

# Three things we knew...

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First, that Gunther Beck had been six feet three inches tall, and spent more on his hair than was right for a man of his build. Rarely did anyone see the top of his head, and it was never seen again after he passed through the turbine at 400-plus miles an hour. According to Europol's own engineers, he would have been alive – though unconscious – when his body struck the first blade.

Second, that the cost of repairing the damage, excluding compensation for his widow and fines for industrial negligence, was somewhere north of 1.2 billion euros. That sum had been my 'in'. I was to pose as a loss adjuster contracted to Airbus, the European aircraft builder, which had been leasing the wind tunnel when it had sliced and diced Gunther Beck. Airbus had lost the only example of its prototype jet, ten years into development, when Beck's remains completed their journey around the tunnel's closed loop, re-entered the test chamber, and impacted its nose cone, engines, and forward wing surfaces. The cost of replacing the prototype had yet to be agreed, but the cost of my persona for this mission, as assembled by Europol's finest, had come in at less than six thousand euros.

And third: Gunther Beck's death had not been an accident.

How did we know? I'll explain. But let me first remind you of a story that had appeared in the news several months earlier. This version was from the BBC, the first English-language outlet to mention Uwe Zimmerman, and the events surrounding his death.

*What induced one of the brightest minds in automotive engineering to boil himself to death in the Monegros Desert? That's what colleagues are asking, here, at the Striadus Group centre of excellence in Zaragoza, Spain.*

*Uwe Zimmerman, 37, was discovered just yards from his car, a still-in-development Striadus Senhoma Mark Two, last Wednesday afternoon. Walkers on the Ruta Jubierre, a celebrated hiking trail through some of the desert's most challenging terrain, say they were alerted to his presence when they saw sunlight reflecting off the windows of his vehicle.*

*Upon investigating, they found Zimmerman, naked, lying on the desert floor. His clothes were later found in the footwell of his car. The heating controls had been set to high, and the heated seats and steering wheel had been activated, despite Zaragoza currently being caught in the grip of an intense and prolonged heat wave.*

*The official cause of death was recorded as the effects of heat exhaustion, but a coroner's report, obtained by the BBC, goes into further detail. His family has requested that those details not be made public. We can, however, reveal that Zimmerman's internal body temperature remained above forty-one degrees, a quarter of an hour after he'd been moved into an ambulance. The ambulance had been chilled to seventeen.*

*While Striadus Group itself is refusing to comment until the conclusion of an official investigation into its engineer's death, Zimmerman's family claims to have received documentation – from inside Striadus itself – suggesting that, in the months leading up to his death, he had met several times with a counsellor retained by the company. What they discussed is not known.*

*Colleagues, who spoke on condition of anonymity, claimed that management had initiated an awareness-raising campaign in the wake of Zimmerman's death, and that posters were now on display in all communal areas, not only at the centre of excellence and the group headquarters at Stuttgart's sprawling Striadus Park, but at facilities worldwide.*

*Zimmerman, who had been born in the medieval German city of Celle and moved to Zaragoza five years ago, headed research into artificial intelligence and its application across all parts of the automotive industry. Striadus Group was trialling several of his innovations in the Senhoma Mark Two, development of which is known to be running several years behind schedule. There is, as yet, no confirmation that problems integrating the cutting-edge intelligence is the cause of that delay, but car buyers, and the Striadus board alike, must be wondering what the death of this engineer, who some have called 'visionary', will mean for the Senhoma line – and for Striadus Group itself.*

# One

It was our wedding anniversary. Not that we kept score any more. Odette and I had been stepping out for six years before we were hitched, and we'd known of each other's existence since school. I can't remember when we'd last marked the day with a card or a gift.

But that's not to say Bichard's timing couldn't have been any better.

I'd been sitting on deck when he arrived, fixing some tackle and minded to head out and catch us some bream for our tea. He announced himself with a cough, a bottle of whisky in one hand, a buff folder pinched between his opposite elbow and hip, and I realised in that instant that the next few days were a write-off.

"I don't suppose this is a social call?" I asked.

"I don't suppose so. Permission to come aboard?"

I unlatched a deck rail and he stepped across to the Huffin' Puffin, the fishing boat I ran out of Portelet Harbour. I'd bought it several years before, to run visitors out to the fishing grounds on the other side of Sark, but now it was more of a cover for the work I took on for Europol.

Bichard was my handler. He had been for several years by now, since I'd got back from Venice, from my first mission, not that I'd known it was that at the time, and explained what had happened, who had been involved, and why. And when I'd agreed to work for him, he'd signed the docket for a new, more powerful engine for the boat. He'd tried to pass it off as a signing-on inducement, but I knew the truth: he thought it might come in useful one day. That day would not be today.

"I wouldn't normally send you on a mission like this," he said, as I led him down to the galley. "But this one is... it's different. What do you know about artificial intelligence?"

"Not much," I admitted. I'd seen the film 2001, and I'd seen Star Trek, so I knew what Hollywood thought AI might become – one day. But I didn't know much more than that: how far we were from that point, whether they'd underestimated, or what we might eventually use it for.

"That's what we were hoping," he said. "We wanted someone fresh. Someone who wouldn't be swayed by the tech."

That sounded like me. Mine was one of the last boats at Portelet not to have satellite navigation. My satellites were the stars and the moon. My maps and charts were printed. My navigation system was and still is my eyes and my mind and my instinct. There are better ways of telling where you are and where you're headed, than a chipboard in the sky, and if they all agree you know you're right. To rely on satellites struck me as risky, still does. You're out in Biscay and the link goes down.

Your antenna snaps. Your battery runs flat. What do you do? You'd be half way down to Finisterre before you find your bearings.

"It's your wedding anniversary, unless I'm mistaken."

"I've booked a table at the—"

"No, you haven't," he said. "Not if past performance is anything to go by."

"No, well..."

"I'll expense you a dinner at the restaurant of your choosing next Friday," he said. "I'll even pay for a babysitter. I'm sure Odette will forgive you disappearing for the rest of the week if she thinks you've made an effort for the first time in... how long."

"Three years," I admitted.

"Good." He was so confident I'd agree to go that he'd already started work on my cover. "I've sent some money to your business account." He pulled that evening's paper towards him and wrote an amount in the corner. It was enough to cover a fishing trip lasting several days. "Give her a call and tell her you've had a booking. Party of three looking to catch whatever's in season right now."

"Well, that would be flatfish."

"Good."

"But you catch them from shore."

He ignored that technicality. "Get yourself to Portbail by dawn. I'll have a car drive you to the airfield at Lessay. There'll be a jet there. Take you to Stuttgart. You'll be there in time for breakfast."

Of all the means of travelling, flying was my least favourite by far. "Can't I get the train," I said. "I can sail to Cherbourg, change at Paris—"

"Time is paramount, Remus. Three men are dead already. Another – a woman, actually – barely escaped with her life. We can't afford to lose any more."

"What exactly is it you want me to do?"

"Ask awkward questions. The more difficult, the better. Find out whether there's a connection between them and, if there is, who else might be in danger."

"So, not find a killer?" I asked, thinking back to the time Bichard had sent me to a secluded monastery in the foothills of the Alps to work out how a French agent had met a nasty end there. I'd gone beyond what he'd expected, but whether you'd call the result a success... well, I was still trying to figure that out.

"If there is a killer, and you unmask them, so much the better, but we're more interested in motive, and protecting any potential future victims. If the deaths were indeed murder, we suspect there's a far larger operation behind them – not just a lone serial killer."

I knew there was no point asking who 'we' were. Bichard wouldn't tell me, even if he could, but understanding their suspicions better might help me direct those awkward questions. I raised my eyebrows and waited.

"Gunther Beck died two weeks ago," he explained. "He was sucked through a

wind turbine at a Striadus Group testing lab in southern Germany. He had fifteen years' experience in developing algorithms for self-driving cars. One of the leaders in his field."

"Striadus Group?" I asked. The bell it rang was distant and muffled.

"It's an automotive multinational. Headquartered in Stuttgart, but it's got operations around the world. You probably know its brands," he said, and he reeled off a handful of names that I knew from the bonnets and boots of cars on the island. "One of Europe's biggest employers, biggest companies, and biggest investors in auto research. And *automated* auto research in particular. That's why we're involved."

"The board called us in?"

He shook his head. "They have no idea we're investigating. Ensuring that remains the case will be one of your mission parameters. No. This is about maintaining Europe's competitive edge." He leaned forward on the bunk and dipped a finger into his drink. He lifted it out and watched the drip on the end of it sway with the motion of the boat. "We suspect this is a nasty case of industrial sabotage."

"By whom?" I suggested a couple of European manufacturers.

Richard licked his finger. "It seems unlikely. There's a lot of patent sharing in the European market, and a rising tide lifts all boats together. Most likely an American consortium. That's the theory. US manufacturers are playing catch-up, and they don't like it. Increased competition from Europe is one thing, but now they're facing Asia, too. So, what do they do?"

"Murder?"

"Poach or see off. We know they've made some strategic hires, but a lot of the names they've approached have turned them down. Gunther Beck among them. So, if they won't defect with their expertise, they're terminating them. Possibly. Theoretically. That's what we want you to find out."

"And in Asia?"

"You mean are they doing the same thing? Not that we've seen. It's beyond our jurisdiction, but we suspect Asia is safe. For the moment. Europe is more familiar, culturally, and logistically. A lot of US companies have better contacts in the European market. That would help them make strategic strikes, which is very much what this feels like."

"Who were the other victims?"

He pushed the folder towards me. "Read that on the flight. Jürgen Wolf, killed in a single car smash when his vehicle veered off the road. There was nothing else around; nobody witnessed it. He was driving a hybrid. The fuel ignited, super-heated the battery, and the cells ruptured. If he wasn't killed by the crash, he was burned to death. He was Europe's lead researcher in object detection, currently working with collision detection systems, somewhat ironically. And Uwe

Zimmerman. He was development lead for autonomous driving at Striadus Group's Zaragoza plant. Died of heat exhaustion in the desert outside the city."

"That doesn't sound suspicious."

"Read the file."

"And the fourth? The woman?"

"Ursula Vogel. She's the anomaly, as she's the only one who survived. If, that is, her accident was somehow related to the other three deaths."

"She's a researcher?"

"No. She heads up the Striadus test lab. That puts her in charge of the wind tunnel where Gunther met his end."

"So, assuming Gunther Beck's death wasn't an accident—"

"It wasn't."

"Might it have been a second attempt on Ursula Vogel's life?"

"We don't think so. Beck's profile made him a logical addition to the list of victims which, rather worryingly, can be said for at least six other names on the Striadus payroll."

"Have they been informed?"

"We've got them under surveillance."

That didn't answer my question, but it was an indication of how seriously Europol was taking things.

"So, what's her story?"

"Vogel? Car crash. Driving a Striadus, like Zimmerman and Wolf, with her mother in the passenger seat. Vogel survived, her mother didn't. Emergency services cut her out, but she died on the way to hospital screaming about the ghost in the machine. Vogel's only recently back at work."

"Ghost in the machine?"

"Apparently the car veered off of its own accord. Avoiding a child or some-such."

"You don't believe it?"

"I don't disbelieve it." He stressed the 'dis'. "The car was designed to do that, so it might just be unfortunate. Either way, Vogel isn't your primary concern. She's an administrator. A very good one, but she's not in the same field as the others." He picked up his glass and drained it. "I'll leave you the bottle. Anniversary gift. But I do need you to Portbail by morning."

"I'll head that way tonight."

"That might be a little premature."

"I'll sleep on the boat."

"Want to borrow my phone?" He hooked a mobile out of his inside pocket.

"What for?"

"Aren't you going to call Odette?"

"I'll call her from France." Richard was right. If I was going to get to Portbail in

time for my flight, I would have to get going. “She’d probably find it *more* suspicious if I called in advance.”

“You two have a very strange relationship.”

“You’re married,” I said. “Just because you’re eligible for tax breaks doesn’t mean you’re no longer an individual.”

Richard shook his head. “Make sure that file doesn’t fall into anyone else’s hand,” he said. “We wouldn’t want to worry the other names on that list.”

# Two

I tacked south from Portelet harbour, cut wide around Icart and Pointe de la Moye, then piloted roughly east-south-east on a course I'd set for Ecrehous. I'd heard the waters were busy with dogfish that week, and I still had some crab in my bait box. They go wild for it, dogfish – spider crab in particular – so I anchored up as the sun went down and set the line on a ratchet. I'd intended to read through the file while I waited. But, best laid plans and all that: I got a bite in fifteen minutes and toyed with it for forty. Dogfish run far and fast if they can, and I wasn't minded to fight this one. It tired itself out playing games, then I reeled it in quite easily as the sun took its place in the sea.

Truth be told, I was rather enjoying myself. I had whisky and fish, Jersey to my starboard side, Maitr'ile to port. The water was calm and the air mild. I decided to stay for the night. I know I was working on Europol's ticket, but what was the point of expensing a mooring unless I'd be going ashore. I'd sleep better on the water than tied to a berth at Portbail, and I'd rather jump in the sea in the morning than scrub myself down in a shared shower or flannel my bits by the sink.

So, I gutted the fish, threw its head in the bait box, and drew half a pan of salt water. I chunked the flesh, boiled it with an onion, and when it was almost done, I drained it. I splashed it with garlic and wine and left it like that to marinade while I went back on deck with the file.

Much of its contents, we'd talked through already. There wasn't a great deal about Gunther Beck or his journey through the turbine – he'd barely been dead a week, after all – but the other two deaths, of Uwe Zimmerman, 37, and Jürgen Wolf, 62, were described in sickening detail.

The first of them, Zimmerman, had been cooked to death in his car. Born and brought up in Celle, he'd been posted to Striadus' Centro Ibérico de Experiencia (*centre of excellence* – their words, not Bichard's). It was an eight-acre site on the banks of the Ebro in one of the tidier suburbs of Zaragoza. By all accounts, his arrival had been a fillip.

Zaragoza had long been a car town before Striadus arrived. Opel was building Corsas there in the early 1980s, and was doing so still when Striadus moved in. There was speculation – if not confirmation – that Striadus had hoped to poach its brightest lights, and when that hadn't happened, its base on the city's periphery looked more and more like a folly. It wasn't long before shareholders were asking difficult questions. What was it doing? How much was it costing? When would they see a return?

The board at Striadus obfuscated, and when that no longer worked, it lied. It

ascribed successes at home to the team in Zaragoza, but it was only when Zimmerman was transferred, to give their claims more credence, that the stories began to ring true. No longer under close observation, he started taking the kind of risks that nobody would have signed off on back home. Several failed, but over the five years he worked there – until his unfortunate end – Striadus had patented sixteen of his inventions, a dozen of which are still used today in every self-driving car. He quickly moved up the ranks, his pay increased, and so did the grade of his company motor, from a poky Striadus Eta, to a Mezgranda, and eventually the first electric Senhoma (literal translation, without human, or ‘unmanned’), to roll off the factory floor. His role in its development can’t be overstated. He had perfected the instrument of his own demise.

He was found five metres from that car, dead from the effects of heat exhaustion. He’d been parked in a valley in the desert – the Desierto de los Monegros – with the car aligned so no shade would touch it from siesta through to high tea. How long he’d sat in it wasn’t clear, but it must have been hours: the post-mortem ascribed his death to a swollen brain and failed organs. He’d never have recovered from either, even if he’d been found in time and plunged into an ice bath.

The region had been experiencing what the locals called an *ola de calor* – a heat wave of unusual intensity. It was the kind of heat that runs cold taps dry and packs out ice cream parlours. Official advice, published in the papers, broadcast from loud hailers strapped to police cars roaming the city streets, was to hunker down, stay inside, and for Santiago’s sake at least, tilt your louvres but keep your doors wide open. Yet the computer in Zimmerman’s car, once they’d retrieved it and stripped it down, revealed that he’d driven for forty miles through the hottest part of the day with the air con set to maximum heat, the windows rolled up, and the heated seats and steering wheel tuned to their winter settings. Then he’d parked up and sat and waited, with the doors not just shut but locked. Two and a half hours later, when the battery had run flat, the doors had unlocked of their own accord, and he’d crawled out into the dust.

That’s the official story, as broken by the BBC. Bichard had included a copy of the Corporation’s story.

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And he’d filled in some of the gaps. Where the BBC had respected the Zimmerman family’s wishes, Bichard had pasted the relevant sections of the coroner’s report. Zimmerman’s back and the back of his legs had been blistered from contact with the seats. His fingernails were broken, his face bruised. He’d been bleeding from

the eyes where his capillaries had burst. There were red stains below his nose. His lips were cracked, and he'd torn his vocal cords. His ankles had ballooned, he had a rash across most of his torso, and, as the BBC had revealed, his internal body temperature was elevated long after he'd been loaded into the ambulance in which he died.

His death had been acknowledged, of course. There was no other option. Tributes had been paid, but the real cause – the *established* cause – was neatly covered up.

The board had commissioned a report, of which one copy – and one copy only – was delivered in person before the month was out. Bichard had seen that copy, by ways and means he'll never reveal, and excerpted it in the file.

The conclusion had been unequivocal: Zimmerman had been murdered.

He'd left his office shortly before one o'clock. The vehicle log showed him travelling south at various speeds between 27 and 44 kilometres an hour. That would have been appropriate for the traffic at that time of day. The satnav hadn't been programmed, so he knew where he wanted to go, but twelve minutes into his journey, the car had taken a sharp right turn. He was now heading west. Simultaneously, all four doors locked, and the climate control settings were changed, from a cooling twenty degrees, to 'Hi', which was one stop above thirty-two. That was the point when the heated steering wheel, and the heated pads in each of the seats, had been switched on.

There's some suggestion, from logged but ignored button presses, that Zimmerman had attempted to override the settings. Every time he did, the car reverted, and, after half a dozen fruitless corrections, it ignored any further attempts to cool the air, slow the engine or open any door. It's mere speculation that this was when he started to pull at the door cards, which would explain the broken fingernails. Shortly thereafter, he may have attempted to smash a window. That would account for his facial bruising.

The whole while, the world slipped by at almost exactly five kilometres less than the limit, wherever he happened to be. Why didn't he turn off the road, or crash into a tree or another car? He couldn't. Steering wheels have no physical connection to the wheels they control: they negotiate with a computer, which passes on their request. That computer was no longer paying Zimmerman any attention. Why didn't he call for help? He couldn't. His phone had paired to the radio, and it wasn't letting go. Zimmerman no longer had control of his car. He was locked out of it, while being locked in.

Whoever *did* have control must have planned his death with some care. There wouldn't have been any point sending him into the valley late in the day. The sun would have gone down too soon, and, when it did, the temperature would have dropped to a chilly twelve degrees. Neither would there have been any point doing it

at the weekend. The valley is busy with hikers then, and he might have been rescued in time.

And then came the report's most damning conclusion: it could only have been controlled like that by someone inside Striadus. Someone with the ways and means to take over a car from a distance. Someone who had waited, patiently, until the opportunity had arisen.

The board covered it up, as it would. It concocted a story, called it suicide, ran a campaign encouraging staff to come forward and talk to their managers if stressed or feeling depressed. They bribed a crooked psychiatrist to backdate a sheaf of convincing notes which suggested that Zimmerman visited him twice for counselling and advice.

And you can almost forgive them for that. Had anyone outside the firm discovered its cars could be hijacked wirelessly, its shares would have gone through the floor. Questions about a loss-making centre built on the banks of the Ebro would soon have become the least of the board's concerns.

\* \* \*

I skim read the first few paragraphs about what had happened to Jürgen Wolf, but by then I was ready to eat. The fish had been in its marinade for thirty or forty minutes, so I shook it dry and fried it off in some butter, and put the file aside for the night. I lay on deck for a while, staring at the stars, and wondered what Odette was doing to mark our anniversary. I hoped she'd gone out with the girls.

I don't know when I dropped off, but I woke up to see Orion above Les Landes, so I knew at least an hour had passed. I went down to the galley and lay on a bunk, and the next thing I knew, the sun was rising. I made coffee, swam while it cooled, then stood on deck naked, eating crackers and dried apricots while drying in the breeze. You should try that if you get the chance. There's no better way to wake up.

\* \* \*

I found a berth at Portbail, where Bichard's car was waiting to drive me down to Lessay. Where he'd got the idea I'd be travelling on a jet, I don't know. Lessay's runway is turfed, and although that's not a deal-breaker, it isn't ideal for jets. So instead, I boarded a C295, matt grey, in Airbus factory livery, as befit that mission's persona. It's not a business or passenger plane, but a twin prop military aircraft designed for short take-offs, steep landings, and long flights in between. My own flight wouldn't come anywhere close to testing its limits, being slightly less than two hours, but that was enough on a plane configured for moving troops between battlefields. By the time we landed, the thrill had more than worn off.

We'd put down at Striadus Stuttgart Flughafen, the company's private airport a mile from the city centre. It was better equipped than Lessay, with a metalled runway and a handful of terminal buildings. They were small but well appointed, and clearly not intended for long-term use. I suppose that was logical. Most people flying from there would have come from the factory, to which it was connected by a shuttle on an elevated track. There was nothing subtle about that track. It was a relic of the sixties, when designers, still reliant on set squares and slide rules, incorporated tolerances that today would seem overly cautious. The deck was deep, the stilts were fat, and the turn that led into the platform was lazy and wide.

But there was a charm to its naivete, which I only fully appreciated upon climbing up to the platform and boarding the waiting pod. This was a world apart. It was clean and fresh and sleek: a jarring contrast to the bulky track on which it ran. There were doors to left and right, and just four seats, each looking into the centre, where a man stood with his hand outstretched to welcome me aboard.

"Remus Carey," he said, with barely a trace of an accent. "Jonas Frank. External relations. Welcome to Stuttgart. A pleasant flight?" There was an economy to his vocabulary that I liked. I felt we might get on, get things done, and I'd be back in Guernsey before the weekend, enjoying the anniversary meal that Bichard had promised to pay for.

I took his hand and shook it. "Good of you to see me, Herr Frank."

"Call me Jonas. Not at all. Rather embarrassing, from the company's point of view. All this. The sooner we get it cleared up."

That economy extended to clipping off his sentences as soon as the outcome was obvious.

"I'm sure it will be some comfort to Gunther Beck's family if we can get them some answers."

"Oh, that too," he said, "that too," as though remembering there was a human aspect to Beck's death, not merely a dimple in the company's bottom line. "So, shall we?"

He indicated a seat and took the one across from me. He spoke to some unseen entity, as though it was sitting between us. "Lena, locate Ursula Vogel." He looked at me and, in a quieter voice, explained that "Ursula is our head of testing. She oversees the wind tunnel where Gunther." He twitched his eyebrows in lieu of saying *was killed*.

"Ursula Vogel is located at pavilion four," said a disembodied voice from speakers set into the ceiling. "Test track. Her phone is set to do not disturb. Her diary is clear. Next appointment, fourteen hundred hours."

"Lena, take us to pavilion four," Jonas said.

"It understands English," I noted.

"Spanish, French and German, too. We shall soon be adding Italian."

“I didn’t realise your workforce was so diverse.”

“But of course. We like to attract the best talent.” He cast a glance at the doors. They hissed as they closed, and a moment later we slipped away from the platform. The pod was running on rubber tyres, and if I’d not known better, I’d have said they were slightly deflated for the sake of a smoother ride. “It’s a beta system,” Jonas said. “A little crude, but we’re making fast progress. It will be in use in our cars in five years. This,” he indicated the pod. “This version is just for test.”

Test or not, it worked. Lena, whoever or whatever she was, understood what Jonas had asked, and was clearly plumbed into some company wide location system, tracking staff and their activities on site.

“Does it know where everyone is? You, for example.” If it did, I could already see how it might be helpful. Assuming it also kept logs, and somehow I could access them, it might tell me who was where when Uwe Zimmerman died in the desert, Jürgen Wolf hit the lamp post, and Gunther Beck was atomised as he passed through the blades of the turbine.

“Me, yes,” He tapped a hard plastic card that swung from his neck on a lanyard. “But not you.”

“And if you didn’t have your ID?”

“No. Though it still would know where my card was.”

The system was imperfect, then – for my needs, at least – as the degree of uncertainty was too high. I wondered whether Ursula Vogel really was at the test track but decided not to ask the question. We’d find out soon enough. Besides, Jonas Frank seemed rather pleased to have introduced me to Lena, and until I knew how useful he’d be, I wanted to keep him onside.

