



The Night Train

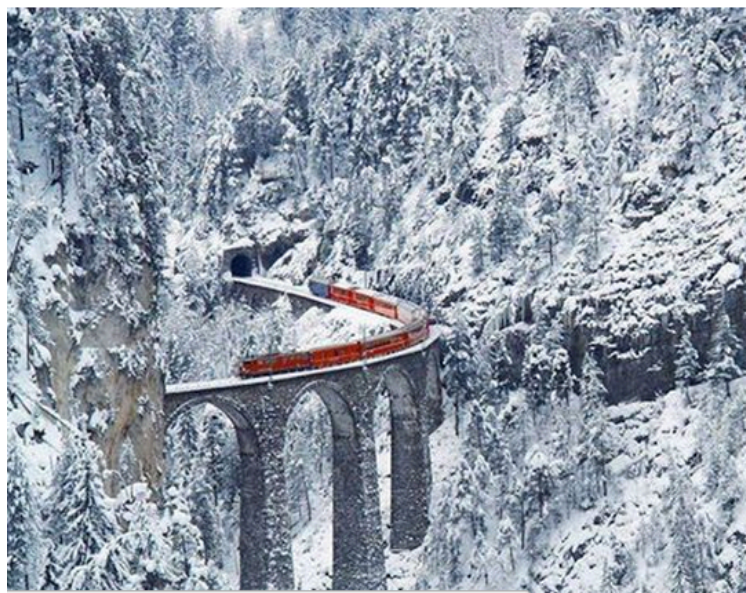
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Rachel shoved a handful of Euros toward the driver as the taxi skidded to a stop at the small station in Keldkirch. Her trip began more than thirty-six hours earlier in a Chicago snowstorm and had been a nightmare of weather delays and missed connections. She had two minutes until her train departed. She was to present her thesis on stochastic calculus at the University of Vienna the following day and had to be on this last train.

She hurried up the icy steps, bumping her suitcase behind her, and raced along the platform, searching in vain for the conductor or ticket taker. The platform was deserted. Well – to hell with it — she thought. I'm getting on this train and we can straighten out my ticket later.

She boarded at the nearest entrance. The hallway down the middle of the car was dimly lit and the first set of doors to compartments on either side were locked. The third door on the left was open and she slid into the seat facing a vaguely familiar, dark-haired man fast asleep on the opposite side of the compartment. Rachel turned to the window and watched the thick flakes swirl to the platform.

Fatigue engulfed Rachel as the train pulled out of the station. Secure in the knowledge that she would reach Vienna in time, Rachel dimmed the compartment lights and eased into the leather seat, allowing sleep to envelop her.



She was jolted awake as the train screeched to a halt, propelling her out of her seat and into the man dozing in the seat facing her. The minute they touched, she knew something was terribly wrong. The recoil of the train sent them both tumbling to the floor.

Rachel scrambled to her knees and struggled to turn the man, dead weight in her hands, onto his back. A slight trickle of dried blood ran from his nose. His skin was clammy and his breathing shallow, but he was alive—barely.

Rachel carefully cradled the unconscious man on her lap, leaning over him to tug the compartment door open. Drawing as much breath as she could hold, she screamed, “HELP,” repeating it until she was hoarse. No one came.

She gently eased the man to the floor and gingerly stepped over him, into the corridor of the train car. Rachel quickly made her way through the car, trying each locked door as she passed, crying for help.

She repeated this process in the next car—and the next. When she entered the fourth and final car on the train, she realized they were the only passengers on this train. But when she tentatively pushed open the door to the engine car and found it deserted, the chilling reality hit her. She was alone on this train, stranded in the middle of God-knows-where, with a man close to death.

‘Surely this can’t be right,’ Rachel thought as she sank against the wall. ‘There has to be someone else here,’ and she knew that there wasn’t, even as she thought this. She reached for a railing to steady herself and made her way back to her original train car and the injured man.

He was turning his head side to side, mumbling something in a language she didn’t understand, possibly Russian. “Sir,” she said, leaning over him and taking his head in her hands. “You’ve been hurt. Lie still. Help is on the way,” she lied.

With visible effort, he forced his eyes open and focused on her face. The realization hit her like a sharp blow: she was looking into the face of the most hunted man on the planet, Ukrainian dissident Vladimir Kosof.

