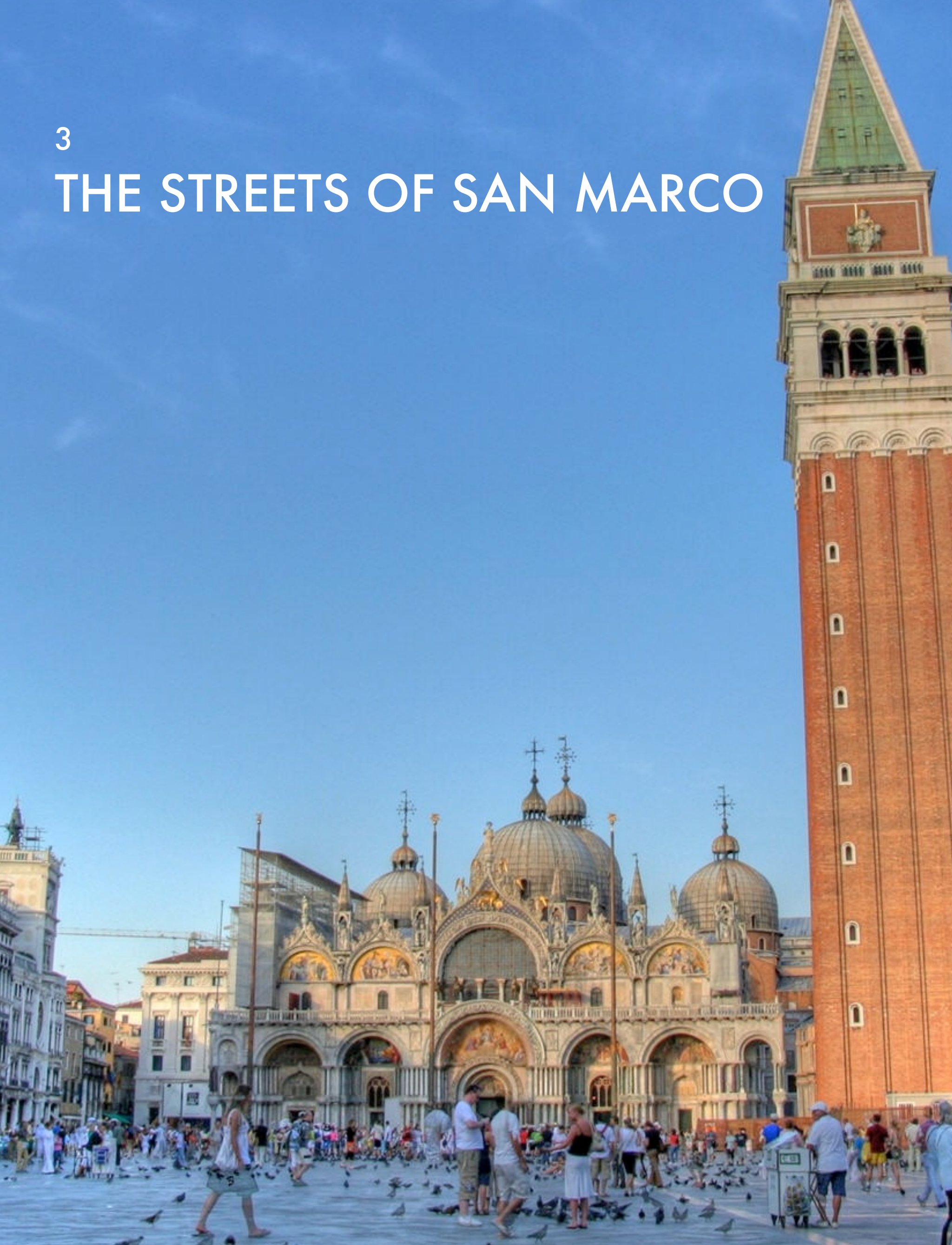
The Idea braked sharply and banked right onto the Via del Cerche. The driver continued on down and Kara accelerated hard and slammed into the right rear corner. This caused the Fiat driver to lose control and he overcorrected, launching the car to the left where it went over the curb and hit the low wall. It rebounded back, but had lost enough momentum that it slammed into a tree and stopped.

Kara hit the brakes and called in the location of the accident as Triela and Claes both jumped from the car and went over, pistols drawn. Triela covered the right side as Claes went over to the driver’s side. The airbag had deployed and he’d been wearing his seatbelt, so he was conscious but bleed-

ing from the nose, which he'd broken on impact. His turned towards Claes and tried to focus on her face.

"Sir, step out of the car, please," Claes ordered.

3
THE STREETS OF SAN MARCO





“If Hillshire sees me in this outfit, I will die of embarrassment,” Triela noted. She was wearing a white tank top that ended above her midriff with a red miniskirt, white leather belt and white leather high-heel t-strap sandals.