The airport and the factory were on opposite sides of the Neckar, the river that runs through Stuttgart and irrigates the region’s vines. The bulk of the factory rose above its somewhat muddy water, and was surrounded by what looked, at first glance, like an automotive theme park. A series of structural earthworks had opened a channel from the river onto the site which, Jonas explained, was still used to bring in the steel and other parts – latterly including batteries for its prototype electric vehicles – as well as feeding a large lagoon, around which was arranged a dozen pavilions; one for each of the six auto brands that made up Gruppe Striadus, and six general interest exhibitions tracing the development of car and truck technology. I wondered how much space they’d given to Carl Benz, without whom Striadus might not exist – or, at the very least, probably wouldn’t be based in Stuttgart.

“I’ve taken the liberty of booking a factory tour,” Jonas said. “You’ll have to ride with the public, I’m afraid, but at least you will get an overview of our operations here.”

“Very kind,” I said, “although I was hoping I might be able to explore on my own.

Is there any way you could—”

“I shall come with,” he interrupted. “It’s safer on a tour. There are many areas we can’t just walk into. As our insurers, I’m sure you would agree.”

How could I not? It wouldn’t fit that mission’s persona to argue to the contrary. Nonetheless, I wouldn’t be stopped from accessing any location I chose, should I think it useful. I’d just have to do it without being seen.

He changed the subject, told me about the park, which architect had designed each pavilion, the cost and effort involved in their construction, but it all felt like diversion, as though the only things he could discuss – maybe the only things he was *allowed* to discuss – were those that promoted the company and the brilliance of the brand. His job – external relations – probably involved dealing with the press, so perhaps it was just a more palatable term for PR.

The pod turned one last corner, and we skirted the back of a canopy thirty or forty feet tall. Like Aphrodite’s shell turned on end, carelessly kicked askew at the end of a party, it rose from a narrow base, but flared and curled over the higher it climbed. The pod passed into its shadow, and the change of light revealed a huddle of three – two men and one woman – sitting in the front row of a rake of plastic seats.

“Ursula Vogel,” Jonas said, pointing. It must have been her in the middle, in jeans and a polo shirt, a pair of smart black trainers and her hair tied out of the way. The men sat either side of her; one with a stopwatch, one with a clipboard, and they leaned back – where she did not – as five cars passed in convoy with just a foot between their bumpers. They both wore polo shirts in trademark Striadus green.

So, this was the track. A pitch-black figure eight, as close to perfect as ever a road could be. It had banked sides, sharp white lines, and neither a crack nor a bump to be seen. I don’t know how fast the cars were going – ninety? a hundred? – but as I looked up, they’d already turned the first corner, with neither a flicker of brake light nor a hint of slowing down.

Unlike us. We were stopping, right at the top of the steeply raked seats. The pod doors slid wide, and Jonas stepped out, leading the way down the steps to the party observing the track.

“Ursula,” Jonas said as we perched on the third step. He was talking to her back and shoulders. “Remus Carey.”

She raised a hand to silence him, her focus still on the cars. They crossed the figure-eight’s pinch-point, the half-way mark, and were heading towards us again. It was only then that I noticed what hadn’t been evident in the pod: they were all but silent. There was the noise of rubber on tarmac, the rush of the wind on the mirrors and arches as each one sailed past, but of the engine, barely a whisper.

I looked at Jonas and, as though anticipating me, he quietly said, “electric”, and smiled.

“Why don’t they overtake?”

“They can’t. There’s only one—” he began, but he stopped abruptly when Ursula spoke.

“*Rufen Sie ihn herein,*” she said – *call him in* – and she leaned to the stopwatch to check the last lap. “*Nicht gut genug.*”

Whatever she’d said, it wasn’t a compliment, and the second man – until he thought better – looked poised to intervene. He changed his mind, and instead spoke into a radio. The lead car slowed, and the four on its tailed slowed in sync, each one maintaining the almost impossible foot that kept them apart.

“They can’t overtake,” Ursula said. “There is only one driver. That is what you were going to say?”

Jonas nodded, and he repeated his introduction.

“A pleasure to meet you, if possibly inconvenient,” Ursula said. She gave me a nod in lieu of a handshake. She was still two steps below us, but something about her countered that. She occupied the space around her, not just the space within, and I noticed that Jonas shuffled just slightly to give her a little more room.

“Likewise.” I dipped my head more slowly than she had. “And I assure you, it’s not my intention to drag things out.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” The lead car had stopped behind her, and the driver wound down his window. They shared a few words in German – not friendly ones, I would guess, from the way that they were spoken – while the men either side smiled at me and pretended not to hear.

“Development cars,” Jonas said. “The Senhoma Mark Two. It’s due for release in —”

“Perhaps you would like a ride,” Ursula said, cutting him off again as she turned back to face us.

“Yes, I—”

“I don’t think that would be—” this time it was Jonas interrupting but, as before, he didn’t get to finish.

“Mr Carey?”

“Call me Remus, please. Yes, I— yes, I would.”

Jonas shot me a glance but said nothing. Perhaps my interruption had annoyed him, I thought.

But that wasn’t it at all.

# Three

Ursula dismissed the men. “Follow me,” she said, limping down the step to the track.

“Ursula, I don’t think—” Jonas began.

“Don’t feel you have to join us.”

“It’s not me. It’s—”

“Really,” I said. “It’s fine.” I followed Ursula down, and Jonas did a double step to catch up.

“It might be a bit... rough,” he said. I now know that that was just an excuse: a way to get around telling me what was really going on. At the time, I was naive to that fact.

“I spend most of my time on the water,” I said. “I think I’ve got the stomach for a few trips around a track.”

“Then at least...” he held up a finger. “One moment.” He jogged across to a basket of helmets, picked out two at random and carried them back.

Ursula had seen him. “Really, Jonas? You have so little faith?”

“But the insurance,” he said. He nodded at me, reminding her.

“Then, it’s your choice,” she told me. “Do you trust my driving? Or doubt me as Jonas seems to doubt me?”

How could I answer? It would fit the mission persona to take the crash hat and wear it, but I needed to keep Ursula sweet. She oversaw testing, and in that position, she oversaw the wind tunnel.

“I understand your caution,” I said to Jonas. “But I promise I’ll indemnify you if anything should go wrong.”

“Not me,” Jonas said. “The company.”

Ursula made a dismissive sound and limped the last few steps to the first car in the convoy. Jonas and I took the second. I dropped myself into the driver’s seat and he sat to my right. The helmets went on the back seat, so either Ursula was as good a driver as she seemed to believe, or Jonas was prone to crumble under at the slightest sign of peer pressure.

The car wouldn’t have turned any heads from the outside. I’m not much into cars myself, but it looked like a family hatchback: wide and long, with room for a tug’s-worth of tackle if you folded down the back seat. Inside was a different story. Even I was impressed. The seats were wide and deep, the surfaces leather or wood, and it had a digital dash, which stretched from directly ahead of me to the other side of Jonas. The instruments on it were virtual, and they seemed to sit slightly proud of the screen, as though they were being projected.

“It’s a Senhoma,” Jonas said, and he quickly added, “Mark Two, very new. Not yet on sale.”

As far as he knew, I was only there to investigate the death of Gunther Lock, but now that he had revealed this was a Mark Two – the same as the car that had killed Uwe Zimmerman – I was far more interested in what it did and what was new.

“That’s something we’re working on.” He pointed at the steering wheel. The three arms that spread from its centre looked like toughened glass, but as I put my hands on the rim, a pulse of light passed through them, like a heartbeat from the horn, which left behind it a series of buttons, ranged across its touch-sensitive surface. “Control for the radio, your phone,” Jonas explained. “And this...” he indicated the screen that stretched between us. “Much larger this time. More room for more information.”

The familiar dials of Odette’s battered car, and the one I remembered my father driving many years ago, were absent from the Senhoma. In their place were a series of graphs and schematics. They covered everything: speed and heat, location and heading, infotainment and battery power. And, above them, there was something else. It was a second, smaller display, fixed to the top of the larger screen by what looked like a puck of putty, moulded and pressed down to hold it firm. It was more utilitarian than the high resolution, projected dash, and its presence was incongruous in such carefully crafted surroundings – like roundworm in flounder or cod. It seemed to do nothing but display a random code that updated every few seconds.

“And that?” I asked. “Is that new?”

When I pointed, the display had read 5D72B. By the time Jonas looked at it, the characters had changed to F26C1. A few seconds later, they’d changed again.

“Aah, that,” he said. “Well, these are development cars. They’re—”

“Are we strapped in?” Ursula’s voice filled the cabin. Jonas rolled his eyes.

“Buckle up,” he said, then he addressed the cabin at large: “We’re ready.”

“*Gut*,” Ursula said. She’d switched to German, and she continued like that for another couple of sentences. I’d assumed she was speaking to Jonas – perhaps telling him something she didn’t want me to hear – but Jonas made no effort to answer her, and when the reply did come, several seconds later, the voice was female, but higher, and hesitant. Whatever she was saying, Ursula was talking again before she’d finished her sentence.

I caught nothing of what Ursula said, but her tone suggested some disagreement, and when the second voice returned, I recognised three words: *verboten*, *nicht*, and a second *verboten*. Something was not allowed.

Jonas pulled himself up in his seat, put his hands together and pressed them between his knees. I could feel his discomfort, even without looking at his face. I’m sure he’d have preferred that it wasn’t an open channel but, unable to change that,

he did the only thing he could: after a second interjection from Ursula, he intervened.

“*Wir haben einen wichtigen Gast, Kontrollraum. Entkoppeln Sie die Autos.*”

I could guess what *Kontrollraum* meant, but only because it sounded so much like control room. The rest of it was lost on me, and I wasn't immediately sure who Jonas had spoken in favour of: Ursula or the control room.

A few seconds later, control replied, “*OK, aber ich akzeptiere die Schuld nicht.*”

I understood or could guess the whole sentence. ‘*Aber*’ was ‘but’, ‘*akzeptiere*’ sounded very much like ‘accept’, and ‘*nicht*’ was ‘not’. *Schuld*, though: I had no idea what that meant, leaving me with “OK, but I accept the \_\_\_ not”. I later discovered that *Schuld* meant, effectively, blame.

The characters on the panel blinked twice, then disappeared entirely. Three soft chimes rang out, and I heard the same three chimes on the radio link coming from Ursula's car. The lights on the three cars behind us blinked out, and as I looked up to the rear-view mirror, each turned left and, without a driver, drove itself to the side of the track and parked up. Now there were just two cars on the track: ours, with Ursula's ahead. Her brake lights went out, and a moment later the brake pedal in our car came up.

“Don't touch anything,” Jonas said as we started to roll. “Not the wheel, not the pedals.”

“Touch what you want Remus,” Ursula said. “It will make no difference.”

The instruments on the dashboard reconfigured. The speed graph moved to the centre, and a bouncing line, as might be found on a heart monitor, tracked the draw of power from the battery, and its replacement through regeneration as Ursula reapplied the brake.

She had steered her Senhoma to the centre of the track, and ours had followed, with a gap of no more than a foot between us. Every instinct told me to reach for the wheel, to grip it tightly, if only to convince myself that my very existence was something more than passive. The truth, though, was that I was as much of a passenger as Jonas was to my right.

We had stopped with Ursula's front wheels on a fat white stripe that spanned the track. The accelerator in our car released, the speed dropped to the x axis, and every system seemed poised, ready for action, waiting for a command. When it came, it was sudden and sharp. I'd rested my foot on what would have been the gas pedal, but now that pedal snapped away, my heel dropped down, and Jonas and myself were thrown back as the car lurched forward. It pressed us into our seats, our heads against the rests, and I felt the pressure squeezing me. It was the kind of acceleration that violated you, pressed deep into your bowels, made your breath catch in your throat, took you over entirely. For one terrifying, exhilarating moment, less than a second, but it felt like so much longer, I was immobilised,

suspended while experiencing a more significant thrust than ever I had in my life.

It didn't even strike me that the roar, which had started as a growl and pitched up, sometimes sliding, and sometimes stepping at simulated gear changes, was itself a fabrication. There was no engine to make such a noise: it was an effect, a soundtrack, purely for the sake of the driver – not that there was one in our car – to give the sensation of riding an old-time gas guzzler, when really the locomotive force was nothing more than the flow of electrons from one bucket of chemicals into another.

But what a flow it was. In less than four seconds, the graph had leaped from zero to three digits. The line that described our ascent was almost perpendicular until, as Ursula threw us around the first corner, it curled back on itself, plateaued, and with the acceleration behind us – physically as well as spatially – my body seemed to catch up with itself. I took a deep breath, the first I'd managed since we'd launched, and felt the tightness, the wonderful reassuring compression, of the seatbelt against my chest.

We took the first corner on only three wheels. The fourth glowed red on the dashboard schematic, indicating loss of grip as it span an inch from the track. Ursula straightened, and we straightened, too, and the wheel came down with a thump, a wobble, and an icon for traction control flashed up, and as soon as it had appeared, it had gone.

“You are enjoying the ride?” Ursula asked. We had already reached the back of the track. We were cresting the top of the figure eight, and back down to the intersection before I'd squeezed out my reply. What I said, I don't remember. Something vapid about the power or speed of the car, I think. “Jonas could tell you all about it,” she said. “If he's not so green. What do you say, Jonas? You enjoy talking about the car?”

Jonas was holding the side of his seat. His other hand was a fist around the grab handle above him. He ignored her quip about being green, but I stole a glance and could see he was far from comfortable.

“Control room,” Ursula said. She was still speaking English. “Open the back loop.”

“Ursula, really, I—” Jonas started, but this time it was control that cut him off. Having been overruled once already, the unseen voice wasn't minded to argue.

“Back loop is clear and open.”

“You have been to Belgium, Remus?” Ursula asked.

I thought it a strange question, but told her I had, several times.

“No, Ursula,” Jonas said.

“You have the power to end it,” Ursula replied and, as if to emphasise the point, the graph on the dash ticked up to one-twenty, one-forty, as she shot her car up a bank and around a corner, and we shot up behind her.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Belgium?”

*“You have the power to end it.”*

It was obvious Jonas would rather have told me what Belgium meant.

“This.” He pointed at the smaller display and its five-character code. It ticked over from F22B8 to D7139. “It is the code for the VLM.”

“VLM?”

“The Virtual Latching Mechanism,” Ursula said. She came down the bank and onto the straight that ran through the centre of the eight. A moment later our car did the same, and both Jonas and I were thrown to the left as the cabin reorientated.

“VLM is a virtual tow rope,” Jonas said. “Each car follows the one in front, and copies what it does. So long as it’s close.”

“How close?”

“Within thirty metres.”

“Like we’re doing now?”

He nodded. “This is VLM. We use it to test several cars at once. Each one could be a little different. Different wheels, different engine, different software.”

With the Virtual Latching Mechanism, at least the way he described it, each car was a drone, taking its instructions from the vehicle ahead. Discrete streams of data, for acceleration, braking, the individual levels of power sent to each wheel – even the temperature and pressure in the cabin – was sent from one car to the next in daisy chain formation. Each stream was individually encrypted with a unique key that was reconfigured every five seconds.

As each car knew how fast it was travelling, it knew how long it would take it to reach the point on the track where the lead car had performed any action. Thus, it waited that long – usually no more than a few milliseconds – and repeated the manoeuvre.

“But,” said Jonas, “it is cleverer than it sounds.”

With so many streams of data passing from car to car, they would each have less time to decrypt and interpret them when travelling at speed, since they’d reach the point of action much sooner.

“They drop back, very slightly. It makes a buffer zone. A few extra centimetres is usually enough,” Jonas said. “It gives them the extra milliseconds they need to interpret the instruction and implement the changes themselves.”

“What I do, you copy,” Ursula said. She tapped the accelerator twice, throwing us forwards and back in our seats. Then she pressed it with more determination. The graph took a steeper turn, through one hundred and fifty to just below one-eighty. I could see why that was: a gap had opened in the fence. She was heading directly for it. “And as you copy me, the car behind copies you, and the car behind that copies it. Or they would if still they were there.”

We were through the fence, we crested a hill – and for a second, Ursula’s car disappeared. She was dropping down the other side while we were still climbing its face. The letters VLM flashed red on the dash, until we, too, joined her on the opposite side, and the whole of the second loop was laid out before us. This part of the track, hidden from public view, was four times the size of the ordered tarmac figure eight we’d been racing around. And it was varied, too. Long stretches seemed to have disappeared beneath drifting dunes. They reappeared, only to be subsumed by mud and grit, by dusty plains, or by potholed stretches of poorly cared-for autobahn.

“What was that?” I asked, indicating the red VLM, just before it disappeared.

“A system cut-out alert,” Jonas said. “One of the streams tracks orientation. A significant deviation between our orientation and the orientation of the lead car could be a sign of a crash. The system is programmed to disconnect if we had not adopted a similar orientation within three seconds.”

“Or if the shift in my car is too severe,” Ursula said.

“That’s your power to end it?” I asked. “You make Ursula crash.”

Ursula laughed, as though the very idea of Jonas making her crash was beyond comprehension. A second later, her laugh distorted and almost in sync, though not quite, I felt why. The smooth black track gave way to a cobbled street that was badly showing its age. The schematic showed the motor in each wheel working hard to compensate, but still it threw the cabin about – and threw us about within it.

“Oh, Belgium, how we’ve missed you,” Ursula said.

“You’ve lost me.”

“It’s what’s known in the industry as Belgian block,” Jonas said. “A good test of the suspension.”

It was a test the Senhoma was struggling to pass. Perhaps the suspension was too hard, or maybe it was the motor in each wheel not quite compensating, but it felt like the car had disappeared, and we were riding the blocks on a sledge. Ursula slowed down. The graph dropped back to the high double digits, but as soon as she had passed the last block, the weight returned to her right foot, and she pulled our Senhoma off the cobbles at high speed.

“I must apologise,” Jonas said. “The car is not finished.”

I understood, now, why he’d been reluctant to venture onto the second loop. The Senhoma was one of Striadus’ best-selling cars, and the Mark Two, already a year overdue, was being touted as the most important release in the company’s history. No doubt he’d wanted to make sure that news of its imperfections, so far into its development, didn’t become public knowledge. I thought it best to ignore them.

“You were telling me about this.” I pointed again at the small display. It read A227B.

“You saw how the control centre unlatched the cars behind us?”

I told him I did.

“They could only do that because we were sitting still. It is too dangerous to do it when moving.”

“Nonsense,” Ursula said. “There’s nothing dangerous at all.”

“It is a necessary safety measure,” Jonas said to me – not to her. There was seemingly no way to mute or cut the connection, so he waited for a moment to see whether she would reply and, when she didn’t, he picked up the thread. “But, when there’s a driver in the car, there are two options. Either. They can tap this...” he pointed at the small display, now bearing the code F219D, “or they can give the code to control, which can unlatch the cars manually.”

“Control can’t see this code itself?”

“For safety reasons, no. It is only shown in the lead car, or one of the drones behind it.”

Ursula threw her own Senhoma into a tight switchback, and a moment later Jonas was thrown so hard against the passenger window I heard his head hit the glass.

“It is in your power, Jonas,” she said. “Though enjoy it while you can. We’ll be taking these out before the end of the week.” She pulled us left-right-left, and we emerged from the switchback onto a loose gravel track. Our back end span out as our wheels struggled for traction on the broken surface, and Ursula gained a couple of inches. She lost them almost immediately as our car found its grip and leaped forward.

Jonas put his hand to his mouth, and his cheeks were white haloes around each finger. He swallowed, with some effort, his eyebrows pinched, and the top of his nose crumpled up.

“There’s no other way?” I asked, choosing not to remark on what had clearly been stifled nausea. “Not if the driver in one of the drones passed out, say? Or was injured.”

“Technically, yes.” I could smell the bile on his breath and hear the discomfort in his voice. “But it’s not easy.” He paused, gulped. “Each of the individual data streams is kept separate, to make it more difficult to take control of a vehicle – remotely – without authorisation.” He paused again, holding out a hand to indicate he wasn’t finished. His face was pasty white, and as he belched a second cloud of bile escaped on his breath. Ursula must have known what was going on. “It’s possible,” he continued, “but time consuming, so control would need to decide which stream they wanted to take back first, and work from there, acquiring each one in turn. There’s no guarantee they’d be able to—”

Ursula stood on the brake, and I thought for a moment that someone must have stepped on the track. So sharp was her action that the pedal in our own Senhoma hit the floor with an audible crack.

“Sorry,” she said, but there was glee in her voice, and as she threw us back in our seat in a race from eighty to twice that speed, Jonas hurled again. This time, he didn’t catch it.

# Four

I hit the small panel and all five characters disappeared. They were replaced in quick succession by a three, a two, then a one. The word *entriegeln* flashed across the dash, the steering wheel span loose, and the accelerator sprang up as the virtual latching mechanism disengaged. I grabbed the wheel and held it straight and let the car gently roll to a stop.

Jonas swore briefly but impressively – in English – then apologised and wound down a window.

“There’s a problem?” Ursula asked.

“No problem,” Jonas replied.

“The car has disengaged. You were scared, Jonas?”

Jonas started to answer, but I interrupted. On this occasion, I thought, he might appreciate it. “On the contrary, it was me.”

Whether this impressed or surprised her, I’m not sure, but there was no immediate reply. By now, she was far ahead of us, her car rising and falling as it tackled the dunes. Eventually, she said, “then I apologise, Mr Carey. You will let me buy you dinner to make amends?”

“Not at all. I just wanted to get a feel for the car myself.”

“Then lunch. You can give me your thoughts. I can work to your schedule.”

I agreed. It would be an opportunity to speak to her alone. Unless, of course, Jonas insisted on tagging along. I wasn’t sure how likely that was. I was already getting the impression that his role was twofold. On the one hand, I believed him when he said that he was there to help me yet, at the same time, I couldn’t help feeling that his priority was Striadus. Whether that was talking it up or minimising any damage made no difference: everything was rosy, and no inconvenient deaths, even if a pattern was emerging, was going to change that. Ursula, on the other hand, was an unknown quantity, perhaps to him as much as she was to me, and he’d want to be on hand to counter anything she might say.

Yet, there was clearly no love lost between them. The antagonism was evident, even if Jonas was doing his best not to let it show. Might it be enough to dissuade him from joining us?

I couldn’t tackle it there, with Ursula listening, so settled myself in my seat, and focused on getting the Senhoma off the track. It clearly hadn’t been built for the kind of driving Ursula favoured, and, at moderate speeds, it was better than I’d expected. I found a cut through that saved us the chore of navigating the dunes and brought us back onto the figure eight. I slowed to thirty, so Jonas had time to take off his jacket and fold it with the soiled lapels hidden from view. I parked behind

Ursula's car.

The small panel blinked twice, *VLM aktiv* flashed up on the dash, and five fresh digits appeared. C2122. The cars had come within range of each other, and the virtual latching mechanism engaged. Ursula opened my door and looked in.

"What do you think of our car?"

"I'm more of a boat man myself," I admitted. "But, as far as cars go—"

"We are meeting in two hours, yes?" Evidently, she didn't want the opinion of a boat man.

"Noon," Jonas said. The colour was slowly returning to his face. "I'll get Remus checked in."

Ursula sniffed the air in our car, and I'd swear to a ghost of a smile having briefly passed across her lips. She stifled it, and knocked twice on the window, then stood straight and walked away. If I'd had any doubt that her aim had been to humiliate Jonas, that would have been the confirmation I needed.

\* \* \*

"What happened back there?" I asked.

We were back on the shuttle, riding high above the park in our pod – the same pod as had delivered us to the track – and we'd just passed the Felico pavilion. From up there, it looked like an oversized spring coiling up from a bank of the lagoon. It spiralled above us and round the track, then spiralled down, into the ground, carrying with it a shallow ramp. Down and round and down it went, until it emerged in a large glass bubble suspended below the water. It looked like the belch of an oversized fish slowly rising towards the surface. It was difficult to get an idea its size from above, but it must have been as large as a house – in plan if not in height. Four of the marque's current models were ranged within it on stands. They were carefully lit and fully explained by panels and screens and boards, and there was room for crowds to gather around them. There must also have been some way of getting them into and out of the bubble. That suggested a sunken roadway running beneath the lagoon.

"One of our newest exhibits," Jonas said. "It's won two awards for—"

"Jonas, stop. You and Ursula. What's the story?"

"There's no story."

"Your jacket would suggest otherwise." I pointed to it. He'd placed it, still folded, on one of the empty seats. "That was deliberate. She knew what would happen. What's going on?"