Rachel retrieved her cell phone from her purse and cursed when she realized she had no service. Her attention was drawn to the window and a distant speck of light. Was it her imagination, or was it getting larger? Yes, it was definitely getting larger.

“Another train is coming, bringing help,” she assured Kosof. Her words had the opposite effect. He began to whisper in the foreign language, and then, with a concerted effort, changed to English.

“Coming to kill me.” He fumbled in his pocket and brought forth an intricate, old-fashioned key, and pressed it into her hand. “Safe deposit in Switzerland. Get it and take to Langley.” He looked into her eyes with such earnestness and clarity that she knew she would help him. At least she would try. Rachel nodded.

“Hide,” he breathed as he slid back into unconsciousness.

Rachel turned to the window; the approaching train was closing on them fast. She shoved the key into her pocket, snatched her purse, and yanked open the under-the-seat cargo hold where she had stashed her suitcase. She rolled into the space, tugging the door shut as she felt the other train shudder to a stop beside them.

Rachel shrank against the back of the compartment and quieted her breathing as the measured slap of men’s boots became steadily louder. She couldn’t tell how many they were, but knew they were enough.

She strained to glimpse a sliver of the compartment through a narrow crack by the hinge. A shout in an unfamiliar language was followed by a sea of legs, clothed in the same black uniform. A man wearing a ski mask grabbed Kosof’s legs and dragged him roughly from the compartment.

Rachel held her breath. Although she couldn’t see him, she knew that another man remained in the compartment. She tasted bile and for an awful moment feared she would be sick. She prayed fervently that he would not search the compartment.

The man suddenly came into view. He removed his ski mask with one swift motion and crouched, examining the floor where she’d cradled Kosof in her arms just minutes earlier. Rachel had a birds-eye view of the back of his neck and knew she would never forget what she saw: a tattoo of a stylized dragon.

After what seemed like an eternity, the man rose and strode out of the compartment. Rachel released the breath she had been holding and sank into the back of the cargo hold. ‘Now what?’ she thought.

She knew she had to get off this train and find that safe deposit box. She also knew that if she didn’t show up for her presentation, someone would start looking for her. But that wouldn’t happen for at least another 24 hours.

As she lay there contemplating her options, the underside of the train began to vibrate and it started to move, slowly at first but rapidly reaching full speed. Who was driving the train? How many had ‘they’ left behind? She tried to think but exhaustion overcame her and she succumbed to sleep.

Rachel woke, stiff and sore, as the brakes squealed and the train slowed to a stop. Momentarily disoriented, the nightmarish memories of only a few hours earlier flooded into her consciousness. Listening carefully to be sure she was alone, she cautiously emerged from the cargo hold.

From the quality of the thin sunshine streaming through the window, she surmised it must be shortly after dawn. They had pulled into a train station. She retrieved her purse and suitcase and cautiously made her way out of the compartment to the steps of the train car.

She released a heavy sigh of relief when she saw the sign that announced they were in Vienna. She was about to step off the train when she noted, out of the corner of her eye, the tall man dressed in black who jumped off of the engine car, onto the platform.

Rachel pressed herself as far back into the entrance of the train car as possible, willing herself to be invisible, as the man strode rapidly along the length of the train, head down. The only thing visible as he passed not more than an arm's length from her was the dragon tattoo on the back of his neck.

Rachel inched forward to watch the man disappear into the crowd on the busy platform. He never turned to look back. She stepped off the train and made her way to the exit in the opposite direction.

An icy wind whipped her hair from her face as she stood in a long line, waiting for a taxi. She'd have just enough time to check into her hotel, shower, and get to the University for her presentation later that morning. 'If this line would start moving,' she thought.

Rachel was ushered into the lecture hall and shown to her seat by the podium as the provost began his opening remarks. She gave him a rueful smile of apology as he turned to her, his relief evident that she was, indeed, there to make her presentation. And that is when she saw her fellow presenter on the other side of the podium, the distinctive dragon tattoo emerging from his shirt collar.

Rachel swallowed hard as she realized that the provost was calling her name, inviting her to the podium. Her hands shook as she placed her notes on the lectern. "You'll be fine," the provost whispered as he stepped aside.

Rachel stole a glance at the man on the other side of the podium. He smiled and nodded in encouragement. Was she mistaken in what she thought she saw?