Petrushka’s face had a look halfway between confusion and exasperation.

“Do you really think you look that horrible?” she asked.

“No. No,” Triela said hastily, worried that she might have struck a nerve. “It’s just that I have never worn anything like this before.”

“Which is a sad thing, as you are a very pretty girl, yet you are always dressed like a man by your handler,” Petrushka noted.

“Now wait a minute!” Triela huffed. “It’s true Hillshire purchases my clothes, but I like what he has bought for me. It’s my...style, Petrushka. I guess I am just not as fashionable as you or Kara.”

“Pagani!” Petrushka sniffed. “That girl is a walking advertisement for Armani and Gucci. I know her handler is from Milan, but still... And even then, she gets it wrong. She has such nice legs, but she always hides them by wearing those tall boots. And her skirts and dresses are much too long—they all fall to the knee so when she wears boots, you can’t see anything! I need to have a talk with her, I think.

“As for you, Triela, we are in Venice and it is summer. Even the men do not dress in suits and ties in this weather. And we want those men to notice us, but not because we are wearing strange clothes,” Petrushka stated, dressed in a light green tank top that also revealed her midriff, cutoff jean shorts and red leather high-heel t-strap sandals.

“Anyway, we should be going,” Petrushka noted. “It looks like our handlers have yet to sleep off their hangovers from last night, so I will leave them a note.” She took out a pen and wrote a note on a piece of paper, which she then taped it to the door of their room.

Petrushka was joking about the hangover part, though Hillshire and Alessandro had been out very late having dinner with two ladies from the Venice office of the Tourism Promotion Agency. They were still sleeping, though it was past 09:00 and the sun had been up for almost three hours.

They checked their pistols and placed them in their purses and then exited the apartment they were renting on the Riva del Ferro fronting the Grand Canal in the sestieri of San Marco near the Rialto Bridge. They hired a water taxi to take them to the Piazza San Marco rather than try and navigate the warren of streets and bridges.

The two fratelli were in Venice not for vacation, but a mission. With the turmoil in Lombardy and Milan caused by the death of Christiano Savonarola, the PDF factions in other regions and cities were jockeying to improve their position. This was no different in the Veneto region, of which Venice was the capital city. Information was leaking to the moles and the intelligence agencies were picking up plenty of chatter and everything pointed to some high-level meetings amongst the PRF and their bankrollers in Venice.

One of the finest hotels in the city was the Hotel Danieli, a former palace of the Doge Andrea Dandolo and literally next door to the Piazza San Marco. To Alessandro, if any place would host the principals for such a meeting, this hotel would be it. That is why he had taken Hillshire and the two ladies to the Bar Dandolo in the hotel, but had not seen anyone on the “SWA most wanted”, as he referred to the list of names and faces of known and suspected PRF leaders and financiers.

The girls stepped off the water taxi and Petrushka headed for the hotel lobby, Triela in tow.

“Fancy,” Petrushka noted. The lobby area did indeed look like a palace, with woven rugs, glass chandeliers, marble columns, stained glass and gilded furniture.

To her surprise, Triela noticed that most of the young women visible were dressed in similar outfits, though their clothes and bags sported the trendiest designer labels. They climbed the steps to the rooftop Restaurant Terrazza Danieli where they had breakfast on the terrace overlooking the island of San Giorgio Maggiore and the church and monastery located upon it. However, they didn’t notice anyone of interest at any of the tables so they finished their meal, paid the bill and went downstairs to the Bar Dandolo.

“Two mimosas, please,” Petrushka said to the bartender as she entered, giving him a smile and a wink as she passed. She chose a table with a view of most of the bar area.

“A little early to be drinking, don’t you think?” Triela asked.

“Mimosas are harmless,” Petrushka replied. “And two pretty girls in a bar not drinking would draw attention.”

“I would think two pretty girls in a bar would draw attention even if they were drinking,” Triela deadpanned.

“You’re learning,” Petrushka said with a smile. A waitress came over and placed their drinks on the table and Petrushka slipped her a €20 note, telling her to split the difference with the bartender.

“Expensive breakfast, a 50% tip on two drinks. Alessandro must give you a nice allowance,” Triela opined.

“I want them to both remember me,” Petrushka replied. “That way, when I come back and ask them some questions about the people we are looking for later, they will not be so reticent to answer.”

“Alessandro taught you this?”

Petrushka nodded. “He is very adept at getting information from people,” she noted. She then thought of all the women he used to sleep with when he was working espionage and intelligence at Public Safety and her face took on a frightening countenance.

“Is something wrong?” Triela asked, taken aback by the sudden change.

“No,” Petrushka said, draining her glass in a single gulp. “Come on, there is nobody here, either.”

Triela quickly choked down her own drink and followed Petrushka out and back onto the Riva degli Schiavoni, which ran the length of the Venice Lagoon.