"Is this relevant to your visit?"

"I don't know. Tell me what it's about and we'll see."

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. "She isn't here. It wouldn't be

right.”

“Then give me your side of the story. You’re here. No need to speculate on Ursula’s feelings.”

“I have no problem with Ursula.”

For that to be true he must have had the patience of a saint. I told him so, and told him I didn’t believe him. “Your loyalties lie with Striadus. I understand that. But you aren’t helping the company by keeping things hidden. The sooner I’m done here, the sooner I’ll be gone. The payment can be agreed and the wind tunnel can be back in action.”

Yes, I was lying to him, but some of it was true. I might not have been there on behalf of the insurers, so it wasn’t up to me when they paid – or how much. Nonetheless, I was sure Bichard could put the brakes on the wind tunnel’s reconstruction if I told him we weren’t making progress. That would be a problem. The Sehome Mark Two was already running late. Any further delay, whether caused by the tunnel being out of action, or the testing department wasting time helping an investigation, might have investors asking the same kind of questions they had about Zaragoza.

I’m guessing Jonas had come to a similar conclusion, although likely for different reasons. “We’ve known each other for years,” he said at last. “We have never been close, but...”

He paused of his own accord this time. “But things are worse?” I asked.

“Not worse.” He cast around for a better fit. “Different. Since the crash.” He looked at me, and he started to speak more slowly. We all do that when we don’t want to say too much. It’s natural human behaviour. We slow down, hoping to be interrupted, preferably with a short-cut to the conclusion. It lets you off the hook; saves you filling in details that could prove incriminating. “You know she crashed?” he asked.

I nodded. I had no intention of interrupting.

“It’s why she limps,” he said. “Six months ago. She was lucky. She was injured, but her mother... well, they took her to the hospital, but she died before they arrived. She’d been with her in the car. I think she finds it difficult to be here after that.”

“Because working with cars reminds her what happened?”

“No,” he said quickly. “No, I – perhaps I don’t mean difficult. I would throw myself into my work after something like that. You too. The way she has done it has been...”

He disappeared again, to that place he goes when he’s looking for a word to fit the occasion. I could think of several myself. Brusque, abrupt, unforgiving. There were others. I thought about the way she’d been on the track, how she’d shouted at the timekeeper when the last lap hadn’t been fast enough; the way she’d dismissed

the driver; her attitude to the helmets and the safety measures built into the virtual latching mechanism.

“She’s taking it out on the people around her?” I asked. “Is that what you mean?”

“We shouldn’t be talking this way.”

“Then tell me about the crash. It must be public knowledge. You won’t be betraying any secrets.”

“You should ask her.”

“I will. But she’s not here now.”

He looked beyond me, over my shoulder, in our direction of travel. I know he was searching for the hotel and the end of our journey. It wasn’t close enough.

“She claims it was the car.”

“An accident?”

“No. The car swerved. It made a decision.”

“What does the car say?”

“How do you mean?”

“I presume it was a Striadus.”

“Of course.”

“So, it would have come back here. Someone would have retrieved the logs. Looked at what it was doing immediately before the crash.”

It was clear he hadn’t expected me to know about the logs. Most likely, then, he assumed I was ignorant about Jürgen Wolf’s and Uwe Zimmerman’s deaths, too.

“It did,” he said.

“The car swerved of its own accord?”

“It made a calculation. It decided on the best course of action.”

“Even though that course of action ended up killing Ursula Vogel’s mother?”

“We don’t know for sure—”

“How else would you describe what happened?”

“It’s not always the case that a negative outcome is really a negative outcome.”

“Try telling that to Ursula Vogel. Try telling that to her mother.”

“And if killing a child had been the alternative?”

“Was it?”

“Most likely.” He paused, lost in thought. “Although I haven’t seen the picture.”

I thought, by picture, he meant the aftermath of the accident. But he hadn’t.

Every Striadus – or at least the ones with what the firm called automotive intelligence – was fitted with a series of cameras, both in the cabin and out. Many of them were purely functional, like the ones that sensed rain and switched the drive mode or activated the windscreen wipers, but half a dozen were what they called discretionary sensors. There were four inside the car itself, helping to minimise energy use by turning off heaters in unused seats, and shutting off vents that wouldn’t cool the parts of the car where someone was actually sitting. The one in

front of the driver tracked their eyes, how often they licked their lips, the angle of their head – all indicators of drowsiness that it used to determine the intervals at which it would recommend breaks.

And all of them, it was said, although Jonas refused to confirm it, made educated guesses about the passengers themselves. I asked him what kind of guesses – and why – but he wouldn't say any more. The system was proprietary, and as such could not be discussed. I asked him whether it calculated each passenger's likely age. He spoke the word 'no', but his body language said 'yes'.

There were two further cameras, each with fisheye lenses, that monitored the cars' surroundings, and these, he admitted, were used to make calculated decisions, of the kind that would have previously been the purview of the driver. So, yes, if it looked like the car was set to strike a child, it's more likely the automotive intelligence would swerve, than if it was heading for a tree.

"That's what happened? In Ursula's case?"

"So she says."

"You doubt her?"

"No."

"Have you seen the log?"

"No."

"And what's the official line?"

His lips pinched for a moment, the way they would if he was blowing through a straw. That must have been the moment he realised he'd said too much.

He didn't reply.

"It wouldn't take much to find out," I said. "Striadus is the second largest car brand in the world. When its head of testing crashes one of its cars, that's news. There must have been an official line. How many magazines would I find it in?"

He stared at me.

"Officially, it was Ursula Vogel's fault, wasn't it?" I asked.

"I could lose my job."

"Not if I promise to keep this between the two of us." The pod was slowing down. The moment we stepped out of it, the environment would change, and this confidence relied on us being the only two in the pod. "I may not speak German, but I'm fairly sure I know what happened back at the track," I said. "Control, whoever that is, didn't want to unlatch the last three cars. I suspect that's because the request came from Ursula. Am I right? It was only when you intervened that they did what they were told."

He couldn't stall any longer. He'd held out for as long as he could, no doubt hoping that we'd arrive at the hotel before he had to say anything. But it was obvious I knew enough to work it out for myself.

"She's not certified to drive on the track."

“Because the official findings place the blame for the crash on her.”

He nodded. “She needs to be recertified. It’s a test. Easy, but—”

“But taking it would be tantamount to endorsing the official line?”

“You can understand her dilemma.”

“She doesn’t know what you think, does she? That her version of events is likely accurate?”

He pulled a tight smile. The kind of smile that has no humour behind it. “As head of external relations, my line and the official line must be aligned. Officially.”

Poor Jonas. I didn’t know whether to pity him or despise him. He was the company’s head cheerleader for something he didn’t believe in, and in that position, he’d made a powerful enemy. He had a way out – two, in fact: to tell the truth or resign – but was too much of a coward to take either. How many more ruined suits would it take to finally force his hand?

The pod turned through ninety degrees, and though we were still outside the hotel, Lena announced our arrival. I thought she was going to drop us there, but the pod carried on, towards the glass wall that surrounded it like a curtain until, at the last moment, two doors slid wide, and we glided into the lobby.

“I’ll leave you here,” Jonas said. “Sort out my clothes.” He dug about in a trouser pocket and pulled out a keycard. “They’ve given you the penthouse. I hope you don’t think we’re trying to sway your report.”

I had no doubt at all that that was exactly what was going on.

# Five

The lobby was a cavern. Not surprising, I suppose, given that the hotel had been a factory. The first-generation Eta had been produced there when it was known as Hall 16 – a name it still sported – and the cranes that once hauled parts from station to station still hung from the ceiling. The offices that had lined its walls were now the guest bedrooms, and where management had met to discuss production delays and overspends had become the buffet and function rooms.

The shuttle had entered the lobby on the third floor and stopped beside a reception desk on a gantry that would have straddled the line. It had saved workers the journey to the end of the conveyor and round at the start and end of each shift, and provided an eerie for managers, who could stand there and watch as the drones below them bolted components together.

There were no staff today. In their place, three screens, of which I chose the left-most, from which an avatar called Lena (no coincidence, I'm sure) directed me to a lift that she'd pre-programmed to take me to my room.

Or perhaps I should say my rooms. Two bedrooms, a lounge, two bathrooms, and a small lobby that saved the main door from opening into the living space. The larger of the bedrooms gave out onto a terrace, where a table and two chairs were catching the morning sun. There was a desk on the opposite side of the room, with the customary menu for room service, a plan of the park and a map of the shuttle pod network. It was all wasted on me. I could have managed with a bedroom the size of the lobby plus somewhere to shower and shave. Still, they were paying. I wasn't complaining.

I was hungry, though. It was a long time since I'd eaten my crackers after that morning's swim, so I ordered a second breakfast, splashed some water onto my face, and when the coffee and croissant arrived, I took them out to the terrace. The view was... well, not inspiring, I don't suppose, but interesting. The Eta had been Striadus' first global success and had precipitated the move to this site from a smaller factory close to Cologne. Production was moved again, to Zaragoza, when the board was panicking about its facility there, and much of the infrastructure left behind was now serving the other five marques in the group, alongside Striadus itself.

By the time Eta moved out, Striadus had acquired five rivals: Felico (executive vehicles), whose underwater bubble we had passed on the shuttle, plus Urbo (city cars), Bonfarte (a racing brand whose name had induced many a childish snigger in my schooldays), Kruda (an off-road brand currently looking to rebrand), and Pagebla (which was an uncomfortable fit, since it produced, exclusively, mopeds).

Each of these had a pavilion in the park, and four of them had at least one model still produced on site. Thus, the foundry to my left as I sat on the terrace was kept busy around the clock, stamping out panels and parts, even if the power station, to my right, had been decommissioned because of emissions. Now it just sat there, or lay there on its back, perhaps, like a fat, dead pig, with stumpy legs at each corner – its chimneys – clawing at the sky.

As I say, then: interesting, if not inspiring. But not *that* interesting. My mind was wandering before I'd finished the croissant, so I nipped in and grabbed Bichard's file again, and turned to Jürgen Wolf. Aged 62, he'd been killed when he'd crashed on an empty road close to his home in Stuttgart. His death seemed plausible. Indeed, were it not for Zimmerman's own demise, coming so shortly after, it might still have been classed as an accident. He'd been driving home from the factory, it was late, he was probably tired. But he was also an accomplished driver. He'd competed in desert rallies and won the Striadus Endurance Cup by completing a coast-to-coast crossing at South America's widest point. So, he wasn't the kind of man who'd fall asleep on his commute. Much less so when driving fast enough to trigger three cameras and destroy the only concrete lamppost within a mile of his home.

And how strange that it had been *that* lamppost, when all the others had been replaced with lighter aluminium poles, designed to crumple on impact. This one had been 'architecturally significant', not so much in its own right, but because it stood in front of the only house on that street to have made it unscathed through the war. The two – the house and the post – were a pair, and thus, it was deemed, the lamppost should be preserved.

The car, if anything, came off worse. It was a Striadus Potenco, the company's first hybrid vehicle, with an impressive battery range of eighty-seven miles.

*range + compact chassis = dense battery, Bichard had scrawled in a margin. Potenco was cutting edge, still is. floor pan = lithium-ion matrix beneath alu[uminium] sheet. crash ruptured front 4 rows li-ion cells, short circuited => thermal runaway. temperatures above design capacity inc safety margin: ignition 4 seconds post impact*

Wolf was trapped. The impact had been at a curious angle, the worst angle, which had only been possible because the car had spun a one-eighty, as though struck by an oncoming truck. But there was no other vehicle. No car, no van, not even a push bike. Closed circuit television, prevalent in that neighbourhood, showed nothing but empty streets. Police concluded, even before they'd left the scene, that Wolf had spun the car himself – although why, they couldn't say.

He might have survived had the airbag deployed, not to save him breaking his nose on the wheel, but to activate the fail-safe, which would have capped the cells

and reduced the risk of runaway when the crash was detected.

But the airbag didn't deploy.

Wolf had booked his Potenco into the company garage the previous week when the airbag light had sprung to life on his dash. He'd missed the appointment, and not yet made another. His secretary said he'd been called away.

And he might also have survived in a more conventional car. Bichard had included schematics for the Potenco, inside and out. They showed a motor on every wheel, which made it more responsive and obviated the need for an axle, or even an engine under the bonnet. But without an engine there was nothing to stop the snout from being compressed towards the cabin. Both front quarter panels, designed to eject when stressed, popped off at the rear, but clung to the bumper. This shunted them backwards, fouled the doors and prevented Wolf's escape.

He was trapped in his personal crematorium, which burned so fast and so fiercely that the heat blew the windows of that nearby house, the only one that survived the war, and, according to a clipping from an eco-sceptic British rag,

*it had been burning for seventeen minutes before a team from the nearby Striadus plant arrived to assist city firefighters on their dousing operation. Residents, who had been advised to stay inside with windows and doors closed, described an hour-long exercise, in which the burning wreck was loaded into a shipping container, sealed up, and driven off site. They did not see the flames extinguished.*

Striadus had been keen to recover the vehicle itself. It didn't want an external inquiry launched before its own, but it was forced, by both media and authorities, to explain how it had dealt with the blaze, and the mechanics of its container.

Bichard's notes didn't explain it but, I later discovered, it was a simple system, in which super cooled blocks of solid carbon dioxide are fed into channels on the top of the container. The heat of the burning car turns them to gas, without them passing through a liquid stage. Being heavier than air, this sinks into the container, displacing the existing atmosphere and smothering the flames. The car in its crate would have been extinguished before it left the site. But Wolf's body by then would have disappeared. All that was left was a piercing and a deformed hunk of metal. It was later identified as his artificial hip.

\* \* \*

We were meeting at noon, but I wanted to get to the test centre early. Early is when you interrupt things, like tidying, stashing and shredding. So I took the map of the park, and the plan of the shuttle network, and went to reception to find a pod at just gone half past eleven.

“Lena, Hall 1,” I said, as the doors slid closed behind me. “The scenic route, if there is one.”

Apparently, there was not. The network is highly regulated, despite what the plan might suggest, with the pods interleaving to make collisions all but impossible. So, I completed the other half of a loop, around the back of the hotel and in towards Hall 1.

Hall 1 is where they make the Senhoma. As the best-selling car in the group, it naturally gets prime position. Before that, it had been part of the foundry, producing door panels, bonnets and boot lids for the Eta. When Eta production had shifted to Zaragoza, the hall was completely retooled, and although the Senhoma’s a larger car – in every direction – the conveyors and machines that produced it were generations younger. They were more compact, more efficient, the process itself less wasteful, and half of the hall was left empty. So, it was redeveloped. The southern end wall was knocked down, and the test centre attached. Now it’s a hybrid: the park’s oldest structure, with one of its youngest glued on, at the end of which a gaping exhaust advertises the presence of the wind tunnel.

There was one solitary car parked behind the centre. It was a Striadus of some kind, but the badge wasn’t the one that the company uses today, so even though I couldn’t work out its age from the registration plates, I could guess – from that badge and the angular bodywork – that it must have been pushing twenty, at least. I assumed, as you would, that it was somehow involved in the test work that went on at the centre. I didn’t discover the truth until the next day.

“Testzentrum, test centre, centro de pruebas,” said Lena, as she opened the shuttle pod door. She carried on announcing as I crossed the platform, and was still showing off when I stepped through the door to reception.

Jonas was waiting. He’d changed his suit and was on the phone, but he ended the call abruptly as I approached.

“You are early. Your room is satisfactory?”

“Very comfortable. Thank you.”

“So, welcome to the test centre.” He pocketed the phone. “It is the second largest in Europe.”

“Only the second?” It was the first time he’d admitted to anything not being biggest or best.

“Unfortunately, yes.” He paused. “Our centre in Cologne is larger by one fifth, but that would not be relevant, I suppose?”

He looked pleased with himself. It had been a set-up, and I’d walked straight into it.

“I’m just here to see the wind tunnel,” I said. “I thought Striadus had left Cologne?”

“Not at all, not at all.” He dug into a trouser pocket and pulled out a small bunch

of keys. There was a grey plastic disk among them, which he pressed on a plate to the left of a door. The door slid open and we stepped through. “Striadus still owns the site in Cologne. When the business moved to Stuttgart, we converted it to a research park. I can organise an expedition.”

I declined the offer of further indoctrination.

“If you change your mind...” he said.

That seemed highly unlikely.

To call what we had entered a ‘workshop’ would do it an injustice. It was the height and width of an aircraft hanger, but shallower, being limited by a glass wall, twenty feet tall, that separated this end of the building from the production hall beyond.

“Senhoma body shells,” Jonas said, indicating the unfinished cars being hauled around the factory floor. Each was hanging from an individual crane, which raised it and span it and dropped it down as required, so the engineers working the pristine line need merely duck in with a piece of equipment to tighten a bolt, fix a panel or press a component into place.

I followed one of the shells as it glided towards us, and as it paused my eyes carried on, up the arm of the crane to the track from which it hung. Each crane was individual. It could pause and move without reference to its neighbours, and pass them, if required, on a narrow-gauge system of rails and sidings. A spur led off to where Jonas and I were standing, and rose high above the line to pass above the glass wall.

Jonas had followed my gaze. Three times a day they would pick a car at random, he said, bring it over the wall, into the centre, and examine it for defects or shoddy workmanship. He assured me none had ever been detected, so the process seemed somewhat academic, but it did explain the presence of an identical set of production tools in an area so lightly used.

“Shall we go in?” I asked. “Fascinating though this is, I’m mindful of the time, and I’m sure we’ll see this on the tour.”

“About that,” Jonas said. He led me through the workshop to another locked door. Once again, he pressed the disk against a pad to unlock it. “A mistake on my part, I’m afraid. I booked the German language tour. I think you speak no German.”

“The English language tour is full?”

“I will interpret for you.”

“French?”

He shook his head. It was very convenient – for him. I didn’t doubt he could bump any guest off one of the tours if he chose, so this was likely a fallback. He had been quick to object when I’d suggested touring on my own. This felt like a good excuse for him to act as my chaperone.

The doors slid closed behind us, snipping off the end of our conversation. We

were now in the inner sanctum: the part of the test centre not visible to the public, where prototypes and half-formed ideas came to be assessed. Jonas apologised for what he called the 'excessive securing'. Products that wouldn't see roads for a decade were apt to pass through these rooms, he explained – and, of course, "we have a duty of confidence to our third-party customers." He nodded at me. "I am sure Airbus would not want designs for its jets being public."

I assured him Airbus would not.

Ursula's office was off to our right, and was larger than my suite at the hotel. The front wall was clear glass, the rear wall opaque, to block the view from outside the centre while giving her sight of everyone who came into the centre, or left. She didn't have a desk, but a conference table, at which one chair – presumably hers – dominated six others. There were pens in a pot at that position, a laptop with the lid shut, and a push button phone with a cable that snaked across the wood and down through a hole at the centre. There were bookshelves used for models, not books, of cars and car parts and factory buildings, and in one illuminated case, a complete collection of scale reconstructions of the pavilions dotting the park.

Everything else was business casual: meaningless art, some comfy chairs, a sparsely populated magazine rack, a microwave oven pushed into a corner, as though it embarrassed her to have it on display. It was an old hunk of a thing, with a rotary dial a heavy door that hung slightly askance on its hinge. It had clearly seen a lot of use and stood out in this room where everything else was light and bright and airy.

There was an improvised gym in one corner: an exercise ball in the corner, a couple of weights, and a thick resistance band. It was the band that drew my attention: bright yellow, a sharp contrast to the sober tones that otherwise filled the office. And there was a small set of pedals directly in front of the ball. They looked like they'd been cut away from a regular pushbike, complete with cogs and a short chain. This was the key to the diorama. The pedals – I'd seen the kind of thing before – would have been for Ursula to exercise her injured leg, perhaps while balancing a buttock on the ball. The weights, the thick rubber resistance band – all had no doubt been supplied by a firm that was keen to be seen giving support to a member of staff it had otherwise shafted.

Ursula looked up when we entered the centre. She stood and waved us in.

"Remus. Good to see you again. Nice tie, Jonas." She stared at it for a moment. "I believe I've not seen it before."

Jonas ignored the quip, which even I thought beneath her. "I ordered coffee," he said.

"It's been delivered." Ursula nodded left, to a tray with a cafetière and some mugs.

"Remus?" Jonas asked.

“Thank you. Black, no sugar. A glass of water, too, if you have it.”

“Of course. Ursula?”

She shook her head. Jonas poured the coffee and we each took one of the comfy seats. They were set some way from the desk, beneath a bank of blank screens. The screens had been mounted so close together, that had it not been for the seams between them you’d think they were a single display the size of a cinema screen.

We made uncomfortable small talk. They told me about cars. I told them about boats. We each nodded politely at the others’ expertise, but I don’t think they had any more interest in my stories than I had in theirs. Eventually, the reason for our chit chat was revealed, when a soft chime rang out from a speaker hidden behind the screens.

Jonas had been telling me all about marriage, which was not, it seemed, the process of giving rings and uttering vows, but of pairing a chassis and body shell to produce a functioning car.

“It is the most crucial moment in the whole process of building—”

Ursula interrupted him, and for once he looked relieved.

“Lena, camera fifteen.”

The screens came to life, showing not one picture but four. They were colour feeds from high resolution cameras showing different views. Each was numbered, and camera fifteen showed a long-haired man standing too close to the lens. Thirteen and fourteen were views of the empty workshop; sixteen was a canteen, with a queue of tray-holding workers, a handful eating at tables and, beyond them, a view of the car park, and row upon row of executive cars in Striadus’ corporate green.

Evidently, camera fifteen was what we had been waiting for. Ursula asked Lena to open the door, and the long-haired figure passed out of fifteen, through fourteen and thirteen, and into the wide hallway outside Ursula’s office. His nose wasn’t as bulbous as it had looked on camera, nor his hair quite so long. He was Reiner (no surname given), an intern who had been shadowing Gunther the night he’d been sucked through the turbine. His intern status explained the lack of a disk to unlock the door.

“Reiner was the last to see Gunther alive,” Jonas said.

“He was also the first to see him dead,” Ursula said.

Reiner said nothing. He spoke no English, but his French was passable, so our conversation devolved into a series of fractured exchanges. He and I spoke French, with him translating his own words into German and me repeating mine in English. Jonas and Ursula spoke to Reiner in German, then translated what they’d said into English. Reiner replied in German, then turned to me and spoke French. I spoke English to Ursula, as well as to Jonas, then summarised what I’d just said in French,

and thus the merry-go-round continued.

For the sake of keeping things simple, if that were ever possible, I've recorded our conversation in English alone. It's not my mother tongue, as you know, so apologies in advance if what follows lacks a degree nuance.

Reiner was nervous in every language, and I suspect his lucky escape (he'd not been sucked through the turbine, after all) had cast a shadow of survivor guilt across him. He'd been working with Gunther for three weeks, with three more to go, after which he'd be reassigned to design or product development. Right now, he was on compassionate leave, and had only come in to see me.

I thanked him for making the effort and asked him to tell me what had happened, from the beginning. What time had they got to the wind tunnel? What had they been working on? I told him to assume I knew nothing, and likewise to leave nothing out.

Ursula jumped in. Reiner wasn't privy to the business side of things, she said, but, "as you know, we were contracted to Airbus to test the new Four/Forty."

Four/Forty was the aircraft's development name, on account of it having four-engines and being forty metres long.

"No other tunnel in Europe could accommodate a craft of that size," Jonas said, marketing again. "Not even your own tunnel at Toulouse."

Unfortunately for Jonas, I knew for a fact that Airbus performs most wind tunnel tests at Filton, which is in the United Kingdom, not France. If I was true to the mission's persona, I'd have to correct him. Ursula gave him a sideways glance as I did, and Reiner looked from one to the other, not quite understanding what had happened. I didn't translate that exchange.

"But you're right," I said. "I'm aware there are plans to build something like this, eventually. At the moment everything has to be done at scale."

Whether there were plans or not, I really didn't know, but it wouldn't hurt to plump his pillow a bit.

"We'd booked the tunnel for...?"

"Seven days," Ursula said. Five days' testing, plus one day set up and one break down. "The plane was flown in the night before and moved under cover of darkness."

"How do you get it into the tunnel?" I asked.

"You'll see when we go in. We can open the first corner. It's just wide enough to accommodate the full wingspan."

"You were there for that?" I asked Reiner.

He shook his head. "Gunther and I were not involved with the set-up. We were working on the tests."

"Which were?"

"Simulated performance. Measuring drag and lift in different meteorological conditions."