She launched into the presentation she had practiced dozens of times and was soon immersed in familiar territory. Her thesis was enthusiastically received and she flushed with pride as she returned to her seat.

The man stood and buttoned his suit jacket. Rachel stared on the back of his neck while he spoke from the podium, but the collar of his jacket and his hair hid anything that might be lurking there.

Rachel kept her eye on the man during the reception that followed their presentations, but couldn't get close to him. They were both inundated by members of the audience who had questions or wanted to share observations. By late afternoon, the crowd had thinned and the provost gathered them together. "Thank you. Most successful symposium we've had in years," he said, shaking their hands. "I'd better escort Rachel to the street; at this hour, we'll be a long time hailing a cab."

“Not necessary,” the man said, his dark eyes searing and unreadable. “She’s staying nearby? I can drop her on my way home.”

Rachel began to protest, but the Provost cut her off, visibly relieved. “I took the train today—should have driven in to do just that. I’m very grateful to you. You must set off, or you’ll be stuck in traffic for hours.”

Rachel hesitated. ‘Should she go with this man? Was he even the man from the train? The provost knew him; surely she would be alright.’

The man reached for her satchel. “I can get that,” she snapped. “But thank you,” she said, attempting to soften her remark.

He led the way to the car park in silence, unlocking and holding the passenger door open for her. He nodded in recognition when she gave him the name of her hotel.

He came around the car to the driver’s side and took off his jacket, folding it carefully before placing it on the back seat. As he turned to fasten his seatbelt, she saw it again: the dragon tattoo.

He eased the car into the heavy rush-hour traffic. “Are you enjoying Vienna?”

“I just arrived this morning, so I haven’t had the chance to see much of it.” And the moment she said it, she knew she’d made a mistake. He swung sharply toward her and was about to speak when she cut him off.

“My flights were delayed with the weather; I got in just after midnight,” she lied. He nodded and she continued, “I’ve never been to Vienna and have a few days to sightsee before I go back. Are you a native? What would you suggest I see?”

“I’ve only been here a short time, myself. Why don’t I pick you up in the morning and we can explore together?”

Rachel’s stomach lurched and she turned quickly toward her car window, pretending to study a row of shops as they drove past. The last thing she wanted to do was spend the day alone with this man, in a city she didn’t know.

“Thank you—very kind of you. But not necessary. I’ll get brochures from the concierge and take a tour.”

“Nonsense. I insist,” he stated firmly, the steel in his voice unmistakable.

“I need to finish a report before I go anywhere. I don’t know when I’ll be through. Why don’t you give me your number and I’ll call to see if you’re available when I’m done?” She gave him what she hoped was an innocent smile.

“Very well, then,” he replied. “I’ll be ready when you call.”

Rachel lingered on the steps to the Police Directorate the next morning. One thing was certain; she would not go sightseeing with her fellow presenter. She wanted to put the Kosof matter in the hands of the police and get out of Vienna. She mentally ran through her explanation to the police again now:

She had boarded a train in Keldkirch the night before last. She and Ukrainian dissident Vladimir Kosof were the only people on the train, and he was grievously injured. It stopped suddenly on an overpass in the mountains. Another train pulled up next to them on the overpass. Kosof regained consciousness and told her they were coming to kill him. He gave her a key to a Swiss bank’s safety deposit box and told her to get the contents and take them to Langley. And to hide—which she did.

A group of uniformed men entered the train and removed Kosof. From her hiding place, she could see a distinctive dragon tattoo on the back of the neck of one of the men. The train started again and finally stopped in Vienna. She observed the man with the tattoo getting off the train and quietly exited in the opposite direction.

Would they believe her? Her story sounded preposterous, even to her own ears. She took a deep breath and grasped the iron door handle, the cold penetrating her glove and sending shivers down her spine.

Rachel paused inside the entrance, allowing her eyes to adjust to the bright fluorescent lights after the dreary morning outside. She unbuttoned her heavy coat and tucked her gloves in her pocket as she made her way to the high reception desk.

The clerk was busy reviewing papers and responding in monosyllables to an elderly man vociferously advancing some position and directing the clerk’s attention to the papers. Rachel couldn’t understand what either man was saying, but she sensed that this would be a lengthy exchange.