They turned right and crossed a small bridge next to the Doge's Palace. They walked past the palace and then turned into the square itself, stopping beside Saint Mark's Basilica. The plaza itself was filled with people so they grabbed two chairs and sat down.

"What are we doing?" Triela asked.

"Observing," Petrushka said, slightly lowering her sunglasses so she could look over them at the people passing by their location.

"Another thing Alessandro taught you?" Triela asked, and Petrushka nodded.

"Bingo," Petrushka said, suddenly straightening up.

"What?" Triela said. She'd been watching the pigeons, having quickly grown bored with their "stake-out".

"Coming out of the Basilica; three men in suit and tie. One is tall with white hair and glasses, one with long brown hair and sunglasses and the third bald, also with sunglasses."

"I see them," Triela acknowledged. "What about them?"

"What did I say about men wearing suits? It's 24° out. They have to be roasting," Petrushka noted.

"But why are they exiting the Basilica?"

"Maybe they're tourists?"

"Notice how brownie and baldy are standing to either side of the white-haired guy," Petrushka said.

"Notice how their heads don't move. Their eyes definitely are, however, behind those dark glasses. That's what brought them to my attention. They're definitely bodyguards."

"Damn, you're good," Triela said, impressed.

"Alessandro is a great mentor," Petrushka said. She rose and started towards the Basilica and the three men, who were now walking along the Doge's Palace back towards the Riva degli Schiavoni. As they approached, Petrushka's cellphone went off. Her ringtone was both unique and loud, and the two bodyguards' heads immediately swung towards them.

"Shit!" Petrushka cursed, fumbling inside her purse for her phone. She pulled it out and flipped it open.

"Ciao!" she said, brightly, turning away.

“Petrushka, it’s Sandro. Where are you?”

Petrushka killed the call and set the phone to vibrate. She used the camera phone to snap a few pictures of the trio. She and Triela tried to nonchalantly follow, but they both had to stay well back so as to not be seen by the two bodyguards, who scanned the crowds as they walked. They stepped into a private boat and pulled out into the lagoon.

“Dammit!” she swore. She dialed Alessandro and informed them of what had just transpired. He ordered them both back to the apartment immediately and they caught a water taxi.

“I’ll send this back to headquarters and see what they make of it,” Alessandro said as he examined the pictures he’d downloaded from Petrushka’s phone.

“I’m sorry about losing them,” Petrushka said. “I should have checked that my phone was on vibrate.”

“It was a chance encounter,” Alessandro stated. “And not like you could jump into a water taxi and yell ‘follow that boat!’ like in a spy movie,” he added with a laugh, assuaging Petrushka’s guilt and shame.

Triela sat on the couch, feeling a bit self-conscious after the look of surprise Hillshire had given her when she’d walked into the apartment. Alessandro, she noted, hadn’t given Petrushka a second glance.

The report came back from Ferro an hour later. The person the girls had noticed was a wealthy financier with no known connections with the PRF. That position changed that evening, however. While the four of them had dinner at the Restaurant Terrazza Danieli, they saw him in the company of one of the suspected senior members of the Verona PRF faction. Petrushka followed them down to the bar and after slipping the bartender a €50 bill to pay for a €5 drink found that the gentleman often entertained guests at the hotel.

Alessandro and Petrushka followed him out of the hotel and they hired a water taxi to “show them around” the city, surreptitiously following their target back to what appeared to be a house on the canal near the Calle Malvasia. They motored on past and had the water taxi drop them off at the Rialto Bridge where they returned to the apartment.

Alessandro and Petrushka moved out and checked in to the Hotel Danieli so they could stake the place out without drawing attention. They also placed a small video camera across from the house, feeding back to the apartment.



Over the next two days, they recorded PRF principals from Venice, Padua and Trieste visiting the house and the Trieste delegation was taken to dinner at the Hotel Danieli.

It appeared that whether then having one central meeting of all the principals, instead many individual meetings were taking place. Since they could not hit everyone at once, they chose to hit none at all and instead compiled a report on all the meetings they could before heading back to Rome.

Later that summer, a decision was made to eliminate the financier and the Jean and Rico fratello were tasked to carry out the mission. They did so and also eliminated three PRF terrorists attempting to escape via the marina on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore.

4

HARD DRIVING





The blue smart fortwo convertible whizzed down the main road paralleling the Tiber River in pursuit of a 1994 Fiat Uno that contained two wanted PRF terrorists. While the smart's 800-cc 3-cylinder diesel engine produced 40 horsepower, the 999-cc 4-cylinder engine in the Uno generated only 5hp more, but was also carrying more weight.