“Weather simulations?”

“How much did you know about the contract, Remus?” That was Ursula.

Jonas spoke before I could answer. Either he hadn’t noticed my ignorance, or he’d spotted too good an opportunity to pass up. “We can simulate any weather you choose. Rain, snow, hail, storms.”

“Sunshine, calm skies?” I asked.

“Anything. At any altitude.”

“And on this occasion?”

Jonas asked Reiner what the test had been.

“It was simulated flight at thirty-seven thousand feet,” Reiner replied – to me, in French, rather than to Jonas. “It was above the weather.”

“But cold.”

“Minus sixty.”

“Centigrade?”

He nodded.

“And the pressure at that height? I presume you can specify?”

Reiner passed my question to Jonas.

“Of course,” Jonas said. “Of course. We can simulate pressure. Any pressure.”

“Pressure at altitude is abstract,” Ursula said. “It depends on temperature, pressure at sea level... many things. We vary the absolute pressure at several intervals during testing.”

“Give me a ballpark.”

She came out with a figure for pounds per square inch, which I remember because it was pi: 3.14. She was right when she said it was abstract, though: psi equal to pi told me nothing.

“Can you give that some context?”

“In here, right now, you’d be looking at fourteen. Maybe fourteen point five psi.”

“So the test chamber was cold and had been depressurised. And the control room?”

“The chamber is isolated,” Ursula said. “That’s the point.”

“There was no change,” said Reiner. “We were wearing our shirt sleeves.”

“So talk me through the test. What were you doing the night Gunther died? It was... eleven? Am I right? That’s late, isn’t it?”

“That’s on your account,” Ursula said, which was interesting, because I’d been addressing Reiner on that occasion, in French. How much of our conversation had Ursula understood, I wondered, and why the charade when she, Reiner and I could all have spoken French for a more natural conversation. Did Jonas speak French, too?

“The aircraft was delivered on time, but your engineer did not arrive,” she continued. “It made us late from the start.”

“Ah.” I pretended to remember.

Ursula had addressed me in English, and I don’t think Reiner had understood, so at least he was telling the truth. “We were talking to the engineers in England,” he said. So that would have been the test centre at Filton. “They were configuring the plane. We were configuring the chamber. It was... difficult,” he said, diplomatically. I told him I understood why, and he looked relieved not to have had to apportion the blame himself.

“What were they doing?” I asked.

Reiner threw the question to Ursula. “The first night’s tests were cabin pressure simulations. You know how an aircraft works?”

“Pretend I don’t.”

She looked at me for a moment, perhaps trying to work out whether that really meant I didn’t. “It might help if we looked at the video,” she said. “It would be easier to explain.”

I would have agreed, of course – if I’d had the chance. But she turned away from me, looked up slightly, as Jonas had done in the pod, and said, “Lena. Replay camera twenty-two, index point Monday, twenty-three fourteen hours. My screen.”

Lena’s response was one of the muted beeps that were becoming so familiar. A moment later, the displays came to life, this time all working together to show one large picture spread across them.

The foreground was hard to make out. It was a darkened control room, seemingly with few physical controls. There were keyboards and trackpads, mice and touch sensitive displays, but none of the switches, buttons and levers I’d expected. The room was in semi darkness, with almost all of the lighting coming through the window from the test chamber. The pane was twelve feet wide, at a guess, and four feet tall: about the same as Ursula’s table if it was stood on edge. I could clearly make out the fuselage of the Four/Forty beyond it, and the thick supports on the undersides of the wings and body section, which kept it firmly in place.

There were two silhouettes: Reiner and Gunther, with Reiner on the left. He was taking notes while Gunther manned the controls. At one point, he leaned across and —

“Lena, skip ahead six minutes,” Ursula said, interrupting even our silent viewing of the footage.

The screen froze for a moment and, when the picture started moving again, Reiner had disappeared.

“Lena, pause,” I said. Gunther had been reaching for the phone. His hand was caught in mid-air.

“Where are you?” I asked Reiner.

“I had left.”

“Gone home?”

“No, I...” He cast a look at Jonas and said something.

Jonas said something in return, then turned to me and explained that Reiner had gone to the canteen for some drinks.

Ursula stood up. She pointed to the aircraft on the screen. “You see this?” She tapped what looked like a small inlet, just below the nearest wing. It was the height and width of a cigarette lighter, but I couldn’t have said how deep it was from that picture. “Most aircraft take air through the engine and feed it into the cabin. This way they maintain the pressure and heat and everyone is comfortable. It isn’t a problem for passengers if they only fly a couple of times every year. But a business jet is different. The same passenger every month or every week or every day. The air is cleaned, but it is not clean, so they breathe some fumes from the engine. Yes?”

I assured her I was following.

“It is different here. The air comes through this...” she asked Jonas for the best description, and they settled on “...vent, to a pipe that passes around the engine two times. This way, the air is heated, but never runs through the engine itself. So the air is clean.”

“So it’s better for the passenger?”

“And better for the crew and better for the environment. It doesn’t take power from the engine, so it doesn’t take fuel from the tank. It is cheaper and less is burned.”

“All very admirable,” I said, “but how do you test that in a wind tunnel? You can’t run the engines.”

“You can’t. Not directly. This was a test of the fuselage. You understand how thick is its skin?” I would have replied, but she saved me the embarrassment. “Two millimetres. Thin. A lot of pressure on a very thin surface. Too much pressure and...” She clasped her hands together – one of them a fist, the other wrapped around it – then quickly pulled them apart, her fingers spreading wide. “Pop,” she said, quietly. She mouthed it more than she spoke it.

I’d have preferred a less detailed briefing, given that I’d be flying back before the end of the week.

“But that doesn’t happen,” I said.

“It is rare.”

That was hardly reassuring. I’d have preferred a simple ‘no’.

“There is a valve you cannot see,” Ursula said. “It is here or so.” She pointed, on the screens, to the back wall of the control room, some way beyond the limits of the window. “It will open when the pressure is high to keep it at eight thousand feet.”

That didn’t make much sense to me, so I asked her to explain. It turns out that the pressure inside a commercial airline simulates – give or take – the pressure you’d experience at the top of an eight-thousand-foot mountain. It’s not the same as sea level, or the pressure in that office in Stuttgart, but it’s sufficient to support

life, unlike the pressure outside the cabin – or the pressure as it had been in the test chamber as shown on the screen.

Jonas had been translating for Reiner, who pointed out that, while what Ursula said was true, the conditions within the tunnel had been more extreme on the night in question.

“Explain,” I said.

“He is reaching for the phone,” Reiner said, pointing to the frozen picture. When testing was being conducted remotely, he said, it was usually done with a video link, allowing the engineers at each end to remain in constant contact. It had been out of action on the night in question (somewhat conveniently), forcing Filton and Stuttgart to rely on a series of calls.

Filton had been keen to test a series of emergency scenarios. This required rapid depressurisation of the test chamber – and, with it, the whole wind tunnel – to simulate a rapid climb. This was to be followed by an equally rapid increase in pressure to simulate an emergency dive, such as would be initiated, automatically, in the event of a cabin leak.

They had done this twice already, and the call that Gunther was poised to pick up would initiate the third and final cycle.

It would also lead to his death.

*Officially.*

“And you had gone out for coffee?” I asked.

Reiner nodded, and again he cast an eye at Jonas, as he had the last time the subject of the canteen had come up. “I had supported the door as I have no pass,” he said. “I’m only an... *interne*?”

“Intern,” I said. “It’s the same in English. You propped the door open?”

“Propped, yes. To save Gunther the need to open it during the test. If only I’d...” This time he looked at both of them – Ursula and Jonas – and the sentence petered out.

“If only you’d...?” I asked, but he shook his head. “If you want to speak alone,” I said, mindful that Ursula almost certainly understood what I was saying. “I’m staying at the hotel here. Unless you need to be somewhere tonight, perhaps I could buy you dinner?”

I don’t think Reiner had noticed that Ursula picked up on something he’d said earlier, so could well have understood what we were saying then. But I think he felt quite safe speaking French, when she and Jonas had only used English and German, and he nodded in response.

“Ask at Reception,” I said. “Around eight?”

Another nod.

“How long had you been out of the room at this point?” I pointed to the screen.

Reiner wobbled his head. “Ten minutes?”

“That’s a long time for a coffee run.”

“There was a queue.”

“At eleven o’clock?”

“Midnight, almost. The line runs through the night. There was a shift change coming up.”

“You didn’t check the camera?”

“I…”

“Can you show him the camera,” I asked Ursula. “Of the canteen.”

“Perhaps we could focus on this.” She nodded at the picture of Gunther reaching for his phone.

“Of course. Sorry. Reiner was explaining about the call. The simulation.”

“Was he?” Ursula asked, playing dumb. “We’d run two simulations. This was the third.”

“Simulating a climb or a dive.”

“It would have been a dive.”

“So the pressure inside the chamber was low.”

“As low as it goes,” Ursula said.

Jonas started to speak, perhaps having spotted an opportunity to point out that no other wind tunnel could simulate such low pressure, or such high altitude, or was clad in such fine timber.

“The differential between the chamber and the control room was at its most extreme,” Ursula said, cutting through him. “And the temperature difference, too, was elevated. The heating log shows an ambient temperature of twenty-two degrees in the control room. Minus seventy-one degrees in the chamber. A difference of ninety-three degrees.”

“And this was the cause of the accident?”

“Our preliminary investigation suggests that it was, yes.”

“Is there a report?”

“I’ll get you a copy,” Jonas said. “In the meantime, I’m sure Ursula—”

“We believe that the rapid changes in both pressure and temperature stressed this glass.” She touched the display to indicate the window between the control room and test chamber. “We are liaising with the contractor to ensure that the requisite tolerances had been considered in its construction. However, it would appear that two smaller panes, arranged either vertically or horizontally, would have been better able to withstand the degree of flex to which this single sheet was subjected as a result of the pressure differential, and the relative temperatures on either side of the pane.”

“I am guessing that the cold air on the inner surface caused that side to contract relative to the side in the control booth?”

“That’s right.”

“And, at the same time, the rapid depressurisation caused it to flex towards the chamber.”

Ursula nodded. “Lena, continue playback, one quarter speed.”

Gunther’s hand started moving again. He picked up the handset, brought it to his mouth, spoke into it painfully slowly. He nodded once, twice, three times, then touched the screen ahead of him. As he lifted his fingers away from the surface, he seemed to shift to the left, and to twist. It was slight. Very slight. And it was quickly brought to an end, by a spot that appeared on the window, half-way up, biased to the right.

Even at quarter speed, it grew more quickly than the camera could capture with any degree of detail. It grew legs, which streaked out in every direction, then they spread, as though webbed, turning the window white in an instant. That must have been the point at which it crystallised, for in the next second, it was gone. The air in the control room was sucked into the relative vacuum of the test chamber, and it took the crystals with it. A second later, the whole picture was white, as every piece of paper took off, every poster was torn from the walls, ceiling tiles came down, and they followed the glass through the cavity that had once been a window.

As they parted, we saw Gunther again, being sucked in the same direction.

The aircraft had been set up with its nose to the left, and it was from that direction that the wind was arriving. Gunther shot off to the right, not touching the plane on his first pass. He disappeared from view, around a corner apparently, and reappeared from the left, but not in human form. He’d passed through the turbine at Mach 0.53 – that’s 412 miles an hour on land – and its six wooden-clad blades had torn him to pieces. Frayed limbs; a part of his torso; a foot; his head. These were only the parts we could identify. All about them was blood and gristle and bone. They splattered the fuselage, shattered the cockpit window, dented the wings, and then they looped the tunnel a second time. A third. Eventually, there was no way to mark the start and end of each pass. The test chamber – indeed, the whole tunnel – was consumed by a thick red mist.

# Six

“Lena, pause.”

The video froze at Ursula’s command. There was plenty to see, but very little to make out. Gunther had been atomised, and spread about the test chamber, the control room, and the walls of the wind tunnel.

I cast a glance at the other three faces in the room. Ursula was impassive. Jonas looked – I don’t know. Embarrassed, perhaps? Certainly not as revolted as I’d expected. It was almost as though it was any other event, like a slip up in a speech or a production defect, for which the standard course of action was damage limitation, and talking about it as little as possible. Reiner was the only one who’d reacted as you’d expect. His face was white, his forehead clammy, and he was picking the skin from the side of his thumb.

“Can we see it again?” I asked. “Reiner, you go if you—”

“No, I’ll stay,” he said. There was no hesitation.

“All of it?” Ursula asked.

“Just until the point where the window breaks. The last few seconds.”

“Lena, skip back ninety seconds.”

Had it really only been ninety seconds?

There was no streaming backwards, no rewinding. Gunther was reconstituted. From wet mist to human in an instant.

“Play,” Ursula said, and Gunther reached for his phone again, for a call that would never end. He picked it up, listened for a few seconds, nodded three times, then that movement repeated. I don’t think it’s something you’d notice at regular speed – but I knew to look out for it, having seen it played through slowly. It was a very slight turn, almost simultaneous with everything else that happened, for it occurred so quickly now – all of it – that there was no possibility of saying what came first.

Movement – dot – blizzard. Bam – bam – bam. Gunther was gone.

“Lena, pause,” I said. She paused the film. “Lena, skip back three seconds.”

Gunther was back in the room. The dot on the window, the semi turn. I stood up and walked close and stared at the glass, but aside from that dot, there was nothing to see. And in less than a second, even the dot would be gone, as this mammoth pane, which was perhaps the only piece of evidence in the whole video, was blown to a million pieces by the rush of air escaping from the room.

“We can supply you with a copy,” Jonas said.

“Thank you,” I said. “And a computer, if that’s possible. To view it.”

“I’ll have one sent to your room.”

I thanked him again, then asked if we could see the tunnel.

“Of course,” Jonas said. “I am sure you will find it most interesting.”

“It’s a no spill zone,” Ursula said.

“Aah, yes,” Jonas said, and he pointed to our mugs on the table. “These will have to stay here.”

They were empty, so it was barely a point worth making. Indeed, it might have been better if it hadn’t been made at all. Not that I realised that then.

The control room was adjacent to Ursula’s office, but it seemed unlikely, even if she’d been there at the time, that she’d have heard what had happened the night Gunther died. The room was a room in a room. Effectively, it was a floating box, suspended at each corner by a thick steel cable. I’d seen similar rooms at Europol, where a floating, windowless box, padded on every surface by sound-deadening foam, is suspended in a similar manner within a far larger space. The idea, I’m told, is that the foam reduces any vibrations that otherwise would reach the wall when someone spoke. It would be difficult, but not impossible to detect any noise that made it through, but would still require a lot of sensitive hardware. It wouldn’t be easy to get that kind of kit into the building but, should the vibrations transfer to the fabric of the building itself, there’s a slim chance – likely only theoretical – that they could be read using lasers directed at brittle surfaces, like windows or doors. So, the box is suspended. The cables have equal tension, so are always fighting against each other; always on the brink of tearing the box apart. That further reduces the likelihood of any vibration passing beyond the box itself, since they’d have to be strong enough to fight against the tension in the cables.

It isn’t cheap setting up a system like that, so I was surprised to see something like it here, in private enterprise. Yes, confidential conversations would take place in this room, but they’d take place in Ursula’s office, too, and the boardroom, and even on the factory floor, and none of them was treated the same way.

“Soundproofing,” she said, and she didn’t elaborate until I asked why. “So we can listen to the car. Or the plane or the boat or the bus if we are renting it out. We want to hear if the air whistles over a spoiler or past a mirror or through a grille. And we want to hear the wheels on the rolling road. Not the sound of the engineers talking, or typing, or clicking the mouse.”

It made sense, and perhaps explained the catastrophic failure that had led to Gunther’s death. The control room’s furthest wall, where the window had been, had slipped an inch or two, and now the frame attached to the room itself no longer aligned with the frame that was part of the chamber. I looked back at the door, where another lip marked the point where the hallway ended and the control room began. It was a complicated construction, but as I examined it, I could think of no better way to marry the two rooms. The door was part of the floating box that housed the control room. The frame was part of the building. They were aligned

such that when the door closed, it pressed against the frame, effectively sealing off the room from the rest of Hall 1.

I straddled the doorway to get a better view of the frame side-on, and held on to the grab handles set either side of the wall. One was inside the room, screwed into the box; the other outside, screwed into the wall.

“Something interests you?” Jonas said. He leaned against the door, which had been propped open, inside the room, as it had been on the night we were there to discuss.

“These handles,” I said. “No other door seems to have them.”

“But no other room has a step.” He pointed at the lip. “*Technischer Arbeitsschutz*,” he said, and, after hunting for an appropriate translation, he came up with “technical occupational protection.”

“Health and safety,” I said.

“That is a good word.”

Good word or not, it was overkill. The relative movement of the two surfaces must have been close to nil, and the chance of tripping when stepping from the anchored hallway to the floating box must have been roughly the same. On a boat, which can tip over the crest of a wave in the time it takes you to lift your foot and put it back down, a handle like that might be reasonable, as the floor you’re aiming for can shift by several feet in an instant. But even so, I had nothing like it on the Huffin’ Puffin.

“It didn’t do much for Gunther’s safety.”

“But the door did not kill him.”

“Then perhaps you could show me what did.”

He stood straight, and held the door until I had stepped back into the room. “Through here,” he said, leading me past the control desk, to a second door that opened into the wind tunnel. The effect was momentarily disconcerting.

The control room had been compact, quite dark, and very well insulated. The tunnel was garishly lit, had hard walls, and was cathedral-like in its proportions. Stepping into the test chamber was like stepping into an egg, thirty metres wide and thirty metres tall. It narrowed at either end, into tunnels that curved back on themselves, and eventually out of sight.

I leaned back for a better look.

“It’s a closed loop,” Ursula said, although that had been obvious from the fact that Gunther’s remains had travelled around and around, becoming ever more granular each time they passed through the turbine. “We can walk it, if you like.”

I told her I would, and she led me up the slope at the back of the egg, since the other end was barred by a grille. Jonas followed behind, pointing out non-technical aspects, like the grain of the wood that clad the surfaces, and the high level of sanding and polish. “Am I right in saying it helps reduce turbulence, Ursula?”

She ignored him. We'd reached the first corner, where a series of vertical louvres followed the turn. "They help steer the air," Ursula said, tapping one gently. I'm not sure why she did: it would obviously have to be replaced when the wind tunnel was rebuilt. Like every other surface, it had been chipped and dented by the debris of the shattered fuselage. And it had been stained red by Gunther's blood.

Ursula later explained what had happened. The window, as we already knew, had been sucked into the tunnel when the relatively high pressure in the control room, and the low pressure in the tunnel had equalised – with devastating effects. One of those effects had been to puncture the skin of the aircraft. This would have been bad news, whatever had been on test, but the developmental pressure system had only made things worse. Using vents on the plane, Ursula said, testing out the word again now that it was part of her vocabulary, rather than bringing in air through the engine, meant a higher level of pressure could be maintained within the cabin. "Much more comfortable for the passengers," she said. "It's like being closer to the ground. It is much more familiar. Much like we live in."

The result was a catastrophic decompression of the aircraft itself. It ripped from cockpit to tail, and spewed out not only the few loose items in the cabin, but anything not secured to a bulkhead. Within eight seconds of Gunther passing into the low-pressure tunnel, and seven of him passing through the turbine, his atomised remains were orbiting the tunnel alongside (an estimated) two and a half thousand components, which had been painstakingly assembled – many of them by hand – over the course of almost ten years.

The heaviest among them quickly fell to the floor, and accumulated in the lower curve of the egg, but the lighter items had travelled around and around, many of them only stopping when they'd lodged in the wooden panels that lined the walls, the blades of the turbine itself, or, as here, in the fins that steered the airflow around the corner.

There were four such corners, and on each of them the fins ('vaness', Ursula called them) were in the same state. Sometimes it was possible to see what had caused the damage, but at others the object, whatever it was, was simply too deep.

We stepped through the first set of vanes and the tunnel got wider.

"We are walking with the wind," Ursula said. "It would be on our backs. We pull it through the tunnel, rather than blowing. It keeps the air smooth."

We rounded another corner, stepped through another set of steering vanes, and in front of us was the turbine itself. One of the six enormous blades had sheered off, but the other five spread out from the spindle like the fingers of an enormous hand. A hand that had waved Gunther goodbye.

"Step through," Ursula said. "It is safe." She touched a blade, as she had done with the first set of vanes, and ran her fingers slowly down it. It was a touch of affection. The kind of touch normally reserved for pets or lovers (or, I supposed,

given where we were, the kind of touch that an owner might give their new car when they picked it up). I preferred not to touch it myself. There was something alluring about the shape; something undoubtedly tactile. But these, like the vanes and the walls and the floor and the ceiling were spattered red. And where the wood had chipped and frayed, that red had seeped into the grain. Here, more than anywhere else, the colour was most vivid, as the next turn into the tunnel was missing. The vanes were still in place, but the wall itself – the outer wall – had been opened up, and through it I got a clear view of the test track where we'd met that morning.

“This is how you bring in cars for testing?” I asked.

“Cars, planes, whatever.”

“But the grille,” I said, picturing the slatted baffle that had prevented us from turning left as we began our tour. “Would it not be in the way?”

“We call it a...” Again, the technical term was the cause of some discussion. Jonas later provided me with a diagram of the wind tunnel, in which the grille was labelled ‘*Strömungsgleichrichter*’. I would never have guessed the translation myself, but they came up with ‘flow straightener’. After the air had been steered around the corners, Ursula explained, it needed to be precisely angled as it re-entered the test chamber to reach the subject nose on. Jonas reeled off some useless stats about the turbine and we rounded one last corner (vanes again). Ursula pulled some keys from her pocket and unlocked a section of the straightener, so she could lead us back into the chamber.

I stood at the centre, right where the plane had been, roughly where the wings had met the body. The aperture that had once been the control room window was directly ahead. Beyond that was the desk and, to the side, the door that I had straddled for a better look at the frame. I took a couple of steps that way, so the door and one edge of the frame were in front of me. I was in line with that tiny white dot: the one that had appeared an instant before the window failed.

I squatted very slightly, so my eye-line was where I judged the dot to have been, then turned and looked behind me at the scarred, pitted slats that followed the contour of the ovoid wall. They would all have to be replaced, eventually, if the airflow was not to be turbulent. But right now – right at that moment – everything was still in place: the slats, the scars, and the debris that had caused them.

I leaned as far as I could over the curve at the bottom of the chamber, where the floor became wall, to soon enough become ceiling in one graceful motion. Then I took a step up and found a tenuous grip, with the tread of my shoe hooked over the edge of a longer, deeper gash. It gave me just enough height to run my palm across the wall, and in doing so feel each of the pits. They had all been driven in at slightly different angles, between ten and forty-five degrees, as determined by the trajectory of the artefact that had caused them, by its weight, and by how it had caught the air.

And on the second pass I found what I had been looking for. One of those holes was different. It was not at a sharp angle, but ninety degrees to the grain. Whatever had made it had hit the wood face on and buried itself so deep that it had only been stopped by the concrete behind it.

I needed to pull it out, but my fingers were fishermen's fingers, too fat and clumsy, too swollen by sea and sun and wind to fit in the hole, let alone to reach deep enough to excavate whatever had made it. I patted my pockets, but aside from a cheap plastic pen they were empty. I had no need of keys here, where doors were opened by cards and tags, or commands doled out to Lena. So I looked about me for some kind of tool – anything that would let me pick at the grain.

And I spotted a splint, metal, a couple of feet to my left. What it once was, I don't know, but I could see that it had been torn from the plane, twisted in the process, then half buried in the wall. I gripped it, tugged it, pulled it out, and used one end to probe the hold. I could feel something inside it. Something small, hard. It sounded like metal. I managed to hook the splint behind it, and angled it out with a flick of my wrist. It ran down the slats, down the curve, down to the bottom of the egg-shaped chamber, and rolled back and forth for a moment in search of equilibrium. I stepped back and scooped it up.

I had found myself a rivet.

I had found the murder weapon.

# Seven

There was no point hiding it. Jonas and Ursula had seen me dislodge the rivet and wanted to know what I'd found.

"I needed a random sample. I'll send it back to Toulouse," I held it in my open palm. "They should be able to match it up with a fixing on the Four/Forty and we'll be able to calculate a more accurate trajectory. See how much of the damage was caused by structural failure, how much by external factors."

They seemed satisfied with that, so I slipped it into my pocket. I had no intention of sending it to Airbus, and was sure – if I did – that it wouldn't match anything in the Four/Forty parts list.