The clerk raised a hand to silence the man and leaned over the counter to acknowledge her, thanking her for her patience and assuring her that he would be with her in a few minutes. He spoke to her in English; it must be obvious that she was an American. She smiled and nodded her thanks, and the smile froze on her lips. As he turned his attention back to the man in front of her, she saw the tattoo on the back of his neck.

“Madam—we’re just finishing,” the clerk called as Rachel turned sharply on her heel and hurried to the entrance, leaning into the heavy door of the Police Directorate to force it open against the wind. One thing was certain: she would get out of Vienna as quickly as possible, and away from anyone sporting that tattoo.



Rachel hailed a taxi and settled into the back seat while the driver snaked through traffic on the way to her hotel. She leaned forward and rested her head in her hands, trying to massage away the headache raging between her temples.

As the taxi swung to the curb outside her hotel, she tapped on the glass separating them. “Do you speak English? Good,” she replied as he nodded. “I’m changing hotels. Would you wait here while I check out? You can keep your meter running—I won’t be a minute,” she shouted over her shoulder as she slammed the door.

Rachel pressed the elevator button and rocked from foot to foot as she waited. She hadn’t had time to unpack, so gathering her things would be easy. She was back at the reception desk to check out in a matter of minutes.

“We’re sorry to see you leave early,” the clerk said, eyeing her curiously. “You’re booked until the end of the week. And your invoice shows you’ve purchased a sightseeing package.”

Rachel forced herself to be civil; what business was it of his? “My plans have changed. An emergency,” she said.

“Oh, I am sorry,” he replied. “Your friend is waiting for you in the lounge,” he said, gesturing to an arched doorway and the dimly lit room beyond.

“Are you all right, miss?” the clerk asked as Rachel grasped the counter to steady herself. She hadn’t called him—what was he doing here?

“I need to get going,” she replied curtly. “You’ve got my credit card on file; just put my charges through.”

“It’ll only take a minute to print your receipt,” he said stiffly.

“You can mail it to me,” she said as she gathered her suitcase and headed to the door.

“Would you like the bellman to call you a cab?”

“Not necessary.”

“What should I tell your friend?” he asked.

“Nothing. I don’t have any friends in Vienna,” she called over her shoulder.

“Where to, miss?” the driver asked, eyeing her curiously in his rear-view mirror.

She didn’t know where to go—she only knew she wanted to get away from here. “I’d like to stay in a bed and breakfast on the side of town furthest from the University. Somewhere less institutional than this chain hotel; more personal. Do you have any suggestions?”

The man smiled broadly. “My sister has such a place. She’s a good cook. You’ll be very happy there.”

“Then it’s settled. If she has a vacancy and Internet access—I have some research to do—it’ll be the perfect spot for me.” Rachel was determined to find out where to take the key that Kosof had given her and retrieve the contents of that safe deposit box.



True to his word, the taxi driver deposited Rachel at the charming old-world home of his sister, an energetic widow in her fifties with a pair of friendly dachshunds. The woman showed her to a room decorated in sunny yellow floral fabrics set off against carved mahogany furniture. The dogs trailed after their master and returned with her when she brought Rachel a cup of tea and a plate of biscuits to enjoy as she settled in. Rachel sank into an oversized armchair to enjoy these offerings and the dogs quickly joined her. For the first time in almost 4 days, she relaxed and let her mind drift.

Rachel woke with a start at the insistent knocking on her door. The dogs were scratching to get out and she pushed herself from the chair.

“Sorry, love. It’s suppertime for the dogs.”

Rachel smiled at her hostess. “I didn’t intend to sleep all afternoon.”

“You must have needed to. Do you have dinner plans?”

“Is there a restaurant close by? I need to eat fast and get to work.”

“You Americans; always rushing,” the woman said reproachfully. “Nothing within walking distance. I’m fixing a bit of chicken and potatoes for myself and can bring you a tray, if you’d like. Or you can join me.”

“Very kind of you. I’ll get started—please let me know when you’re ready.”

Rachel firmly shut the door and was halfway across the room when she turned and retraced her steps to lock it. The woman seemed innocent, but she couldn’t take any chances.

She unzipped the inner compartment of her purse and retrieved the safe deposit key that Kosof had given her. She could see letters stamped into the metal. She took the key to the window and held it in the light. She was able to make out the name of the bank: Britsch & Cie.