"Faster! Faster!" Petrushka yelled as she waved her Spectre M4 in her right hand, her hair flying back in the wind. Beside her, Alessandro was hunched over the wheel, threading the car through the traffic, which was heavy enough to keep both parties from engaging each other with their firearms.

On the other side of the river, north of their location, Kara was trying to will the traffic away before her F430 while Michele alternately squeezed his eyes shut and bit his tongue to keep from swearing.

"Come on!" she grouched, laying on the horn, flashing her lights and blipping the throttle. Any opening equal to the length and width of the Ferrari was immediately filled as she worked her way south.

The Fiat hung a right on the Via Luisa di Savola and Alessandro followed. Meanwhile, Kara had fought her way to the Ponte Pietro Nenri over the river and sliced across oncoming traffic to barrel across it. She continued down the side streets, intimidating cars out of her way with the shriek of the Ferrari's V8.

Alessandro followed the Fiat along the Viala del Muro Torto as it wound through the parklands of the Villa Borghese. Kara, meanwhile, hammered along the Viale Giorgio Washington, the Viale Fiorello La Guardia and finally the Viale San Paolo del Brasie. She came out behind the other two, tearing across the Corso d'Italia to the sound of horns and shrieking tires. She then started to worm her way up towards Alessandro. Meanwhile, Giuse and Henrietta were screaming down the Viale del Policlinico as fast as traffic and the Porsche Boxster's flat-6 engine would allow.

It all came to a head at the intersection of the Corso d'Italia and the Via Nomentana. Alessandro used the wider spaces to bring the fortwo up beside the Fiat on the left and Petrushka fired a burst from her Spectre into the left front tire, shredding it. The loss of traction and steering caused the car to jink to the left, almost clipping the smart and forcing Alessandro to brake heavily. The Fiat tried to stop, but its braking performance was diminished due to the blown tire and it mounted the curbing of the Monumento al Bersagliere at the Piazzale di Porta Pia and came to an abrupt stop against the base of the statue.

Kara overshot trying to avoid hitting Alessandro and skidded to a sideways stop next to the monument. She jumped out of the car, drawing her pistol. Petrushka leapt out of the fortwo without bothering to open the door and as the Boxster screeched to a halt on the other side, Henrietta appeared, her FN90 at the ready.

"Everybody brought two-seaters, I see," Alessandro noted, wondering how they were going to take the two suspects into custody.

"I'll call Ferro," Giuseppe replied while Michele reached for his credentials that showed him as a member of the Carabinieri's Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale (Special Operations Group) and took a position to intercept the Polizia Stradale (Traffic Police) Fiat Punto winding its way towards them.

5

SAMPO



“Are you ready?” Henrietta asked.

“Yes, Henrietta!” Rico replied with a smile.

The two girls left their hotel room and headed out onto the street. Even though it was November, the weather was still mild in the Sicilian commune of Taormina. Henrietta wore an olive-green and white dress with white stockings and black patent leather Mary Jane flats. Rico was wearing a grey long-sleeved sweater, blue jeans and red sneakers.

It was a clear fall day and the temperature was mild. As they were not on a mission, neither girl was armed, though they were hardly defenseless thanks to their cyborg bodies. Their handlers had left earlier and had left them instructions to meet them at a trattoria a few blocks down for lunch.

As they walked, Henrietta started humming a merry tune and they skipped along the sidewalk.

“Henrietta, what song are you humming?”

“It’s from a cartoon movie about two girls living in the woods with this giant grey and white stuffed animal and a cat that was a bus and they have all these great adventures!”

As they rounded the corner, Rico squealed with joy and ran past Henrietta.

“Eh? Rico?” Henrietta called, chasing after her.

Rico was standing before a small yellow car, bouncing up and down.



“It’s so cute!” Rico said.

“It’s a car, Rico,” Henrietta noted.

“But it’s such a pretty yellow, Henrietta! Like a sunflower! And you can lean back against it and feel the sun on your face!” Rico then proceeded to do just that, a large smile plastered on her face and her eyes closed in happiness.

“It would be nice if Jean would buy such a car,” she said.

“But Jean has such a nice car!” Henrietta exclaimed. “It’s so big and has such soft seats.”

“But the doors are so tall it’s hard to see out, Henrietta. And I feel so small in that big seat with that wide console between Jean and I. This car is smaller so I could see out the windows and be closer to Jean.”

Henrietta could relate to those comments. Her handler’s car was a small convertible so it was easy for her to look out, especially when the roof was down. And there was only a small console between the seats so if she scooted over to the left as much as possible, she could almost rub shoulders with Giuse. Henrietta had sat in the back of Jean’s car with Rico and the console between them was so wide they could almost have put a third girl there. She shuddered with the thought of such a distance separating her and Giuse on a long road-trip.

“Come on, Rico. We don’t want to be late.”

“Okay, Henrietta!” Rico took one last look at the little yellow car and followed after her friend.