"If there's nothing else you need to see," Ursula said. Most people would have ticked up the end of those words to form a question. She didn't. It was a statement of fact: time to leave.

"I think I've seen all I need," I said, and I turned to Reiner and switched to French. "Eight o'clock?"

He had said nothing since we'd left Ursula's office, and now he said nothing again. He nodded.

"Is it...?" Jonas began. *Is it something I need to know about?*, presumably.

"I've invited Reiner for dinner. We're meeting at eight." There was no point lying. I had no doubt that the over-generous hospitality was Jonas's way of keeping me on site, since I was easier to observe on home turf. There was no way I could keep my meeting with Reiner a secret, and lying about it would only raise suspicions.

"He is not authorised—"

"To accept a dinner invitation?"

"He is an intern."

"Then authorise him."

"He can't speak on behalf of the company."

"Then let him speak on behalf of himself."

"It's not allowed."

"What's not allowed? Free speech? Or free speech on company grounds? I can easily meet him off-site."

"*Vraiment, si c'est un problème...*" Reiner said.

"It's not a problem at all," I said. "Is it, Jonas?"

"It..." Jonas wasn't sure how to answer. He looked at Ursula. Ursula shrugged.

"Good," I said. "Eight o'clock." And I turned to Jonas: "That should give you just about time to add a French-speaking spy to the wait staff."

For the first time since my arrival, I think I saw Ursula smile.

I nodded at them both and turned to leave. Reiner did likewise, but Jonas called him back.

*“Warten Sie eine Minute.”*

Another bit of German that was close enough to English to understand: “wait you a minute”. No doubt Jonas wanted to know what Reiner planned to tell me.

\* \* \*

The laptop I’d requested was in my room when I got there, and so was a DVD of the gruesome footage. I spent an hour reeling through it, trying to see if I’d missed something when we’d watched it in Ursula’s office. I’m not the best with technology, as you know, so it took me some time to work out how to play it back slowly. Even then, the crucial moment was over too quickly to see in any great detail.

Reach for the phone, dot on the glass, broken window, gone. Gunther with it. I supposed the effect, and the physics behind it, was much the same as that of being sucked from an aircraft at cruising height.

There was nothing new to see but, by the end of the hour, I had written three questions on a bedside pad. I wasn’t going to type them on the off-chance Jonas could see what I was doing with the computer.

*Why no fail-safe to stop the turbine when something makes contact with the blades?*

*If Gunther turning at point window shattered, what distracted him? A person?*

*Door to the control room opens inwards, so wouldn’t have been slammed shut by change in pressure, but kept open. If someone else was there, what prevented them from also being sucked in?*

If the answer to question two was ‘yes’, then it must have been someone he’d heard or seen reflected in the window. That reflection, if it existed, wasn’t visible on the video. Reiner was the most obvious candidate, but what motive might he have for wanting Gunther dead? And if it was him, why wasn’t he killed, too?

I pondered these questions long after I’d given up on the video. I was convinced, now, that it would tell me no more than I already knew. So, I’d have to fall back on traditional methods: questions, deduction, body language.

With that in mind, I showered and changed. Then sat on the balcony drinking gin, and eventually made my way to the restaurant, where Jonas’ spy was easy to spot. When he wasn’t fussing about my table, he spent his time by the kitchen door, trying not to look like he was watching what I was up to. None of the other staff spoke to him, perhaps because no-one knew him, and he ignored the other diners’ attempts to call him to their table. If he’d done that, of course, he might have

missed me doing something interesting.

It was such a silly game. I knew he was watching me, and he knew that I knew and was watching him back. It would have made more sense for Jonas to have booked me a private room with a bug beneath the cloth. It would also have been much less effort.

And it might have been a more comfortable for Reiner, not to be meeting in public. We have no way of knowing that, though, since he didn't show for dinner.

# Eight

Jonas had promised to pick me up the next morning and, good as his word, he was out on the pavement at ten-thirty sharp. He'd borrowed a Senhoma Mark Two from the track.

"Second phase testing," he explained. "We're putting more of them on public roads to see how they cope with traffic."

"No doodah," I said, tapping a gap on the dashboard where the second screen had been: the one with the code for the virtual latching mechanism.

"It's proprietary technology. The system's still in there, but we prefer not to show the public what happens behind the curtain."

"I see," I said. "So today is..."

"The tour."

"In German?"

"Yes."

"Still no spaces on the—"

"No."

The French language tour, I was going to say. Or the English. It didn't matter which, but Jonas's denial was fast and firm. Too fast and firm.

"Good evening last night?" I asked. There was no point pushing the point, so small talk it was.

"Yes," he said, pulling away without checking over his shoulder. It wasn't such a dangerous move: the public can't bring their own cars into the park, and most internal journeys are made on the shuttle network, so there's very little traffic. "I cooked for my daughters."

"You don't share the cooking?"

"Who with? I live alone."

"I see," I said. "You're... separated?"

"Divorced."

"And your daughters live with your wife? Your ex-wife."

He nodded. "But I see them Tuesdays and twice on weekends every month."

"That sounds..." I wasn't sure what it sounded like. I couldn't imagine what would happen if Odette and I split and had to work out custody and access arrangements for Olly. In fact, I couldn't even imagine what would ever drive us apart, so I tried "...amicable."

"Expensive." That either meant his daughters had too healthy an appetite, or his ex was bleeding him dry. I suspected the latter. "And your evening?" he asked, changing the subject. "How was your dinner with Reiner?"

“I’m sure you’ll hear soon enough. Your man was easy to spot.”

“Reiner?”

“Your man in the dining room. He wasn’t exactly subtle. Reiner, on the other hand; Reiner didn’t show up.”

Jonas slackened the pressure on the accelerator, and the simulated engine noise calmed slightly in response. “I’m sorry,” he said. “That’s... bad mannered.”

“Indeed. But I’m sure it’s a positive, as far as Striadus is concerned.”

“You’re not suggesting I...”

“Warned him off? The thought had crossed my mind.”

“I assure you, Remus, I would never—”

“You called him back yesterday. When we were leaving the test centre. Did you tell him not to talk to me?”

“No.”

“Remind him that his position was only temporary? That an intern doesn’t enjoy the same protections as an employee?”

“My job, this week, is to help you. We spoke so I could coach him. Help him to think through what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it.”

“What did he want to say?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you did speak.”

“We did speak. But not about that. He said that what he wanted to say would be between you and him.”

“After that? Where did he go?”

Jonas shrugged. “I don’t know. Officially, he’s signed off. He was free to leave. Or he could spend time in the park.”

“He wouldn’t go back to his desk?”

“He couldn’t. Not until he is...” He lapsed into German when the English words refused to come. He tried to keep it slow and simple, but I didn’t get much more than a gist. I think – and it’s something I should have checked – that it all came down to what the firm’s psychiatrist thought. When he deemed him fit to return, so be it, but until then, no. I wondered whether that would be the same psychiatrist who had been persuaded to fabricate notes suggesting the Uwe Zimmerman took his own life.

Jonas had become distracted over the last couple of minutes, and his concentration was almost entirely on our conversation. I’m guessing that’s why he didn’t see the other car coming from the left. But our Senhoma did. It applied the brakes – hard, sharp – and span the wheel in his hand. It was a rough, unrefined twist. The glass spokes of the steering wheel cracked his fingers and thumbs away, clearly with some force, as his immediate reaction was to grip them against his chest.

*“Warnung. Automatisches Kollisionssystem aktiviert. Warnung. Automatisches Kollisionssystem aktiviert,”* said a voice from some unseen speaker. It was calm and measured, in contrast to the collision avoidance system itself, which clearly needed refinement.

The car we had so narrowly missed was immediately familiar. It was the classic Striadus I’d seen behind the test centre: the one I’d assumed, the day before, was somehow involved in the work that went on there – perhaps as a control against which modern cars were compared. It was the car with the old logo; the car that was more angular – and heavier looking – than the company’s current line-up. The car that had been on the road for a long time, but was well looked-after, with clean lines, unblemished paint, and not a spot of dirt. How quickly that could have changed if we hadn’t been riding a modern Senhoma – for the older car had no collision avoidance system, no self-driving circuitry, no artificial intelligence. All it had was Ursula, at the wheel, one hand on the horn, the other gesticulating through the driver’s side window. She had balled her fist and held it up, with her thumb poking out between her middle and index fingers. If I hadn’t already worked out that it was something highly insulting – otherwise lost on me – that was confirmed when she transformed into a more traditional middle finger, which was quickly retracted once she spotted me in the passenger seat.

I waved politely. She nodded and drove on.

“Sorry,” Jonas said, although whether for Ursula’s insult, the Senhoma’s reaction, or his driving, I don’t know.

“Happens to the best of us,” I said. “It’s, uh... it’s a fierce little system.”

“It could save your life.”

“It could break your neck.”

“It’s being refined.” Jonas pulled away again, more carefully this time.

“I thought this was the second generation?” I said.

“It depends how you count.”

“I tend to start at one.”

“I mean, it is not the first car to have...” He twirled his hand, suggesting there might be some unknowable, unseen entity in the ether. “But the code this time is new. Rewritten from the zero line.”

“Wouldn’t it be cheaper to improve what you already had?”

“If it was the same car,” he said, and he listed the features that made the Mark Two a completely new vehicle, almost entirely incompatible with its predecessor. Faster processors, allowing for quicker decisions; more effective brakes for shorter stopping distances; more responsive servos behind the wheel; a tighter turning circle; sensors beneath the car to calculate mass and weight distribution... none of these, nor a dozen others, had featured in the first Senhoma, so none could have been used by the previous self-driving system. “It was easier to start again from

nothing.”

“And cheaper?”

He ignored that. “And this,” he said, pointing to a small, reflective dot, set into the lining of the roof. “And that.” He pointed to another on my side of the car. “And three in the back.”

“Cameras?” I asked, squinting at the dot above me. I hadn’t spotted it until then.

“There are two others. One in the front grille. One beneath the licence plate at the back end of the car.”

“Why?”

“Because it will be the first ethical car on the highway.”

“In terms of emissions? I thought that was hokum. All you’re doing is moving the emissions from the exhaust pipe to the power station chimney. It’s all smoke and mirrors. Or *no* smoke, more accurately.”

“No, no, no,” he said, and I worried that he was starting to get distracted again. “Really ethical. Logical. A car that can make the best decisions for anyone on the road.”

At that point, I had to admit that he’d lost me, and he explained in more detail how one of the biggest hurdles in the development of the Mark Two had been the intelligence under the hood. The car’s electronic brain, he said, was a miniaturised version of Lena (“her daughter, Ilsa”), the assistant that ran the park, appearing everywhere from the pods to the hotel reception, the screens in Ursula’s office and, Jonas later revealed, some of the engineers’ homes.

It was Ilsa who had wrenched the wheel out of Jonas’ hand and prevented us from crashing into Ursula’s classic car. And the reason she had been rough with us, so Jonas said, was that she was still learning. “Like a kitten that doesn’t know how to play nicely. Yet.”

For the first eighteen months, Lena herself had controlled the first fourteen vehicles produced on the Mark Two line. They were test units, confined to the track, since that was the only way to ensure the data could pass quickly enough between car and server – limb and brain, effectively – to make timely decisions. Only now, with Ilsa online, and decision making delegated to each individual car, could they venture onto the public road with the intelligence active.

“So this will be the first time the public has seen a Mark Two?” I asked. I know that wasn’t the case. Both Uwe Zimmerman and Jürgen Wolf had died in a Mark Two, and neither had been on company property.

“No, but it is the first time they’ve been thinking for themselves in the wild.”

“But they could still have been controlled from here? By Lena? Before Ilsa came on line, I mean, even out on the highway.”

“They could have been controlled, but not by Lena.”

“How?”

I think we were venturing into areas Jonas would have preferred to avoid – perhaps because Ilsa had only just been certified, and even then in limited form.

“Ilsa. If the driver switched it on.”

“Might they do that by accident?” I asked. If they could – if it was as easy as knocking the indicator when you meant to switch on the wipers – then perhaps that explained Jürgen Wolf’s collision with the lamp post. I wasn’t sure the same could be said for Uwe Zimmerman, but it was possible – just possible – that this was a case of patricide; the cars killing their own creators. If they had been responsible for the intelligence behind Lena, might they also, like geneticists with digital Petri dishes, been responsible for cloning her to produce her progeny, Ilsa?

“No.”

That ruled that out then.

“It would take many steps to turn it on,” he said. “It uses the same encryption key as the virtual latching mechanism, to connect the controls of the car to the Ilsa system. It can only be done when the car is stopped. It can only be done through a menu with...” he guessed “...six or seven steps.”

We drove past the Kruda pavilion. Kruda was the off-road marque, and its showcase was suitably rugged. Built directly across the lagoon from the organic spiral that wound to Felico’s subaquatic bubble, it was a direct contradiction to its elegant, graceful neighbour. Kruda’s building was a scaled mountain, with an Alpine road winding up and over and disappearing inside. Various off-road vehicles had been parked among its trees, and an ‘*Achtung! Bären!*’ sign warned of bears in the vicinity.

“Ursula was driving a Striadus, wasn’t she. When she crashed,” I said.

“Of course.”

“The one she’s driving today?”

“That’s her own.”

“So she was driving a company car? A Senhoma Mark Two?”

He shook his head. “It was six months ago.”

“So a Mark 1.”

“One point five. The old car, but it had some of the new software.”

“Including Ilsa?”

“No, but some of the intelligence.”

“The collision avoidance system?”

“That was part of it.”

“Yet she still crashed.”

“Maybe she had turned it off.”

“Had she?”

“Maybe.”

“You’re avoiding my question.”

He didn't respond. We'd arrived at the production line, and he was paying more attention to parking than was strictly required in a car with so many cameras.

"You've already told me the company investigated what happened. You've already told me it downloaded the logs, and you've already told me that blame was laid on Ursula Vogel, even though she claimed the car was at fault. And I know there's bad blood between you because you have to follow the company line, even if that means blaming her for the accident." I paused, while he activated the parking brake and unclipped his seat belt. "Is that why she drives that old car? Because it has no intelligence built in? She's in control."

Jonas thought for a moment. It looked like he was going to reply, but then he checked the clock on the dash and, in doing so, his eyes swept by the Striadus logo sitting at the centre of the wheel. It reminded him where his responsibilities lay.

"You'll have to ask her why she prefers to drive that car," he said. "But later. We must hurry."

\* \* \*

We didn't need to hurry at all. The tour didn't start until eleven and it was only quarter to. Jonas said something about needing to chase some quotes for a paper, which gave him an excuse to wander off and avoid further questions.

It also gave me a chance to think, so I sat on a bench in the sun on a bank of the lagoon, and stared at a spot in the water. If I tried very hard I could almost believe I was back on my boat, all alone.

Lena and Ilsa were starting to look like culprits. Or, if not that, accomplices at least. It was almost as though they spited the team responsible for their existence. Zimmerman's name was on several of the patents on which self-driving cars relied, and Wolf had worked on the algorithms on the basis of which those same vehicles made split second decisions.

Zimmerman had been murdered, and I was pretty sure now, since the trip to the wind tunnel, that Gunther Beck had been, too. Whether Wolf was a third murder victim, and Ursula Vogel an attempted fourth who had made a lucky escape (although the same could not be said for her mother) I still didn't know for sure.

If they had been murdered, who by? That was not my question to answer, but I couldn't deny I was curious. Nobody I had met so far, with the possible exception of Reiner no-surname, seemed likely. Jonas had sold his soul to Striadus; Ursula was a potential victim, who'd lost her mother and much of her privilege within the company. I'd not had the opportunity to meet anyone else. I'd been shuttled around the park, quite literally, in the company pods or Jonas' car, and Lena had checked me in at the hotel.

"Remus."

But Reiner... I kept coming back to Reiner. If he was a plant for the American conglomerate, he was ideally positioned. He'd been moving between departments every few weeks. That would give him an overview on which to send back reports. And he'd changed his mind about talking to me the previous evening. Why? Had he called his handler, told him what had happened, how Jonas had reacted when I'd suggested that we talk? It's possible. They wouldn't want to do anything that would jeopardise his position in the company. I knew as well as anyone the value of having your own man on the inside.

"Remus." I jumped, as Jonas tapped my shoulder. I realised he'd been calling me, but my mind had been elsewhere. Not only on the investigation, but the lagoon, too, which had taken me back to my boat, the harbour, and home.

"Sorry."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, of course."

We strolled along the shoreline to a broad, wooden pontoon, alongside which a flat bottomed boat was tethered, empty and idling. A couple of dozen guests had got there before us, but Jonas bypassed them all, showed his ID to a uniformed man standing by a gangplank, and spoke a few words in German. One nod, two nods, then the man stepped back and Jonas led me onboard. It didn't go unnoticed that the last two people in line didn't board, which could only mean we'd taken their place. Jonas was clearly determined that we'd take the German tour, almost certainly so he could keep an eye on me. Otherwise, why not bump someone off one of the other two tours I could have taken alone?

"I hope you don't get seasick," he joked. I assured him I did not.

Two men in jeans and t-shirts took the seats directly behind us. They looked vaguely familiar, but I didn't pay them much attention. I was just glad to be on the water.

The boat took us round the lagoon, past each of the brand pavilions, and through the cut to the river, at the point where the shuttle track led back across to the airport. It barely seemed possible that only twenty-four hours had passed since I'd first entered the park on a pod by way of that bridge. Now, here I was, sure that I had evidence pointing to two, and possibly three murders, and on my way to the factory around which they each revolved.

Sadly, most of the tour did not take place on the boat. That was just showmanship, demonstrating how material arrived at the gate. From the point we stepped off on the harbourside, we would follow those materials along various production lines, until the tour came to a close at the on-site dealership. Marketing at its best.

We transferred to a small land train that took us on a pre-determined route around the plant. We saw three of the production lines ("*Fotos verboden*") and a

handful of... I want to call them videos, but they weren't. At the end of each production line, the train moved into a darkened room where a holographic engineer demonstrated how car production had changed through the last hundred years. From steam and electric, to petrol and diesel propulsion, and once again back to electric. From handlebars to steering wheels. From boxy bodies to streamlined shells. And from dumb to hyper intelligent cars that could think and judge and decide for themselves. Exactly how they did that was neatly glossed over, so I raised my hand while a hologram was still talking, and coughed, and the guide at the front of our train, after smiling at me, glanced quickly, briefly, at Jonas. Clearly, she'd been warned.

"Can you elaborate?" I said.

"*Bitte?*"

"About the intelligence. And the collision avoidance system. I don't understand how it chooses who should be saved? Where does *intelligence* come into choosing who should live and who might die?"

"*Es tut mir Leid. Ich verstehe nicht...*"

I asked Jonas to translate for her.

"I'm not sure this is the place," he said, rather than repeating her words in English. "I have briefing documents. I'd be glad to share them with—"

"Unless you plan on sharing them with everyone here, I think we'd all be interested to hear how it works. Who's saved? Who's sacrificed? How does it decide?"

Jonas looked at me, and I looked at Jonas, considering that he had far more to lose than I did. The hologram said its last few words. It stepped into a virtual car and drove out of the darkened room.

"We must continue," said the woman at the front of the train in uncomfortable, broken English. "The next group is..." She pointed to the back of the train. I could hear the next one approaching.

The train began to move, but I wasn't prepared to leave my question behind.

"Am I right in thinking the system favours youth over old age?"

Again, she looked at Jonas. He spoke on her behalf. "I have explained the system. Ethical choices must be made."

"And it would be ethical to save the young, even if an older passenger – Ursula Vogel's mother, for instance – should suffer as a result?"

"It's an unfortunate truth of the age we live in that if we want easy, inexpensive, safe transport, there are accidents. We are committed to making sure that where those accidents happen – and they will – the impact is minimised."

"And this way the impact is minimised how? Is it because the fact the young might have a future means they have the most to offer society? Is it eugenics? Is that it?"

“Many reasons.”

“Because that’s only one measure of value, isn’t it? Would it not also be fair to say that someone who could afford, say, a Senhoma, is likely paying higher taxes, contributing more to society – more to the Striadus bottom line – than someone who drives an Eta. Might it also be possible that a self driving system should favour someone in that position over someone in a smaller, cheaper, poorer car.”

Jonas started two sentences, discarding each in turn. I’d stumbled on an uncomfortable truth: that artificial intelligence can never be dispassionate, ethical, or fair. It can only follow the rules laid down by those who, like Zimmerman, and Wolf, had devised it.

“Please, sir. May we enjoy the ride.” It was not Jonas. It was a man in the carriage ahead, who had turned in his seat and now stared at me. I turned, and met his eyes, and he held my gaze. I genuinely think he thought he was helping, posing as an outsider. A random. A visitor to the park who was annoyed by my interruption.

But that interruption had been a mistake – and, after a second or so, he realised that himself. He quickly turned away, but by then it was too late.

I had seen him before. It was Jonas’ spy from the restaurant. And now I knew where I’d seen the men who had boarded the boat behind us. They were Ursula’s flunkies: the two I had met at the track the previous morning, only now they had shed their uniforms, and lost the clipboard and stopwatch.

I turned in my own seat and looked at the women behind us. “And you? Do you work for Striadus, too? Is everyone on this tour a plant?”

\* \* \*

Jonas admitted the deception. There were no randoms here; no members of the public. Everyone was on staff, and everyone was on company time. He had worried, rightly, it turned out, that I might pull precisely the trick I had, and ask questions that couldn’t be answered in public.

“Do you want to see the rest of the plant?” he asked.

“Is there any point?”

“Maybe not.”

I was tempted to tell him to turn back the train, if only because I knew that would not be possible and I was in the mood for trouble. In the end, I sat there, and let it proceed, through two more video presentations and, eventually, through the production hall with the tall glass wall. This was the one that backed on to the test centre, from which incomplete cars could be plucked at random for spot checks in the workshop. It was the hall through which Reiner had walked to buy drinks from the canteen. Drinks that were not allowed in the ‘no spill’ control room. The hall onto which Ursula’s office backed. I wondered if she was in there now, watching us on

her wall of screens. Or was she watching the corridor outside her door? Or the queue in the canteen?

We paused several times as we worked our way through that hall, always keeping a safe distance from the train ahead. Once or twice, labourers on the line would nod at a fellow passenger, clearly unaware they were posing as an outsider.

The boldest among them looked up from his station, recognised someone and came towards us, only for the woman two seats ahead of me to mouth something. He raised his eyebrows, acknowledging her, and stepped back onto the line. As he did, he picked up his tool. It was a gas-powered riveting gun. Returning to his work, he selected a rivet from a shallow tray of parts. It was the same as the one I'd pulled out of the wall in the tunnel. It would have been just the right size to create a tiny hole in the control room window. A tiny hole that manifested as a small white dot, there for a moment and gone in an instant as the window was blown away.

# Nine

You would think nothing had happened. We finished the tour and Jonas asked if I wanted to grab some lunch. I did, but not with him. I wanted to have a conversation with consequences. A two-way exchange. Answers that followed questions and led on to thoughts and opinions, and maybe even a disagreement or two. It didn't seem likely I'd ever get that with him.

Yet, somewhere inside, there must have been another Jonas. A Jonas who goes to the pub with friends – *real* friends, not work friends – and bitches about office politics, long hours, and his awkward, broken relationship with Ursula Vogel.

In fact, that was what I needed. Spiky, uncompromising, difficult Ursula. She would be the antidote to Jonas' unrelenting positivity, and his ongoing efforts to look like he was helping, while actually hampering my inquiries at every turn.

So I lied. I said I'd rather walk round the park, visit the pavilions, and get a better idea of how the marques fit together: it would help me understand what Striadus did. That softened the blow, and so did my suggestion of a drink or two after work.

"How late?" he asked: he had a trans-Atlantic call booked in at six.

We settled on eight at the hotel bar. He could give his spy the night off.

\* \* \*

I did visit one pavilion: the clean, white box that was home to Pabegla, but only because I knew that Jonas would watch me wandering off. Pabegla is the runt of the litter. Specialising in mopeds, but latterly branching out into electric pedal cycles, it was always going to be an uncomfortable fit in a group that straddles racing cars, all terrain vehicles, mass market family vehicles and luxury sedans. But there it was, taking up space, distracting the board and park visitors from what they should be focused on: the brands that made the most profit.