Rachel waited impatiently for her laptop to connect to the Internet. She was relieved that the key wasn’t from Credit Suisse or one of the other huge Swiss banks. With any luck, there wouldn’t be too many branches of Britsch & Cie.

The streaming news headline answered her most immediate question: Ukrainian dissident Vladimir Kosof remained missing. She quickly searched for the bank—she needed to get into that safe deposit box.

Rachel held her breath as Britsch & Cie’s home page loaded. It was a small family-owned bank, with one branch located in Bern. It would take at least a day to make the journey. She exhaled sharply and dug in her purse for a pen and scrap of paper, then changed her mind. She returned her attention to the computer screen and burned the address and phone number into her memory.

Rachel was scrolling through the results of her Google search of Vladimir Kosof when her hostess knocked. She quickly shut her computer and unlocked the door.

The woman greeted her with a shocked expression. “You’re safe here, love. No need to lock your door.” When Rachel offered no response, she continued curtly, “Dinner is ready.”

“Sorry. Old habits die hard; I’m from Chicago,” Rachel said, by way of explanation.

“I guess you have to keep your doors locked there, don’t you? Vienna isn’t like that; we’re safe in our homes and we don’t lock our doors,” she replied with a note of superiority.

Relieved that she’d smoothed the woman’s ruffled feathers, Rachel followed her into the kitchen and was surprised to see the woman’s brother – her taxi driver from earlier that day – seated at the table.

“My brother was able to join us,” the woman supplied. Rachel nodded her greeting. She ate while brother and sister catalogued the sights and destinations in Vienna that she really should see before she returned to Chicago. And he’d be happy to take her anywhere she wanted to go.

‘So that’s why he’s here,’ Rachel thought. ‘To drum up a lucrative fare.’ She was about to tell them that she would be traveling to Bern in the morning, when the words froze on her lips.

"A gentleman from the hotel has been looking for you," the man said. "The desk clerk found me to ask where you'd gone; the man paid him to find out."

Rachel wasn't able to conceal her alarm at his statement that the man was looking for her. The taxi driver assured her that he hadn't told the desk clerk where she was, but how could she trust him?

She quickly excused herself from the table and retreated to her room, her course of action firmly in mind. She emerged ten minutes later, luggage in hand.

"Would you drop me at the airport? I've booked a seat on a redeye flight going home," she lied.

"Don't rush off; you haven't seen Vienna yet," the woman implored.

Rachel handed the woman the fee for one night's lodging plus a generous tip and turned to man. "Can we leave now?"

He nodded and they set off. She needed to avoid all conversation and closed her eyes, pretending to doze. When he pulled to the curb at the airport, she silently handed him his fare and strode into the terminal. Rachel watched until he pulled away, and then returned to the taxi queue. "The train station, please," she said as the next driver in line opened her door.

"There won't be many trains leaving tonight," the driver said, eyeing her in the rear-view mirror.

Rachel shrugged and turned to her window. If she had to sit up all night in the station, so be it. She wanted nothing more than to get out of Vienna.

The clerk at the ticket window informed her that a train connecting through to Bern would be leaving in just over three hours, but it was completely booked. There was a morning train, with two connections and layovers that would get her there by seven o'clock the next night.



Rachel hesitated. The clerk regarded her quizzically. “All right,” she drew a ragged breath. “I’ll take it. I was hoping to get there in the morning,” she said, averting her face as a tear escaped and traced down her cheek.

“Go get a good night’s sleep,” he answered kindly.

“No. I’ll wait here.”

Rachel found a seat in the train station, close to the ticket booth, directly under a lamp. She wouldn’t be able to sleep, so she’d try to work. She pulled out the dog-eared academic journal she’d been dragging around with her since she left Chicago.

Rachel was engrossed in her reading when the muscular man sat down at the other end of her bench. The station was deserted; with all of the other available benches, why did he have to pick hers? The thought hit Rachel like a cold drink tossed in her face.

She cautiously cut her eyes to the man, observing him surreptitiously. As he shifted to the left to retrieve the newspaper on the ground next to him, she observed a dark shape on the back of his neck. Could it possibly be a tattoo? The man sank back into the bench and opened his paper, obscuring her view.

Rachel froze, attempting to collect her thoughts. She started when the ticket agent tapped her on the shoulder from behind, sending her journal scattering to the ground. “Miss—we’ve had a cancellation and can get you on the earlier train.”