Each of the pavilions had a pre-determined flow. In one door, out of another. It's quite a clever system, for although the pavilions are spread out, some five minutes' walk away from their neighbour, every exit faces the next entrance, and most guests end up orbiting the lagoon in a clockwise direction. In follow-up calls, Jonas told me that helps with all sorts of things, from projecting demand at the food stands to making sure the toilets were clean and fully supplied.

When I came out of Pabegla, two minutes after entering, I was shielded by the building. I split from the crowd and headed for Hall 8, the closest production building, where I found a pod and asked Lena to take me to Ursula.

"Can you tell her I'm coming?" I asked.

“Contacting Ursula Vogel,” she replied, and that slow, soft chime rang out, repeated, and rang out once again.

“Remus?”

“Ursula,” I said. I hadn’t expected Lena to put me through. “I’ve got a couple of hours to spare. Did you fancy grabbing some lunch?”

“Of course.”

“How’s the canteen?”

“Lena, show me camera sixteen.”

Lena, in the pod, must have heard her, as the small screen set into the wall switched to a view of a long queue along the full length of one wall.

“Shift change,” Ursula said. “I have noodles and a microwave, but, how about a walk by the river?”

I remembered the microwave, with its crooked door and old, manual dial, and I wondered what state the noodles might have been in once they emerged. So I said I’d rather have done that anyway – even if the canteen was empty – and she told me to meet her at the back of the wind tunnel building. It would save me being chaperoned through the sensitive parts of the building.

I arrived to find the tunnel in pieces. The corner door was open, and a couple of security guards, dressed head to toe in Striadus green, were watching as a six-foot long wooden blade was craned in through the gap. Ursula was waiting.

“What do you think?”

“Beautiful,” I said, and this time I wasn’t fluffing. My father used to build boats. Wooden boats, with organic curves made of timber that was first steamed, then carefully, patiently, slowly bent into shape in a series of ever tighter vices. The same craftsmanship was evident in the blade, which had an almost sail-like quality. Its wood twisted in two directions, to steer the airflow while minimising turbulence, and its surface, while matt, had been sanded to perfection. There was not a blemish, a pimple or divot to be seen anywhere on it, and it seemed almost criminal that, locked up in the most sensitive part of the whole plant, the public would never see it, much less get the opportunity to appreciate the skill that had gone into its construction. “What does something like that cost?”

“You tell me. You’re the loss adjuster. Aren’t you?”

I wondered whether she’d worked me out for a moment. The look she shot me suggested as much. Then she smiled, which either meant, *I’m joking*, or *I really can’t decide*.

“Loss adjuster. Not valuer. You put in your claim. I decide if it’s fair. I’m surprised you’re going ahead before we’ve agreed a settlement.”

“It needs doing, whatever you decide. The longer it’s out of action, the more we lose – and you won’t cover our losses.”

“When will you be up and running?”

“Two months. This needs to be tested first. That can start while we repair the walls. The workers would be glad of the breeze.”

“You’ll be running it while they’re in there?”

She nodded. “Slowly. Three turns a minute to begin. This door will stay open. It is safe that way.”

If the door was to stay open, security would be staying on site, too. That rather spoiled my half-formed plans to investigate after hours.

“And then?”

“We shall see. We have the plans for the first build still, so it should not take so long.”

I admired her optimism – and her lack of pretension. She led me through the park to one of the hot dog stands, and bought us one each. She plied them with ketchup and mustard, and handed me the slightly smaller of the two, wrapped in a paper towel. It was quite the most disgusting meat I’ve tasted in a while.

“I know a spot by the river,” she said, tapping her identity tag on a reader in lieu of payment. “Somewhere we won’t be disturbed.”

I’m guessing it had once been a stock yard. There were rails sunk into gravel, now half lost under grass and weed, and a black patch where the coal had been dumped for the power station. Now that the station sat idle, there was no need for local fuel. But this ghost was a reminder. Striadus might like to present itself as clean and green and eco-minded, but it still relied on fossil fuels burned somewhere else in the country. And its zero emission cars? Weren’t they, too, just a way to shift the pollution away from the kerb to a power station somewhere else on the grid?

“There’s a beauty, don’t you think?” She indicated the tired, semi-derelict yard all about us.

“An honesty, perhaps.” It was a sharp contrast to the squared off, primped and preened park on the other side of the staff-only gate. And to the bank of the river to which it led. The far side of the yard was screened by a wall of willow, which arched across a grassy bank to dip their longest fingers in the river. We threw ourselves down beneath them and finished our take-away lunch, neither of us talking until we’d both screwed up our papers.

I didn’t realise how much I’d missed a bit of silence. Silence with another person in particular. The whole time I’d spent with Jonas, he’d filled with nervous chatter, promoting the firm, promoting its products, directing my attention away from anything not quite perfect. He’d never have led me through the yard, across the weed-strewn tracks, past the shadow of the long-gone coal.

“You and Jonas don’t get on,” I said.

Ursula had been leaning back on her elbows. Now she lay down fully on her back, her ankles crossed, her hands pushed into her pockets. “Is that for your report?”

“Why is that?”

“Some people don’t. You get on with everyone you work with?”

“I work alone. Most of the time.”

She looked at me, and shielded her eyes. “I find that surprising.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I believe you, but I find it surprising.”

“That makes two of us.” I waited for a moment, and when she didn’t press me on the point, I mentioned her car.

“One day it will be a classic. Twenty-two years old, fifteen thousand kilometres.”

“Then wouldn’t it be better kept in a garage?”

“It is.”

“At night, but you drive it every day. Every mile reduces its value.”

“Don’t you believe in doing something for the fun of it?”

“Yes. But I don’t think that’s what you’re doing, is it?” No answer. “You’re driving an old car because it’s not intelligent. You’re driving an old car because you’re in control.”

“Very perceptive.”

Her honesty was more refreshing than I’d expected. “Because of your crash?”

“You heard about that.”

“I did. And about Uwe Zimmerman. And Jürgen Wolf. Striadus has a patchy safety record.”

“Three thousand people die on German roads every year. They aren’t all driving Striadus.”

“But you were, and I’m led to believe you blame the car.”

“I can’t comment.”

“Then why aren’t you licensed to drive on the track?”

“My, my,” she said, and this time she pushed herself up, back onto her elbows. “You have been doing your research.”

“It’s my job.”

“Or has Jonas been telling tales?”

“I could have worked it out for myself.”

“So he has.”

“His job is to help me. This week, at least.”

“His job is to make Striadus look good. A job he takes far too seriously.”

“Don’t you share that responsibility?”

“My responsibility is to make sure our cars are safe.”

“Yet you won’t drive one that can think for itself.”

“I can only test for structural defects, fuel economy, streamlining. Not whether some programmer’s put a comma in the wrong place.”

“Is that where the blame lies? Bad coding? Faulty programming? Is that what

killed Uwe Zimmerman?”

“Uwe Zimmerman needed to learn to keep an eye on his range. He was a fool for driving so far without considering his return.”

“It was my understanding the car was to blame. Even Striadus admitted as much, although not publicly.”

She tucked her top lip behind her bottom teeth for a moment. “Did it,” she said at last, slowly and carefully. She spoke the way a bird watcher might when a rarely seen species came into view. As if, by speaking too loudly, she might just scare it off. “Did it indeed? How do you know?”

“I have sources. I’ve seen an excerpt of the official report.”

“I wasn’t aware there had been one.” She lay back down. It was a calculated move; unfortunately so calculated that I could see right through it. She wanted to look unconcerned, as though the report’s existence wasn’t of any great interest one way or the other. “I don’t suppose you could share a copy.”

“I don’t suppose so.” My turn to be quiet. I wanted to see what she might offer by way of an inducement. I waited twenty seconds for a bid, to no avail. “You know, there was significant damage to Zimmerman’s car.”

“I doubt it.”

“Oh, not externally. Internally. Blood on the surfaces. It looked like he’d been trying to break a window with his forehead. Fingernails embedded in the door cards. He didn’t drive out to the desert of his own accord.”

“If you believe that, why does it still surprise you that I drive an old car?”

“You surely don’t believe it was an accident?”

“Maybe not. But a malfunction is always a possibility.”

“A malfunction doesn’t last forty minutes. A malfunction doesn’t position a car quite so precisely that it’s in full sun, yet hidden from view. A malfunction doesn’t set every source of heat to maximum. One of those things, perhaps. But not all three, on the hottest day of the year.”

“Every machine has an optimal working temperature. A limit beyond which there’s no guarantee it will work the way it should.”

“Then how do you explain Jürgen Wolf? He was driving at night, there was nothing on the road, yet still he crashed and died.”

She raised her eyebrows and closed her eyes; pursed her lips and crumpled her chin. She said nothing.

“Well?” I asked.

“Jürgen Wolf was an idiot. He’d worked late, fell asleep at the wheel. He shouldn’t have been on the road.”

“Is that how Jonas would sell it? If he wanted to make sure Striadus didn’t get the blame?”

“You’ll have to ask him. And when you’re at it, ask how he came to be the first on

the scene. It's almost as if he knew where to look."

She said all that with her eyes closed, her legs still crossed at the ankle. She looked like she hadn't a care in the world, and that what we were discussing wasn't so much the death of two colleagues, as it was where we were taking our families that summer. Or would have done, had her sole remaining relative – her mother – not also been killed in a so-called 'intelligent' Striadus.

"Jonas discovered Jürgen Wolf?"

"He didn't tell you everything, then."

"We haven't discussed it."

"Maybe you should. And ask him what he was doing in Zaragoza last month."

"Last month?"

"*Early* last month. I'm sure he'll remember when it was. It was the day Uwe Zimmerman died. He had to stay an extra two days to do his external relations."

"Do you know what he was doing there?"

"Officially?"

"No," I said. "I can find out the official story from him."

"Unofficially, then, I hear we may have some competition moving into town."

"I thought Striadus was the competition."

"We were, but Zaragoza might be about to welcome its third manufacturer."

I reeled off a few names, none of which was correct.

"Bigger. Think bigger."

I shook my head. "Your knowledge of the market is better than mine."

"It's all speculation, of course, but..."

"Yes?"

I think she was torn. On the one hand, she wanted to expose Jonas. On the other, she was enjoying my ignorance, and having me at her mercy.

"It was a conglomerate, I believe," she said at last. "Over from the States."

"They wanted to poach Jonas?"

"Why else would they meet?"

# Ten

I could have tackled Jonas right away – but he’s better at denial than he is at watching his wandering mouth, so I thought it best to leave it until our drink. Perhaps if I put the drinks on my tab (Striadus was paying, but at least it wouldn’t come out of his pocket) I could ply him with sufficient booze to loosen his lips still further.

Ursula hadn’t hung around long after dropping him in it. It didn’t surprise me, and I couldn’t hold it against her. You can’t help but admire someone who knows when to time their exit for maximum impact. Payload – bombshell – crater – gone. A master of her craft.

So I wandered along the river for a mile in either direction, each time reaching a fence that marked the edge of the factory land. The plant was far larger than I’d imagined, and I could see why the shareholders worried about the expense of a base in Zaragoza when so much space here in Stuttgart was ripe for further development.

No doubt the answer would be that Zaragoza already had an established base of expertise, and that setting up there would more easily help Striadus attract the skills it required. That failed. Would the Americans fail, too, if they built their own plant in the city in an effort to revive their European operations? If there was any truth in what Ursula said about Jonas and his meeting with the conglomerate, it would seem they were putting out feelers already. Had they been successful? There was only one way to find out and that, too, would have to wait for our drink. What had originally been intended as a way of softening my lunch rejection was turning into a more important event, and one for which I’d need to make sure I had my thoughts in order.

I was almost back at the lagoon, so stopped at a gift shop, picked up an overpriced jotter (Bonfarte branding) and pen (Pabegla), and tapped my room card in lieu of payment. Jonas could no doubt track each transaction, and pin them to specific locations as I moved around the park, but that was no bad thing. It gave some truth to the lie I’d told about wanting to see the pavilions. On the off-chance he could also track the movements of the keycard itself, the way Lena could track the token on his keyring, I went down into the bubble and sat on one of the benches beneath a vintage Felico Venkinto. Even I, a man who had no great interest in cars, could see that it was a thing of beauty. Not that I was there to admire it, admirable though it was: I just wanted to stick a pin, to stake a claim, on Jonas’ virtual map.

I stayed ten minutes, most of which I spent looking up through the domed glass ceiling and the water to the blue sky above the lagoon. Then I came back up for air,

walked towards the Bonfarte pavilion, and stopped half way to write some notes. I hadn't wanted to do so in either pavilion. I had no doubt that each would have cameras on site. Ostensibly they would be there for security, but perhaps Jonas and Ursula – and anyone who was authorised – could ask Lena to open a feed. I didn't want them reading over my shoulder.

Thus, my afternoon progressed. I'd step into a pavilion to think, then take a bench beside the lagoon to write my notes. After a couple of hours, a toilet stop, and a double-shot espresso, I had a fairly clear idea of what I knew – and what I still needed to know.

So, in the interests of showing my workings:

Wolf, Beck and Zimmerman were all involved in developing autonomous cars. The fact all three met with an unnatural end largely confirms Richard's suspicions, and convinces me that someone or something had a hand in their deaths.

I'm erring on the side of someone. AI is just a marketing term for a series of branched decisions that give the impression of intelligence (hence, 'artificial'). All those branches are really doing is stripping down a range of possible outcomes until there's only one left. That option is executed, so if it resulted in execution, the death has been ordered by whoever had coded the AI in the first place.

If it wasn't the AI, it must have been someone with live access to the systems that underpinned the cars. They're still development models, so hadn't been detached from the Striadus servers. The servers can monitor them and intervene in case of a problem. Can an operator?

Uwe Zimmerman's death in the middle of the desert coincided with the hottest day of the year. That can't be a coincidence. This makes point three more likely than point two. Lena and Ilia effectively off the hook.

So, who had access to those systems, while also having access to the test centre? Gunther Beck's death was a work of art, but was manual; required intervention. Someone used a gas gun to fire a single rivet through the observation window. The window was under tension due to pressure and temperature differences on either side, so shattered in an instant. Result: the same as that of smashing an aircraft window at cruising height: Gunther Beck had been sucked through and atomised by the turbine.

Logical answer: Reiner did it. He's the only one I know for sure was on site. But why was he not sucked in behind Gunther? Where is he now?

Opportunity: Reiner would pass through the workshop to reach the canteen. He'd have found a rivet gun there. BUT, if him, I'm looking for two killers AT LEAST: I don't believe he'll have access to systems underpinning self driving features in Uwe and Jürgen's cars.

More likely: someone with access to camera feeds waited for him to leave, watched him join canteen queue, seized the opportunity to dispatch Gunther unseen.

Ursula? Jonas?

Don't trust either of them. BUT: of the two, Ursula seems most open. Jonas has tried to guide my thinking as much as he has my movements. Ursula doesn't seem to care what I think or where I go. BUT it's not her job to control how the outside world sees Striadus. That's Jonas.

Does either have a motive? Ursula lost her mother in a crash that she blames on the car. If she's right, the brains behind the car were to blame: people like Jürgen Wolf, Gunther Beck, Uwe Zimmerman. That would mean the Americans are out of the picture. Jonas? Not sure. He might have had the opportunity, but does he have a motive? It's rare for anyone to kill for the sake of it.

\* \* \*

This time, I wasn't stood up. I spent the afternoon in the park, early evening in my room, where I showered and changed, and was in the bar just before eight. Jonas was already there. He'd opened a bottle of Solaris: dry white wine made from the local grape. It was pleasant. The kind of wine that nibbled at the back of your tongue and made you shiver a little, and I had to remind myself to be careful. The aim, that evening, was to wheedle out the honest Jonas: the one who bitched with his friends in the pub. As none of them was there with us, and I was certainly not his friend, I'd have to rely on the wine standing in, and my ability to string out the evening long enough to get him drunk.

Fortunately, he'd ordered some food, which would help prolong the proceedings.

"The last time I organised without asking was a mistake," he said, referring to the tour. "This time, I hope will be a success."

He'd chosen a rich meat stew, with vegetables in broth. Beef, I'd guess, as it was dark but neither as rich as game nor as fatty as lamb, and he said it was gayburger mash, or something of that sort [I've checked: *gaisburger marsch*, so it was beef]. That helped offset the glass and a half I drank, but most of the time I merely wet my lips, and kept a close eye on his glass, topping it up whenever he'd drunk it half way.

"How long have you been with Striadus," I asked.

He signalled for a second basket of bread. The waiter acknowledged.

"Eight years."

"Always in PR?"

"External relations. No. Not always. Marketing for two years, but I didn't want to work in an office. I applied for a job on the track."

"Test driving?"

He nodded, smiling. Given what had happened the previous day, I found that amusing.

“I’m guessing you quickly realised it wasn’t for you.”

“I thought I did quite well.”

“You weren’t sick?”

“No.”

“Because you were driving?”

“It’s not always necessary to race. Most people who drive don’t race.”

The waiter placed the bread between us. Jonas took a hunk, and he dipped it in his stew.

“So you went back to marketing,” I said. “And that led to external relations?”

“Eventually.”

“What comes next?”

He looked at my bowl, which was empty. I’d let him do most of the talking, as well as most of the drinking, and had finished some way ahead of him.

“Next? You’re still hungry?” He seemed genuinely concerned that his hospitality was lacking.

“Not next tonight. Next for you. Next in your career?”

“Aph. Who knows? I’m happy here.”

“You’ve never been tempted to leave? Get a better job somewhere else?”

“We have all done that. Haven’t you?”

I could answer, quite honestly, that I haven’t. Jonas might have believed I worked in insurance, and, in his position, I’d find it hard to believe that the person across the table from him wouldn’t be itching to change their job. He didn’t know the truth, of course: not that I worked for Europol – that was only a sideline. A profitable one. One that was mainlining more often than I’d intended. But that my real job, my passion and my profession, was the Huffin’ Puffin. It was taking visitors out to Little Russell, or the rich fishing grounds beyond Sark. It was repairing nets, painting the deck, scouting for new opportunities, sitting in the sun and watching the planes take off whenever the wind was a westerly. Who would want to change that?

“Yes,” I said. Sometimes it’s better to lie, after all. “Of course I’ve thought about changing career. But opportunities are few and far between. I’d guess it’s the same...?”

He shrugged. “I’m not actively looking.”

“Despite all that nastiness with Ursula Vogel? Despite all the problems at Striadus?”

“Gunther Beck’s death was unfortunate, but this is a heavy industry.”

“And Uwe Zimmerman?”

He’d been dipping into his stew again, and now his hand paused, the hunk of bread wet and getting wetter. “You know of Uwe Zimmerman?”

“I read the papers.” I paused for a second. “I read about Jürgen Wolf, too.”  
Jonas pulled the bread from his stew. He hung on to it as he sucked it dry, the popped it into his mouth to chew.

“You were the first on the scene,” I said.

“I would have seen it happen a few seconds earlier.”

“So the car was still in tact when you arrived?”

“It was still in one piece when it was recovered.”

“It was burned, wasn’t it?”

“But still structurally sound.”

“The battery pack—”

“We don’t build our own batteries. We ship them in from China. The car was still in one piece.”

“But Wolf was dead.”

Jonas shrugged. There was no way to come back from that. No spin that would make it right.

“How did you come to find him?” I asked.

“Chance.” He’d not finished his stew – nor the bread – but he put his spoon in the bowl and pushed it away. “He lives not far from my neighbourhood. We’d both been working late. We used to joke we should car share.”

“Maybe you should.”

“But then I would be dead, too.”

Maybe he would. Maybe not. Maybe Jürgen Wolf would still be alive. Did this put Jonas and Reiner in the same boat, I wondered. Both could have shared the fate of one of the victims, but both had had a lucky escape.

“Can you show me?”

“The car?”

“Where it happened.”

“Is it relevant?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. If there’s any suggestion of systematic failures, or lapses, it might affect any payout.”

“You really think seeing a lighting pole might help?”

“Is there any reason you’d rather I didn’t see it?”

“No,” he said, quickly. “No, of course not.”

He pushed himself up from the table, not realising until then quite how much he’d drunk. He gripped the edge for a moment, steadied himself, slowly closed his eyes.

“You’re in no fit state,” I said. “Pass me your keys.”

\* \* \*

Jonas lived in Reutlingen, twenty miles south of Stuttgart.

“Had I heard of it?” he asked. It was where the wings of the V-1 rocket were built during the war. He had no chance to elaborate, falling asleep as we passed through the factory gate.

“Ilsa,” I said. “Navigate home.”

The familiar, low chime rang out, and the dashboard reconfigured to show a series of turns and timings alongside our speed and remaining range.

“*Willst du, dass ich fahre?*” she asked.

I told her I didn’t understand, and she asked, in English, if I wanted her to drive. I didn’t respond to that, worried that whatever I said might be misinterpreted. Instead, I drove slowly and carefully, not wanting to wake my passenger until we’d reached his front door.

Tell the truth, I quite enjoyed it. The Senhoma was a pleasant drive: the steering responsive, the motors on each wheel smooth, and the simulated engine noise satisfyingly grumpy. Of course, if I’d not been driving like a grandmother it might have been different, but at forty kilometres most of the way it was comfortable and felt safe, despite being to blame for at least two deaths in six months.

I gently touched his hand when Ilsa announced that we had arrived. We had pulled up outside a bungalow with no lawn and not much drive.

“Jonas,” I said.

He opened his eyes, smiling, but the smile quickly disappeared when he realised where he was. “Sorry,” he said. “Sorry, sorry. I shouldn’t—”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry.”

“But—the crash...”

“Another time. You need to sleep. Can I drive myself back?”

“Of course.” He pulled himself up, unclipped his belt. “Of course. Take it. I’ll get the bus. Are you sure you don’t want to—”

“I’m sure.” In truth, seeing the lamppost was the last thing I wanted or needed to do. I’d only suggested it to move our conversation forward. But now that I had his keys – and his tag – I was far keener to look at something else: the inside of his office.

# Eleven

I was ten miles out from the plant when I thought to search his car. What did I want to find? Remnants of his meeting with the consortium – if, indeed, it had happened. I'd originally thought the most likely place I'd find them was his home and, if not there, his office, but the car made a more logical backup cache. If he'd driven to Zaragoza, he might have thrown something in the back or in the boot, and not thought to take it out. If he'd flown, it would probably have been from Striadus' own airport, but he'd still have needed to get home when he returned, and that would have meant a car journey, too.

So, I doubled back to a service area and started with the glove box. Aside from the owner's guide, there was just a packet of sweets and a copy of a group insurance document. There was nothing beneath either of the front seats, so I popped the boot and lifted out his shopping bags and charging cable. There was a false floor, but it hid nothing more incriminating than the standard-issue spare wheel.

The car was clean, figuratively as well as literally.

It had been worth a shot.

I arrived back at the park at eleven and drove around the perimeter until I got to the gate through which we'd left. There was a box on a pillar, in lieu of a guard, with which Ilsa negotiated our entry. The gates swung wide, revealing a somewhat lax attitude to site security. The car would seem to have been a key that would unlock the gate, whoever was driving. Had I really been contracted to Striadus' insurer, I may well have felt duty bound to report it, but right now I had more important matters on my mind. I steered the car back to Jonas' parking space, cut the engine and sat for a moment, staring.

I was nose-in, against the floor to ceiling windows that gave into the canteen. It was busy, given the time of night, and brightly lit, too. The light spilled out on the car, reflected off the bonnet, but nobody in there paid me much attention. They were more interested in their mugs of coffee, snacks, and what looked like the dubious hot dog Ursula had bought me at lunchtime. I wondered how many of them might have seen Reiner the night his colleague had been sucked through the turbine. They would be his alibi. How many of them had seen him since? How many had asked how he was coping? How many of them knew where he was?

Very few, I imagined.

I hauled myself out of the car and walked casually along the run of windows (there's nothing so suspicious as trying not to look suspicious) and across the lawn to Building Four. Once the hall where they'd built the Kruda Ferulo, it had been

converted to an administration block twenty years earlier, when the death of a minor celebrity had killed the Ferulo brand stone dead. Kruda had moved on to bigger, although not always better, things, and the story of a television presenter's death in a stunt gone wrong (admittedly not Kruda's fault) eventually ran its course. Today, it's barely remarked upon, and Jupp Sturzflug (an unfortunate stage name – *nosedive* – that described both his act and his demise) is remembered still less. He perhaps proves the adage that no news really is good news. It was an adage to which, in certain circumstances, Jonas clearly subscribed.

His office was on the second floor, at the furthest end of a corridor lined with clippings and magazine covers. This was his domain: external relations, and these were his triumphs. Car of the Year. Best Sporty Hatchback. Powering Ahead: Bonfarte's All-Electric Racer. *Voiture de l'Année*. Striadus Rides Again. *Auto des Jahrzehnts*. Pabegla Rises... no sight of the less savoury headlines I'd read in Bichard's files. Headlines like Man Cooked to Death in Desert, and Technician's Turbine Tragedy.

His was room 224. End of the corridor, last door on the right, with a view across the lagoon to the Striadus pavilion. It was the largest of all the pavilions but, arguably, the least architecturally ambitious. Perhaps that was the point. Striadus was a brand with history. It was unexciting, dependable, *safe*; saviour of the brands that surrounded it; a mother-figure. Its pavilion was a lump with gently rounded corners that looked weighty, even from this distance. It was an anchor for the park, as much as it was for the wider group; a sun around which the planets span, gradually drawing them in as it stretched the gravitational field that kept them each aligned. Perhaps its enormous bulk was a reminder, too, for Jonas and his team, of how important it was that they protect the uber-brand: how the fortunes of a trillion euro enterprise, and everyone who worked for it, were reliant on their abilities to counteract criticism; to deflect unwelcome publicity.

The pavilion was soft grey on three sides, one and a bit of which faced me now, but looked silver in the moonlight. It was an illusion, of course, but you couldn't deny it was appropriate – from this angle, at least. Everything that went on in this office was crafted to burnish the brand. To give it a sheen it didn't deserve. I couldn't have done it myself. Not when I knew about the late-running products, the way the board had lied about the Zaragoza plant, its failure to poach any talent from its rivals. And the deaths, of course. Perhaps I could have turned a blind eye if I had enjoyed my job, but would I have done – in Jonas' position? His daily interaction with Ursula Vogel can't have been pleasant, however much he insisted there was no problem. And what did he have to go back to at night? He had a family but no family life. A home but no home life. Just a very expensive ex-wife and some daughters who visited now and then. I could hardly blame him if he'd been tempted to jump ship, and accept whatever the American consortium had offered.

If, indeed, there had been an offer. So far, I only had Ursula's word.

That's why I'd used the chip on his keyring to open the building's front door, and I'd worked my way through the keys until I'd found the one that unlocked his office. And there I stood, in the half light, wondering whether this room had a camera, and, if it did, who was watching.

There was no point being subtle about it.

"Lena, lights," I said, and every other panel in the ceiling glowed ivory white.

"Lena, brighter." They ramped up to daylight brightness and I opened the first of his cabinets. It was a drinks cabinet. A good start, but not what I was after.

The room was of a similar size to Ursula's at the test centre, although Jonas had a more traditional desk, and cupboards filled with documents where she had shelves of models. Many of those documents were brochures for cars that hadn't been built in years. Classics that I remember from my childhood, which had seemed special at the time but now looked hopelessly boxy and primitive. There was one for the car to which Ursula had reverted after her crash. A flyer for the car I remember my own mother driving, and sales figures for my first motor, which I'd hated with a passion and replaced as soon as I could.

I worked my way from cupboard to cabinet to shelving unit. There was a stack of archive boxes in one corner, either recently arrived from or waiting to go into storage, and an industrial-sized shredder filled half-way to the brim with fragmented secrets.

Eventually, I arrived at his desk: a thick glass panel straddling two pedestals, each composed of three drawers. There was a computer (password protected), phone and photo on top of it, the photo showing Jonas in a tent with two young girls. The drawers were locked, which was interesting in itself, but not entirely indicative of there being something to hide. The cabinets and cupboards had had locks, too, but the keys hung from each of them, and someone had put a spot of glue on each hole to hold them in place. Perhaps so their contents were accessible to anyone in Jonas' team. That would only work if he had an open door policy, allowing colleagues to come and go in his absence, whenever they needed reference material. So, it was logical that he should have a lock on his own drawers, where he was likely to keep his personal papers close at hand.

I fingered through his keys until I found one that fit both pedestals, then worked my way methodically from drawer to drawer, top to bottom, left then right. There was the usual parental detritus: lurid drawings exhibiting more passion than skill, school photos, cheap presents that would one day make their way home. There were payslips, old letters, a couple of coffee vouchers. And, in the middle draw of the right-hand pedestal, a large office diary. A4, a page per day, with times in the margin and a space for writing notes. I opened it at the bookmark. The factory tour, the trans-Atlantic call, and our drink at the hotel were all blocked out. So was a

meeting with an advertising agency, a *Teamsitzung* at nine that morning, and lunch with four people whose names I didn't recognise. I asked Lena to translate *Teamsitzung*. Team meeting, apparently.

The previous morning had been struck through by a heavy blue line. My name sat at the centre, with Airbus scrawled beneath. That would have been my arrival, then, our trip to the track, and Jonas' hasty change of clothes.

But there were no loose leaves tucked into the back of the book, no suggestive letters in the drawer, no offers of employment. I tried to remember when Uwe Zimmerman had died, and turned back through the months, looking for appointments in Zaragoza, to see if any of them would jog my memory. I found four, of which one had been an overnight trip, with several busy days either side. The two days that followed it had been crossed out entirely. They would be the appointments he'd missed when he'd been stranded in Spain after Zimmerman's death.

That trip could well have been the cover he needed for an interview.

It was interesting. Coincidental. But not definitive. Neither was the lack of an appointment the night Gunther Beck had died in the wind tunnel. That might suggest he was in the city when it happened. Or it might just suggest that not everything made it into the book.

I'd spent forty minutes searching his office, without much success, so I put the diary back where I'd found it, and took a quick survey of the cupboards, cabinets and drawers. Everything was back in place. So long as there wasn't a camera there, I didn't think anyone would know that I'd been snooping.

Nonetheless, I was more than usually cautious as I left the building and, rather than cut straight back to the hotel, I took a detour, so that when I eventually did head there, I'd be coming from the back of the cafeteria, rather than Building Four. It was still busy, as I passed. The queue was no shorter than it had been when I arrived, the hot plates were still well stocked, and the light continued burning brightly, illuminating the canteen itself, the cars outside the window, and a figure, roughly my height, limping across the car park.

# Twelve

I didn't sleep. That's to say, I *got* to sleep, but soon I woke up and spent forty minutes wondering whether I'd made a mistake in trusting Jonas Frank. There were enough circumstantial titbits (I'd rather not call them evidence) to place him close to two deaths: of Uwe Zimmerman, during which Jonas had been in Zaragoza, and Jürgen Wolf, after which he'd been the first to arrive on the scene. I couldn't say for sure that he was also the distraction at the door of the control room – the one that caused Gunther Beck to turn a fraction, just before the window behind him shattered and he was sucked through.

But neither could I say that he *wasn't*.

Whoever had been at that door, and whoever had used a gas gun to fire the rivet through the glass, should, by rights, be dead. They should have been sucked into the tunnel directly behind their victim, and I didn't yet know why they hadn't. But I would. Soon.

At three o'clock, I got up, and I read my list again. The last point – point 10 – had been a musing, not quite a statement, which now only half rang true.

*10. Does either have a motive? Ursula lost her mother in a crash that she blames on the car. If she's right, the brains behind the car were to blame: people like Jürgen Wolf, Gunther Beck, Uwe Zimmerman. That would mean the Americans are out of the picture. Jonas? Not sure. He might have had the opportunity, but does he have a motive? It's rare for anyone to kill for the sake of it.*

I now believed that Jonas did have a motive. A good one. The oldest, least imaginative, most honest motive of all. Money.

He'd already all-but told me his wife was bleeding him dry. And now I'd seen his home: a small bungalow, two bedrooms at most. It was hardly the kind of house you'd expect of someone in his position. As head of external relations, Jonas line-managed a team of thousands scattered around the globe – and with them, a budget of millions. He was tasked with converting those millions into sales that totalled billions, all the while avoiding awkward encounters with tabloids, stamping on bad news, and fire-fighting whenever trouble ignited the public interest. It's the kind of job that usually pays for a large family home, a bolt-hole by the sea, and skiing trips twice a year. Yet here was a man who lived in a cabin and took his daughters camping. The temptation to earn a little extra must have been hard to resist. Even if the offer came from a rival.

What was it Bichard had said? *We know the Americans have made some*

*strategic hires, but a lot of the names they've approached have turned them down. Gunther Beck among them. So, if they won't defect, with their expertise, they're terminating them. Possibly. Theoretically. That's what we want you to find out.*

I think I'd just found out.

The Americans had set up in Zaragoza for the same reason Striadus had: to try and tempt the brightest minds to switch their allegiance. Well, so Ursula said, anyway. But what if the only mind they'd switched had been that of Jonas Frank? What if he was doing their business on the inside, in the most damaging fashion he could? In a way that would cast a shadow on Striadus' own technology, while simultaneously removing the brains best placed to fix its flaws? Once they were out of the picture, there was nobody who could prove that those flaws weren't the cause of their own deaths?

If they hadn't offered Jonas a full-time position, perhaps the Americans had suggested a freelance assignment. Case by case, death by death, payment upon delivery. Perhaps his tiresome promotion of the Striadus party line, all his misdirection, hadn't been done with the aim of protecting Striadus and its products at all. Could it instead have been his way of protecting himself?

I wrote it down as a sanity check and read it through twice. It didn't look *too* far-fetched, even though I'm always wary of thinking too much in the dark. The mind does strange things in the gloom, obsessing on matters that really don't matter. What makes no sense in daylight can look logical at night, and I wondered, if not outright worried, that I was losing precious sleeping time plotting paths toward dead ends.

\* \* \*

I cracked, and cracked open the mini bar. I drank two measures of whisky undiluted and did twenty minutes of stretching while I waited for the alcohol to kick in. I don't remember much after getting back into bed, and the following morning I called reception, and asked the voice that answered (not Lena, I'm glad to say), to patch me through to Jonas' phone.

"I'll leave a message," I said. She had pointed out it was half past six. I knew that already, and the early hour was precisely why I was calling.

"Jonas, it's Remus," I said, after a greeting and the ever-familiar slow, soft beep. "I hope you're not suffering. Could you meet me in the test centre at nine? I suspect I know what happened, but would rather not tackle Ursula on my own. Don't call back. I'm heading out for a walk."

What I actually did was have breakfast, then I headed to the river, by way of the staff car park. I had a hunch that I wanted to check, desperately hoping I'd be proved wrong. Not because I didn't want this over, of course. I did. And my hunch

was key to getting out of there. That day if possible. But if it played out – as it did – the implication was almost too dreadful to contemplate.

I returned to Jonas' car, and I checked the boot for the second time.

Then I boarded one of the boats that brought staff into the plant each morning, and rode it a few miles south. I wanted to make myself unavailable so that I wouldn't have to refuse to explain my thoughts to anyone in advance. I also wanted to make the most of the beautiful morning, and a beautiful cruise, that took us beyond the city limits, past vineyards, to views of the hills and mountains.

When half of my time was up, I got off and waited for a boat heading back to the city. I already knew I'd be late. That was the point. Boats are slower than buses, you never get three at once, and I had to sit in the sun for twenty minutes as I waited for one to arrive. By the time it got to the factory dock it was already ten past nine. The test centre was five minutes' walk, but I diverted via security – the central office in building nine – and was twenty-five minutes late arriving at Ursula's outer door. She was sitting on her exercise ball as I entered, using it for balance while she pressed the foot of her bad leg on a prickly rubber roller. Jonas, who had come to the door when they'd seen me on the camera, poured coffee for the three of us and took a seat by the screens. Ursula stayed by the door to exercise. From there, she could see the wind tunnel and its control room. I stood between them.

"Sorry about last night," Jonas said. "Perhaps I don't hold my drink as well as you do. No problems getting back?"

"None at all. You didn't mind me taking the car?"

He shook his head. "There's a staff bus through the villages. I like to ride it now and then."

"He thinks it helps him connect with the little people," Ursula said. She was grinding the roller into the carpet. It was leaving a pattern in the weave.

Jonas ignored her. "You had something you wanted to talk about." He cast a glance at Ursula, feeling, I'm sure, that he knew something she didn't. And he did. Just not what.

"Where were you when Gunther Beck was killed?"

"Me?" Ursula asked, when she noticed that I, too, was looking in her direction.

"Both of you. But you can start."

"I don't remember. It's been a few weeks. Lena," she said, looking up a little, into the middle distance, the way I'd seen Jonas do – and I'd done myself – when addressing the unseen computer. "Where was I on..." she looked at Jonas, as though she'd forgotten the date. Jonas said the date himself. "Twenty-three hundred hours," Ursula said.

There was a moment of silence, then Lena replied, "no record of Ursula Vogel on site".

"Or, at least, no record of your pass," Jonas said.

“And you, Jonas?” I asked.

“At home.”

“You’re sure?”

He repeated Ursula’s question, and once again Lena replied that she had no record of Jonas’ presence that night.

“Can anyone vouch for that?”

He thought for a moment. “I doubt it.”

“What a shame it wasn’t a Tuesday,” Ursula said. Jonas scowled.

“What about the day that Uwe Zimmerman died in the desert?”

“I was in Zaragoza,” Jonas said.

“Where Zimmerman died.”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m hardly likely to forget. I was stuck for another two days, cleaning up the mess.”

“And he died at five, is that right? Five in the afternoon?”

“That’s when he was found. I believe he died a little time after. They tried to take him to hospital, but...”

“And am I right in thinking that you, as head of external relations, would have been one of the first people who was told that he’d been killed? You’d need to be prepped. You were the point of contact for media, his family, authorities.”

“Yes, I was—”

“But when did you hear?” The interruption came from Ursula. “When did you actually hear what had happened? Five o’clock, or later than that?” She knew the answer, of course. That much was obvious from the way she’d posed the question. She just wanted to make sure I knew, too.

Jonas didn’t reply until I prompted him.

“About midnight,” he said. “Midnight, one o’clock. Something like that.”

Ursula made a tutting noise, and moved the knobbly roller to her other foot. She was making a passable show of being focused on her exercise, when really her attention was given to causing trouble for Jonas. I almost wished she wasn’t there. The sketchier things started looking for him, the less likely it was that he’d talk.

“Why so late?”

“I was in meetings.”

“Until midnight?”

“It happens.”

“Who were you meeting?” Ursula asked, but I stepped in with my own question before Jonas could answer.

“You have a Striadus mobile, don’t you?”

“It was turned off.”

“Who were you meeting?” Ursula asked again.

“I think I can answer that,” I said. Until this point, I’d been standing, but now I took a seat in the cluster beneath the screens. It made Jonas and me a twosome, and put Ursula on the outside. “Did they offer you a job?”

“I don’t know who you—”

“The Americans,” I said.

I think it was at that point that he knew he’d been found out. “They did.”

“You didn’t take it though, did you?”

He shook his head. The prickling sound of Ursula’s roller slowed a little, then stopped.

“Then you’re an idiot,” she said. “What did they offer?”

“Why not?” I asked. I didn’t care what they’d offered him. The salary, and any package surrounding it, clearly wasn’t the problem. They’d have known what he’d been worth, so if they’d really wanted him they’d have found a way to meet his demands. There must have been another reason he’d—

“I’d have had to move to Chicago,” he said, breaking my chain of thought. When I didn’t immediately make the connection, he explained: “I couldn’t leave the girls.”

Of course. If he and his wife had still been together, he might have been able to take it. But shared custody isn’t so simple.

Ursula made a dismissive sound. Perhaps not surprising, given that she had no family of her own.

“Did they offer you anything else?”

Jonas thought for a long time before he spoke again. “What kind of anything?”

“Opportunities. Freelance assignments... a retainer?”

I knew that the answer had to be yes to at least one of those options, but Jonas wasn’t ready to admit to any of them.

“You know,” I said, “it’s very difficult to hide financial transactions. The whole industry is so... wired. Everything touches something else. Follow the money isn’t just a saying, it’s—”

“Yes,” he cut in. “Yes. They promised me...” he seemed to have some difficulty saying “a retainer”, but it came out eventually.

“My, my,” Ursula said. She kicked away the roller and stood up. “I knew things were tight, but not that tight.”

“You know nothing,” Jonas said. “You think you do. Or at least you’d like us to think you do, but you know nothing.” And he launched a string of expletives, first in English, then in German, and he carried on in German as his anger spilled over.

At last I was meeting the Jonas Frank I’d known was there all along. It was the Jonas Frank I’d wanted to meet since I’d first arrived at the park. The Jonas Frank who goes to the pub and bitches about office politics, and inadequate pay rises and impossible colleagues like Ursula Vogel. If only he’d unmasked himself yesterday, or

the day before, or never donned the mask in the first place, it might not have taken so long to come to this point at all.

I marvelled at him for a moment, then looked at Ursula, expecting to see her recoil, like a snake on the point of lashing out. But she wasn't. Her face was soft and calm, her expression unreadable. She looked, more than anything, utterly unimpressed. Perhaps, even, a little bored.

I know what effect she was hoping to have on him. She wanted to show him that his anger was wasted on her, and his insults and arguments, whatever they might be, for I'd not understood any of it since the last English profanity, were entirely ineffective.

It worked. Jonas stopped in what sounded like the middle of a sentence, cast a glance at me, then slumped back in his seat.

"Sorry about that," Ursula said to me, then she picked up a thick rubber band and looped it around her foot. She pulled it tight and stretched it by flexing her ankle.

"Jonas," I said. "Questions are going to be asked, obviously. About what the retainer was for. What you're expected to do in return. Whether it had anything to do with the deaths of Gunther Beck, Jürgen Wolf and Uwe Zimmerman."

"I didn't kill them."

"What about Reiner?"

"What about him?"

"You were the last person to see him alive."

"Why do you... why do you say that?"

"He agreed to meet me. You didn't want him to. You asked him to come to your office after our meeting in there." I pointed towards the control room.

"Yes, but—but I—"

He was still struggling to find the words – the *right* words, in either language – when the soft, familiar chime rang out.

"Visitors at the workshop door," Lena said.

"Lena, camera fifteen," Ursula said, stretching the band as far as she could, with her leg kicked out in front of her.

One of the screens woke up, and we looked at the picture, split into four, showing cameras thirteen to sixteen. Each was numbered. Thirteen and fourteen were views of the empty workshop; sixteen was the canteen, with a queue of tray-holding workers, a handful eating at tables and, beyond them, a view of the car park, and row upon row of executive cars in Striadus' corporate colour. I could see Jonas' car at the very centre of the front row where I'd parked it the night before. Two Striadus security guards had been posted to stand beside it and were doing their best to keep curious passers-by from getting too close: the result of the hunch I'd checked on that morning.

And on camera fifteen were three faces, one of which I knew from my brief visit to the central security office.

*“Kann ich Ihnen helfen?”* Ursula asked.

The familiar face of the three leaned forward. *“Wir suchen Jonas Frank.”*

*“Warum glaubst du, ist er hier?”*

*“Remus Carey sagte uns, wir würden ihn hier finden. Wir müssen ihn nach der Leiche in seinem Auto fragen.”*

Both Jonas and Ursula looked at me.

“You told them I was here,” Jonas said. “Why?”

“A body in the boot of his car?” Ursula asked, translating what the security guard had said, and she turned her gaze on Jonas. “Lena, open the workshop door.”

# Thirteen

“Why shouldn’t I have told them where you were, Jonas?” I asked.

“I... I’m...”

There was no good reason. Perhaps he meant I should have spoken to him first.

We watched as a man and two women, each in Striadus green, came in through the outer door and walked through the workshop. They passed one of the gas-powered rivet guns without understanding the significance, and stepped into the lobby outside Ursula’s office. We could see them through the glass.

Ursula unhooked the exercise band from her foot, and looped it around her neck. It hung there like a thick rubber scarf.

“*Eingeben*,” she called, waving them in. “You don’t mind if we speak English, I hope?”

The man to whom I’d spoken at the security office nodded in my direction. “If you will excuse my poor... um...”

“Of course,” I said, reading his badge. He was Tobias. The women were Hanna and Mia. None of their badges bore family names.

“Is someone going to explain?” Jonas asked.

The three of them walked past myself and Ursula, and stood in front of Jonas at the furthest end of the room.

“We were hoping you could do that,” said Hanna.

“I would if... can someone explain what is happening?”

“Lena,” I said. “Isolate camera sixteen.” I was taking a punt, but she understood. The image in the lower-right quadrant of the screen above Jonas enlarged to take over the full display. The views of the empty workshop from cameras thirteen and fourteen blinked out. So did the door on camera fifteen. All that was left was the queue in the canteen, the workers with their trays, and the view through the window of the cars in the staff car park.

Until then, I don’t think Jonas had noticed the guards beside his Senhoma. He hadn’t noticed the open boot, the crowd of onlookers pressed against the window, or the steady stream of inquisitive passers-by who stopped for a moment before being swiftly moved on.

“We’ve found Reiner,” I said. “I found him.”

“Where, exactly?” Jonas asked. The question was entirely superfluous, since it was obvious from the picture alone where I’d found him. Not to mention the fact that, going on Ursula’s reaction, Tobias must have announced it at the door.

“The boot of your car.”

“He has been dead for some time,” Tobias said. “Remus Carey says you were the

last to see him.”

“No,” Jonas said. “We don’t know that. I saw him, yes, but—”

“When did you see him?”

“Monday. With Remus and Ursula.”

“Didn’t you meet with him afterwards?” Ursula asked. “On your own.”

“Yes, but I... how long? How long has he been dead?”

“He is starting to smell. If Remus Carey had not found him, it soon would have been obvious.”

Jonas looked at me. “Remus, you don’t believe I had anything to do with this?”

“I—”

“You were in my car last night. You drove it back here. Did you smell anything?”

“I smelled something suspicious, if that counts,” I said. “But not in the literal sense. I just didn’t realise until this morning.”

“You smelled this body?” Hanna asked.

“No. Not last night, no. In fact, last night, there was no body. I know that for a fact.”

“You do?” Ursula asked. She held either end of the exercise band and pulled it tight on the back of her neck. It wouldn’t do anything to help her gammy leg, but I suspect it helped ease the tension we were all feeling.

“I searched your car,” I said to Jonas. “In fact, I may as well admit I searched your office, too. I had your keys, so I had your tag. It was too good an opportunity to pass up.”

Perhaps if he’d not already blown his top with Ursula, his reaction might have been stronger, but he seemed resigned to the fact that matters were out of his hands at this point. He slumped very slightly in his seat, as though gently deflating.

“I wasn’t looking for a body, you understand,” I said. “But Ursula had told me about your job offer by then and I wanted to find out more.”

“What would a loss adjuster—”

“I’m not,” I said. “You’re right. A loss adjuster wouldn’t have any need to search your office. I’d imagine. The truth is, I don’t rightly know as I don’t work in insurance. I never have.”

“So what do you do at Airbus?” Ursula asked.

“Nothing. I work for Europol.” It’s rare that I’d burn my persona like that, but I’d already explained to Tobias who I was and where I was from, assuming it was the only way to make sure he’d take me seriously. “I was sent here to investigate Gunther Beck’s death. It was too suspicious coming so soon after Jürgen Wolf and Uwe Zimmerman, and as we knew the Americans were trying to regain their position in Europe, there were suspicions of a conspiracy.”

“A conspiracy? What kind of conspiracy?” This was Jonas.

“To dispose of Europe’s brightest minds in the field of automotive AI.”

“And you think I’m involved.”

“I had to assume everyone was unless I knew any better.”

“That’s what you think the retainer was for?”

“Wouldn’t you have assumed the same?”

“And Reiner? Why would I kill him?”

“Reiner was killed to stop him talking. There was a risk he knew what happened to Gunther Beck, how he was killed, and by who,” I explained. “But not by you.”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Jonas said. I don’t think he’d picked up on my last sentence.

“I know, although I thought you might have done. Until this morning.”

“You said—” Tobias began.

“Only that you’d find a body in his boot,” I said. “Not that he was responsible. I know for a fact that he wasn’t because there was nothing but some charging cables and shopping bags in there last night.”

“Then who did?”

“She did,” I said, and I pointed. They followed my finger and found Ursula.

Ursula made a strange whooshing sound. Not a laugh, not a puff: more of a pinched exhale.

“You were in the staff car park last night,” I said. “I saw you limping past the canteen.”

“Indeed I was. It’s a *staff* car park,” Ursula said, by way of explanation.

“But you park your car behind the test centre. You lost your space in the staff car park when you stopped driving a company car. It didn’t occur to me what you were doing there. Not until this morning.”