“Oh...thank God,” she mumbled as both she and the man at the end of the bench reached for the journal. He got to it first. “Thank you,” she said as he leaned over to hand it to her, exposing the back of his neck.

Rachel let out a nervous laugh when she saw the birthmark partially covered by his collar. Both men eyed her curiously.

“Come,” the ticket agent said. “Your train is about to leave.”

For the second time in a week, Rachel settled into a train for a nighttime journey. But this time the train was filled to capacity. She fell asleep in her seat before it pulled out of the station and didn’t wake until it pulled into Bern the next morning.

Rachel took a taxi the short distance to Britsch & Cie and was the first customer when the doors were unlocked promptly at 9 am. The guard directed her to the safe deposit box window at the rear of the bank, on the ground floor. She drew the attention of every employee as the wheels of her suitcase rattled across the cold marble floor. So far, her plan to make an inconspicuous visit to Vladimir Kosof’s safe deposit box was not going well.

She carefully retrieved the key from its secure hiding place in her purse and handed it to the attendant. He noted the number on the key and turned to his computer. He scrolled down the screen and clicked on a link, contemplating the contents of the next screen intently. His head finally came up sharply and he studied Rachel. “Name on the account?” he finally asked.

“Vladimir Kosof,” she replied.

He nodded and led her through two sets of locked doors to a small, windowless room. He handed her the key and pointed to a small safe deposit box near the left end of the top row. She inserted the key and drew the box out of its slot. Rachel nodded when he asked if she would like to open it in private and he escorted her to a tiny room. And in that room, she extracted the only two items from the box: a piece of paper with a phone number bearing a 703 area code, and a cipher.

Rachel examined the cipher, turning it over in her hand, holding it directly under the lamp on the small table in the room. She sighed and leaned into the straight back of the wooden chair. If there were any clues on the cipher, she couldn’t discern them. She needed time to think this through.

She pulled her cell phone out of her purse and googled the area code for CIA headquarters: 703. Bern was six hours ahead of Virginia—if she tried her call now, it would be the middle of the night there. Maybe she would get someone’s voice mail message if she placed the call now. That might be preferable—give her time to consider how to proceed.

Cell phone coverage inside the thick walls of the bank was spotty and her first two attempts to place the call failed. She was about to hit the resend button again when the attendant knocked sharply on the door.

“Miss, is everything all right? Do you need anything?”

Rachel checked her watch and was astonished that she had been inside the tiny room for over an hour. It was time to get out of Britsch & Cie, out of Bern, and back to the US.

“I’m fine, thank you,” she called as she carefully placed the cipher and the scrap of paper in the zippered compartment of her purse. “I’m just leaving.”

Rachel quickly exited the bank, ignoring the curious stares from the tellers as her suitcase clattered behind her. She hailed a taxi, intending to go to a nearby hotel for some much-needed sleep. Instead, she heard herself telling the driver to take her to the airport. Her return flight originated in Vienna, but she didn’t care how much it might cost to change her ticket—she wouldn’t return there.

Fatigue wrapped her in its undeniable embrace while she waited in line at the airline ticket counter. She almost missed the fact that the ticket agent was preparing to send her back to Chicago.

“I’m sorry,” Rachel said. “I need to return to Washington, D. C.”

“We’ll have to start all over again,” the woman snapped. “The flight leaves in an hour and a quarter. You’ll have to run if you’re going to get through security in time.” She glared at Rachel as she slowly handed her the ticket.

Rachel wove her way through the crowded airport as swiftly as possible. She held her breath as the operator of the baggage scanner ran her purse back and forth through the machine, certain that he would pull her aside and demand to see the round object in her purse: the cipher. He looked at her over the top of the machine, and then allowed it to go through.

She snatched her purse from the conveyor belt and ran the length of the terminal, arriving at her gate in time to be the last person to board the flight back to US soil.

Rachel ordered a glass of wine when the attendant came to take her beverage order. She drank it in a series of unladylike gulps, reclined her seat the inadequate amount allowed, and slept soundly until the attendant woke her to return her seat to the upright position for landing.

Rachel quickly cleared customs and proceeded to the curb outside of Reagan National Airport. It was 6 am. She made her way to a deserted bench off to the side and pulled out the scrap of paper and her phone.

She punched in the numbers and brought the phone to her ear. The man answered before she ever heard it ring.

“Colonel Sullivan.”

Rachel hesitated. The words she had rehearsed over and over in her mind deserted her.

“If you’re calling this number, I believe you have something important to deliver to me,” he continued, dissolving her doubt.

She took a deep breath and began her story.

The black Suburban with the darkly-tinted windows picked her up within the hour. Col. Sullivan told her the driver would bring her to his office at the CIA. Rachel eyed the driver nervously. Tall, muscular, and dressed in a black track suit, he barely nodded to her when she thanked him for helping her with her suitcase and hadn’t said a word.



Rachel was excited and terrified – in equal measure – at the prospect of delivering her cargo deep within the bowels of the world’s most famous spy headquarters. Would she disappear without a trace after discharging her promise to Kosof? She immediately dismissed the thought as ridiculous; she’d watched too many movies. This was America, after all.

Her driver wove through a series of gates. She recognized the CIA Headquarters building from seeing it on television. He escorted her inside and her passage was swift and sure, as if she was expected. He walked her to a lone elevator at the end of a hallway and placed her inside, pushing the single button, and exited as the door shut. “Col. Sullivan will meet you,” were the only words he uttered.

She recognized Col. Sullivan when she stepped off the elevator: he was her fellow presenter; the man with the tattoo on the back of his neck.

Rachel’s heart hammered in her chest and she lunged for the wall as her knees buckled. Col. Sullivan stepped forward to steady her. Maybe her fear that she’d never be seen again wasn’t so far-fetched after all.

"The elusive Dr. Hudson, at last," he said. "Let's go to my office."

He took her elbow and escorted her the short distance to an office with a commanding view.

"You have something for me," he stated as he steered her to a chair.

Rachel slid the cipher across the desk. He nodded in satisfaction.

"Good work," he said. "You could have saved yourself a lot of trouble if you'd gone sightseeing with me that day. I just wanted that key."

Rachel stiffened and glared at him. "You owe me an explanation," she spat.

Col. Sullivan regarded her thoughtfully. "I believe I do. I was working on the inside, to protect Kosof. After they removed him from the train, he managed to tell me he gave you the key. We uncovered your identity from the railroad and you were easy to track from there."

"You're not a professor?"

Col. Sullivan shook his head.

"What about your presentation?"

"We can come up with that sort of thing when we need to."

Rachel nodded slowly, trying to take it all in.

"You were very brave, you know. And smart. You gave us a run for our money in Bern."

"Were you watching me?"

"The whole time. We wanted that key. And we weren't going to let anything happen to you."

"So I wasn't paranoid? The taxi driver; the man on the bench at the train station the night I left Vienna?"

Col. Sullivan nodded. "And others. We had eyes on you at all times."

"Why didn't someone just say 'We're the CIA and we'd like that safe deposit key, thank you very much?'"

He smiled for the first time. "If we're watching you, others may be watching you. We knew we could keep you safe and thought it would be most inconspicuous to let you proceed. It became obvious that you were going to do as he asked."

“I was terrified. I considered tossing that key in the trash a hundred times,” she asserted.

“But you didn’t.”

“What happens now? Where is Kosof? What are you going to do with that cipher?”

“You go back to Chicago and resume your life. You mention nothing of this to anyone—we’ll know if you do. The rest is classified.”

Rachel locked the door to her classroom. She was more than ready for the summer hiatus. What an odd year it had been. She’d received accolades for her presentation in Vienna, but her trip wasn’t memorable for that reason. She hadn’t slept well since her return, her conversation with Col. Sullivan replaying constantly in her head. She checked the Internet regularly during the day—and when she awoke in the middle of the night—for any news of the fate of Vladimir Kosof. But there was nothing.

She’d tidied up her office the weekend before; she only needed to retrieve her satchel and head to her car. She planned to get in and drive, to whatever destination seemed promising as she went along. She’d never done anything so spontaneous. Maybe it was about time.

She impatiently tore off the note taped to her office door.

PLEASE EXIT BY THE SIDE DOOR.

The summer maintenance crew must be busy painting the entrances already. They certainly needed it, she thought.

Rachel stepped through the side door and gasped as the handsome man – the one whose fate she had been so faithfully tracking – stepped from the shadows and handed her a bouquet of forget-me-nots.

“I owe you my life,” Vladimir Kosof said. “I want to thank you.”

THE END