“Putting Reiner Fuchs’ body in his boot?” So that was his surname. “What possible motivation might I have had for killing anyone?”

“Your motivation for killing Reiner, we’ve already covered. He might have been able to point a finger. I suspect you caught up with him shortly after he’d met with Jonas. And if it wasn’t Jonas who killed him, then Jonas almost certainly wasn’t responsible for Gunther, Wolf, or Zimmerman, either.”

Ursula looked at Tobias. “You believe this, do you?”

“I believe it,” Jonas said. “I find it very easy to believe.”

“I am a victim in all this,” Ursula said. “Has everyone forgotten what happened to me? To my mother.”

“I’m sure we all feel sorry for your loss,” I said. “But, if you’ll forgive me, I believe your mother’s death wasn’t only a tragic accident. It was also your motive.”

“*Mist!*”

I have no idea what that meant, but she spat the word out.

“You blamed each of them, and probably five or six others, for what happened to you and your mother, and I’d bet good money that if you hadn’t been found out this

string of 'accidents' would have continued."

She stared at me for quite some time. Ten seconds, perhaps, nodding very slowly. It looked like she was calculating the interest on a loan, working out if it was worth taking out, and how she might repay it. "Well," she said at last, "I'll certainly be interested to see what kind of evidence you have."

I pointed at the screen above Jonas' head. "Camera sixteen. The canteen. You could see where Reiner was when he went to buy those coffees. There's always a queue. He'd been out of the room ten minutes before Gunther was killed. I'm guessing it took that long for the part of the queue he was in to come within view of the camera."

"I was out of the building, remember."

"Are you sure about that? When I first arrived, two days ago, Jonas explained how Lena was able to find you at the track. She knew where your badge was. If you'd left it here, in the test centre, she'd have sent us here instead. All we know for certain is that your badge wasn't on site when Gunther Beck was killed. Or..." I walked across to the corner, where her chunky little microwave sat on a printer stand. It was the microwave I'd noticed that first time I'd come in here, with its rotary dial and crooked door. It was the microwave in which she'd offered to cook me some noodles – noodles I'd declined, quite wisely, as it had given us a chance to head out and sit by the river and talk.

I pressed the release and the door sprang open with a theatrical ring of its bell. "You would know better than I would," I said, "but I seem to remember stories about keeping key remotes in one of these at night. Something about the faraday cage blocking radio signals, making them impossible to clone."

It wouldn't have surprised me if she'd said that was an old wives' tale, but she didn't. Perhaps she knew it would have been too easy to check and debunk.

"I'm guessing it would also have hidden your badge from Lena's sensors," I said.

"I'm guessing it would, if that was what happened."

"But Beck's death was an accident," Jonas said. "We all saw the footage. We know why the window broke. It was stressed. There was a fault."

"It was stressed, yes," I said, surprised at his contribution. I wondered whether the old Jonas might be about to return: the Jonas that needs to explain away every possible misdeed as a mishap. "The pressure differential probably explains its rapid disintegration, but it didn't cause it."

I dipped into my pocket and pulled out the rivet that I had dug from the wall.

"Remember this?" I asked, holding it up between finger and thumb? "This was in the wood panelling on the rear wall of the chamber. You know what it is, don't you?"

"A screw?" Tobias asked.

"Nearly. It's a bolt, or a rivet. Of the kind used on the factory floor." I paused for nothing more than effect. "And if it's used on the factory floor, it's also used in the

workshop.”

“It’s a standard part,” Ursula said. “Which proves nothing. There must be a million rivets in every aircraft.”

“Then how do you explain that every piece of debris from the aircraft entered the panels at an angle? This,” I let it drop into my hand and gripped it, “was embedded in the wall at ninety degrees. That wouldn’t be possible if it had been carried by the airstream.”

“Was that the dot on the window?” Jonas asked.

“Almost certainly. It was fired by someone—” I raised my eyebrows at Ursula “—standing at the door to the control room.”

“Someone who, presumably, followed Gunther Beck through the window,” Ursula said. “In which case, we’ll never know who they were.”

“We wouldn’t, if they had, but they didn’t. We know that from the video.”

“There you go. There was no one. It was a malfunction of the window. An accident.”

“Not quite. It foxed me, too. For a while. How could they avoid suffering the same fate, when the door opened into the room, not out of it, and would have been held open by the pressure differential?” I pointed through the window, to the large lobby around which each of the test centre’s rooms were arranged. “It’s a strange room, isn’t it, the control room. A floating box, to minimise vibration and noise.”

“That and other reasons.”

“Which explains the lip. And the lip explains the handles on either side of the door.”

“You’re not going to suggest that someone hung on for long enough—”

She stopped talking as I unlooped the thick rubber exercise band that she’d hung across her neck. “No. But I daresay, given something strong enough they could easily tie themselves on.”

I turned the loop inside out and showed it to Tobias, Jonas, Hanna and Mia. There were some words on the inside, repeated in four languages. ‘*Gewichtsbeschränkung 75kg + Limite de poids 75kg + Límite de peso 75kg + Maximum weight 75kg*’.

“I wouldn’t usually ask a woman how much she weighed, Ursula, but given the circumstances...”

We never did find out. She reached down and grabbed the knobbled roller and threw it in my direction. Her aim was off. Badly. It missed me and missed Tobias, and it missed Jonas, too, but only because he ducked to the left and it just missed clipping his ear. But that was all the distraction she needed. She ran, limping, lopsided, through the door to the lobby, from there to the control room, and through to the test chamber by way of the shattered window.

Mia shouted something; the first thing she’d said since arriving, but Jonas

pushed her out of the way, into Tobias, as he rushed to get past. I was already moving. I was out of the door a second or so behind Ursula, and saw her as she disappeared through the steering veins at the first corner of the wind tunnel.

There was something different about the tunnel that morning. Something that had changed since I'd taken my tour two days before. It was a cool, soft breeze on my back, just strong enough to lift my hair. And a noise. A gentle beating that explained itself as I rounded the second corner. The blades were turning. The turbine was complete, and it was being tested. Ursula was already on the opposite side, running through the open loading door to the outside world.

"Stop her," I shouted at the two men watching the entrance, but they had no idea what was going on, what we'd just discussed, or what she'd done. As far as they were concerned, she was just Ursula Vogel; their boss. Why would they interfere?

"Stop him," she shouted as she ran past them, and they turned and stared as I stopped and watched the blades rotate.

How fast had she said they'd be running? Three turns a minute. But multiply that by six for each of the hefty wooden blades, and one of them swept past me every three seconds. Still, it was just a matter of timing, wasn't it. And, I realised, of spacing. Each blade was six feet long, so at standing height I was looking at the spindle. That's where they converged, and it looked like there was no chance of stepping through without being hit. But crouch down, and the blades are further apart. Each tip was almost two metres away from its neighbour. So long as I was fast enough...

"Go, go, go," shouted Jonas as he rounded the corner behind me. He stepped through the second set of veins and pushed me forward.

I leaned into his weight and pushed him back, then squatted and rolled, balling myself as tightly as I could, with my chin tucked down to my chest, my hands around my shins. Everything was protected, I was moving more quickly than I would if I squatted and ran, but still the tip of one of the blades caught me and pushed me aside. Its angle chipped me forward, like a wedge beneath a golf ball, and I rolled into the feet of one of the men on the other side. He stumbled, and I reached for his belt, took hold of the clasp and pulled him down and over. He crashed into his colleague, and the two of them hit the curved wall and slid down as I pushed myself up. I ran out of the tunnel as they struggled to disentangle themselves, and followed Ursula round the corner, expecting to see her driving off in the classic Striadus she kept behind the centre.

But the car was still there, and she was still running. She was beyond it. She crossed a verge ducked beneath the tiered seating down which Jonas and I had walked from the pod to the side of the figure-eight.

She disappeared in the shadows, but I knew where she was going, and I knew why. A second later, the sound of a car door closing, the whistling whine of four

electric motors, the flash of sunshine reflected on the window... I followed, past her car, across the verge, through the shadows, out onto the track. I jumped back as she swerved towards me in her Senhoma Mark Two. She missed me, but she was moving, and already picking up speed. I ran to the closest car and got in, and pressed a button marked START. The dashboard came to life and the running lights turned themselves on, illuminating the rear bumper of the car ahead.

I pulled out without looking. I had no idea where she was heading, how much charge either of us had, or whose car would run out first, but they're not the kind of things you consider in situations like that. She had crossed the pinch of the figure eight before I'd left the kerb and, as she approached the top of the metalled track, I heard her voice in the cabin.

"*Kontrollraum*," she said. It was a word I remembered from my first trip round that track. She was speaking to the control room, although what she was telling them – or asking them, perhaps – I had no clue.

I pressed hard on what would have been the gas in a petrol car, keeping my eye on the winding track, rather than Ursula's vehicle. There was nowhere for her to go but around and around. The simulated engine noise filled the cabin, almost drowning out the control room's response. I don't know what it was. All I can say for sure is it wasn't an objection. They'd been burned before for disagreeing. It wasn't going to happen again. Ursula had completed her first loop. She was turning at the final bend while I was passing the intersection, and I didn't think until too late that I should have stamped on the brake and stayed there; parked the car and fled; blocked the track. Instead, I followed, leaning into the corner, feeling the back spin out before finding its grip and pushing me ahead with a jolt. Now, I was heading back up the track, and the conversation explained itself.

The barrier had been lifted. The back end of the track was open, and Ursula sailed straight through. I did the same, up the hill and down the other side with my fingernails gouging the wheel. I flew. How high and how far, I don't know. Maybe a couple of car lengths. I came down hard in the trough that sat at the foot of the incline.

"Remus Carey," Ursula said. The radio link between the two cars was still active. "You're better at this than I thought."

"This is all rather pointless, isn't it?"

"You think?" she asked. "Oh, I see. You think this part is another closed loop?"

If I'd been feeling generous, I might have admitted she was right. Jonas and I had taken a short cut after he'd thrown up, and I'd not seen the further end of the track. But now, as I looked beyond Ursula's car, I could see a red and white barrier straddling an access road. It was there as a marker more than anything else, to keep the cars on track. It hadn't been built to stop a determined driver from gaining access, as evidence by the way it splintered as Ursula rammed it aside. She pulled

a sharp left onto the road, and I did the same, leaving the track without touching the Belgian pavé, the dunes, or the broken autobahn.

Her brake lights flashed, suddenly and fiercely, seemingly for no reason. The road was empty, nothing was joining, and the view ahead was clear. The gap between us disappeared. Where previously there had been several meters, now there was just a few inches. My foot was still down on the floor, the pedal on the carpet, but the car knew better than to trust my slow reactions. It mashed the brake, cut power to the motors, and saved us both from a smash. My front bumper kissed the back of Ursula's car, then she pulled ahead by a foot.

And then I heard the slow, gentle chime, which had been the soundtrack of my time at the park. It was as much a part of Striadus as the marques around the lagoon, the green in which it dressed its staff, and the intelligence behind Lena and Ilsa. It was the sound of every alert, the sound of the lift as it opened its doors, and, in this case, the sound of a single word appearing on the dash.

*Eingerastet.*

The steering got stiff. The pedal beneath my right foot went soft. The Virtual Latching Mechanism engaged. My car was locked to Ursula's car. Wherever she was going, I was going, too.

# Fourteen

“Remus, can you hear me?”

“Jonas. Yes. I can hear you.” He was coming through on the same channel as Ursula. I had no doubt that must mean she could hear him, too. She’d be able to hear us both.

“Can you stick with her?”

“I haven’t got much choice. The cars have paired.”

“They’ve what?”

“The Virtual Latching Mechanism. It’s engaged. We’re stuck. Where are you?”

“In the control room.”

“Where are we heading?”

“Don’t you worry about that, Carey.” It was Ursula, ahead of me. She hit the brake, the accelerator, the brake. Her driving was deliberately erratic. My own Senhoma was mirroring each manoeuvre, the simulated engine noise alternately revving and cooling. “Sit back. Enjoy the ride.”

“Jonas,” I asked. “Can you disconnect us?”

“With the code, yes. But otherwise, not when you’re off the track.”

“Which code?”

“The secondary display. The letters and numbers.”

I glanced along the dash, but there was no second display. It had been removed, as it had in Jonas’ own car. “It’s gone.”

“Scheisse.” A moment’s thought. “OK. There is still a chance. Stay there. I’m coming to get you.”

“You’re what?”

Ursula started laughing over the open radio link. “This, I *have* to see.”

“Turn around, and maybe you will,” I said.

“And spoil all our fun?”

A string of German interrupted us. It was someone in the control room. Not Jonas this time, nor the voice from before. This was someone new. Ursula shot straight back at them, and I saw her striking the steering wheel with the flat of her outstretched hand. A moment later, I felt us pulling ahead. We were racing along the north bank of the Neckar, heading south, lacing a route through the morning commute. Ursula blasted her horn but there was nowhere for the traffic to go. To our right there was a railway line; to left, the terraced vines, so she pulled into the opposite lane and cut around a bus.

She hadn’t seen the van that was heading our way.

She swerved and my car swerved – sharply, suddenly – and I cracked my head

on the window. I let go of the wheel and braced myself, hanging on to the handle above my head and the inside of my seat, as she steered us back into the traffic on our own side of the road. The driver in the van wasn't so quick. He'd compensated once already, and momentum was against him. The van tipped up, but balanced. Just for a moment. It was cruising on two wheels, and would have been recoverable – *should* have been recoverable – if he'd steered into the angle. But it wobbled, corrected, and wobbled again, and finally, aching slowly, toppled over, skidded on its side, and shot sparks along the road as it scarred its shell.

"Jonas," I said. "Can you hear me?"

"I'm here." His voice was different. More enclosed, somehow squashed – and rougher.

"There's been a crash. Just behind us. You're going to have to find a way round."

"I'm on my way," he shot back. "I've got another Senhoma. I'm coming off the back of the track now."

"What good is that?"

"With a display," he interrupted. "Remus, you remember I told you how it worked?"

I had no recollection at all. All I cared about at that moment was unlatching from Ursula's car so I could get ahead of her, cut her off, and maybe get all three of us out of this chase alive.

"As soon as I get close enough, my car will pair with yours. Your car will share the encryption key, all three of us will be being controlled by Ursula's Senhoma."

"Which only makes things worse, surely." I had a flash of what had happened the last time he'd been in a car driven by Ursula Vogel.

"No. Listen, Remus. As soon as my car has the key, I can give it to control. They can manually unlatch the cars from base. But you'll have to be ready."

"Believe me, I've never been more ready," I said, as Ursula once again pulled us into the oncoming lane. I looked from the road to the dash, just long enough to catch sight of our speed, the rate at which she was draining my battery, and the map of the area sunk into a panel between each gauge. We were heading into the hills at forty-four kilometres an hour. The battery was three quarters depleted, and its range was sixty kilometres, so this could go on for... I did a quick calculation... an hour and a quarter if nobody got in our way. And then the range dropped suddenly as the car sprang ahead. A gap had opened up, and Ursula was taking advantage. The Senhoma was a ferocious beast, with instant power, and plenty of it. The digital roar of an engine filled the cabin. I could almost smell the fumes of it drifting through the vents.

The digital speed gauge skipped up in five-digit increments. Forty-four, forty-five, fifty, fifty-five, and the range dropped to thirty-eight, thirty-two, twenty-seven kilometres. It seemed increasingly unlikely we'd survive that long.

“Now, there’s a chance I’m not going to get to you in time,” Jonas said.

“You’re not going to reach us at all,” Ursula interrupted.

“So I need you to do something yourself.”

“Just tell me,” I said. I wouldn’t have cared what he said, so long as it meant I was playing an active part in this chase.

“Each system is separate, remember? So that if one fails the others carry on working. Steering, acceleration, fuel management, suspension, environmental... Ursula’s car is sending six individual streams of data to yours. If I join the group, your car will send them to me, but there’s a manual control for each of them, so you can take them offline, one by one.”

“Where?” I looked down at the buttons on the steering wheel, with their scattering of icons for phone control, volume, and changing the layout of the dash. Perhaps it was a case of pressing two or three at once.

“Control?” Jonas said.

“Herr Carey,” said the voice that had spoken German a few minutes earlier.

“Call me Remus. It’s quicker.”

“The control is in the rear.”

“Of?”

“The rear. The rear of the car.”

“The boot?”

“No, it’s...” The voice reverted to German, asked Jonas for help.

“Under the back seat,” Jonas said. “Can you climb into the back?”

“You are joking, of course.”

“They are not joking,” Ursula said. “They neither have a sense of humour.”

I unclipped my belt, the soft chime sounded, and Ilsa said something in an unusually stern tone of voice.

“*Meine Güte*,” Ursula said. “You’re actually going to do it.”

She knew that I was loose in the car now, and she steered left-right-left, violently, sharply, weaving backwards and forwards across both lanes. My own Senhoma copied her with the tiniest delay, as though it was being tugged left and right by a rope running slightly slack. I tumbled across to the passenger seat, and the old-style handbrake jabbed the soft flesh between my hip and my ribs.

“Be careful, Remus,” said Jonas, although how he thought I might manage that, I really had no idea.

“Where the hell are you?” I shouted, squeezing myself between the front seats. From that angle I had a clear view through the rear window, and although I could see several Striadus cars and vans behind us, Jonas was in none of them.

“South side of the river. A mile behind.”

“South side? What the hell are you—”

I never should have asked. Now Ursula knew where Jonas was, too, and knew

the direction from which he'd be coming. We'd just passed a turn to the hills, and she slammed on the brakes, threw us into reverse and span us both back a few metres. Momentum grabbed me, threw me backwards, towards the front of the car. I hit the dash, then fell into the passenger footwell. She braked again, then the gear switched to drive, and we took the spur off the main road through a cloud of white smoke thrown out by our scalded tires.

"We're heading to the—"

"I know," said Jonas. "We're tracking. Are you in the back seat?"

"Give me a second."

I clambered out of the footwell and pulled myself up on the passenger headrest. It gave me a point of reference in the wildly careering car, as I slid a leg sideways between the seats and threw myself into the back. I turned over and looked forward in the otherwise empty cabin to where the wheel and pedals continued to move on their own.

"Tell me what to do."

"Control?" Jonas asked.

Control spoke for some seconds, with Jonas giving a simultaneous translation. "Reach behind the cushion on the passenger side. There is a tag. You will find it. Pull it."

I dug my hand between the base and back of the seats, then worked my way along until I came to a thick, slick ribbon. It felt like a seatbelt, cut short and folded over. I slipped my hand inside and pulled. A click, then the base of the seat lifted up to reveal a small numeric keypad, three additional buttons – one red, one amber, one green – and a single rotating selector. Six of the eight positions around the selector's rim were labelled. In German.

"Right. I've got a dial and some buttons. What am I looking at?"

"I warn you, Carey—" Ursula began, but Jonas wasn't letting her finish.

"The dial switches between the systems." He asked control to clarify something, and a moment later said, "positions three and four are the systems for acceleration and steering. We're going to talk you through regaining control of these two systems. None of the others matter much."

"Not to you, maybe."

"We have no time to work through them all."

"You're wearing a helmet," Ursula said. "You picked up a helmet, didn't you? You really don't trust me."

That explained the pinched voice, the roughness and the slight crackle underlying our exchange. He must have grabbed one of the helmets from the rack at the edge of the track, as he'd wanted to do the first time Ursula had taken us for a spin.

"As soon as you've gained control of these two systems, you need to be back in

the driving seat,” he emphasised, ignoring Ursula’s barb. “The car will keep driving itself until you touch the wheel.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

Jonas hesitated as the old and new manifestations fought for control of his mouth. He was searching for a way to admit that the system still needed several months’ work, without quite saying as much. Eventually, he came up with, “it works better on the track.”

“That’s putting it lightly,” said Ursula. “Do you know how many times that self-drive system has worked in the wild?”

“Talk me through it,” I said.

“Are you two going to ignore me?” Ursula shouted, and she shook the wheel.

“OK. Steering first,” Jonas said. “Turn the selector to position number four.”

I snapped the dial two spots to the right. It fell into each notch with a satisfying click. It felt somehow appropriate that the system to override the computer was manual and unrefined.

“OK.”

“Control?”

Control read out a string of numbers, which Jonas repeated in English. “One – four – zero – one – seven.”

I spoke them aloud as I punched the corresponding buttons. As I pressed number seven, the red and amber buttons lit up.

“I’ve got lights,” I said. “Two lights. Red and amber.”

“Good,” Jonas said. “Don’t worry about green. It’s not lit because it’s already selected. Red and amber are your alternatives.”

“So I hit red?”

“No!” Jonas and Ursula shouted it together.

“But red for stop,” I said.

“Red for danger,” said Jonas. “Press amber, then turn the dial to position three and be ready for the code.”

“Amber takes back control of the steering?”

“Yes.”

“Then what does red do?”

“Don’t press red,” Ursula said.

I didn’t need to wait for Jonas to tell me what danger meant. If Ursula didn’t want me pressing that button, it was clearly the button I was going to press.

The car shook violently as Ursula started weaving again. She was trying to destabilise me, to get me away from the buttons. She cut around a dust cart, but didn’t cut back as an Alfa Romeo rounded a corner ahead. It came barrelling straight towards her, but Ursula held her position, even as the other driver flashed her lights and leaned on the horn. At the last moment, Ursula hit the brake and

pulled right, missing the Alfa by inches. My car and the oncoming driver each took evasive action. Too late. Our front wings clipped and we each lost a mirror and peeled a strip of paint from our cars. My car corrected, the Alfa swung back into her lane, clearing the view of the road behind, where a green Senhoma Mark Two appeared, cutting in from a single-lane track. It was Jonas. He was closing fast. Faster than I expected: faster than I ever thought he could.

The soft, gentle chime rang out, and Ilsa said something, as a graphic on the dashboard showed a third car joining our group. The Virtual Latching Mechanism engaged, locking Jonas onto the invisible towbar trailing from my bumper. And, through me, he was linked directly to Ursula, in her car a few feet ahead. We were now one giant vehicle. Twelve motors on twelve wheels, with two passengers and one driver, travelling at sixty through a built-up area. Inside my car, the simulated roar of the engine was starting to split my ears, but outside we swept by in silence, as evidenced by the passers-by who jumped back from the kerb in surprise.

I reached out and hit the red button, and Ilsa spoke again.

Jonas heard her, and swore. "I said amber, Carey, amber." And he swore again as his own car swerved and hit a parked vehicle.

How did he know what I'd done?

"Get in the front, and steer," he shouted.

As I turned, I saw Ursula's car do the same. It wobbled, as though on black ice, and came dangerously close to mounting the kerb.

"Does anyone want to explain what's happening?" I asked, climbing back into the driver's seat.

"You hit red," Ursula said. "You've taken over the steering."

"For all three of us," Jonas said. "But Ursula still controls acceleration and braking."

"Then let me take that, too."

"No. Time." Jonas said, splitting out the words he had spoken many times already. "You know how fast these cars can go?"

I didn't, but I was going to find out. I watched as our speed gauge climbed higher, from sixty to eighty, then eighty-five. We were mounting a hill in the suburbs; cars were waiting at junctions left and right. One of them, not realising how fast we were going, pulled forwards, then stopped, as the driver reconsidered. Unable to pull back, he stood on the gas, and at the same time he span his wheel to the right. Ursula's car struck his front quarter and pushed him off the road, so fiercely that the back end swung round. He missed me, but his boot struck Jonas and shattered his passenger headlight.

"Are you going to unlatch us, or not?" I shouted, as I tried to judge when to turn so the three of us could round a shallow corner without a collision.

"I can't," Jonas said. "You've disengaged the system."

“You told me to.”

“You were supposed to transfer it. You were supposed to press amber. Amber.”

“Is this losing something in the translation?”

The voice of control started to speak, loudly and with some urgency. But what they were saying, I don’t know, as Jonas didn’t translate.

“Press amber, and you assume control of the chosen system, without disengaging the Virtual Latching Mechanism’s release,” Ursula said, speaking over control, apparently ignoring them. “But you pressed red. You took control of the steering and scrambled the lock.”

“Why the hell would that even be an option?”

“Safety,” Ursula said. “There must be a way to correct the system from every car.”

“From under the back seat?”

“We didn’t think it would ever be used. But still they insisted that we have it, so...”

I could imagine her shrugging. Or shrugging it off, the way she had dismissed the other safety features built into the development cars.

Control stopped talking.

“There’s nothing they can do. Only Ursula can stop us now,” Jonas said. “And only you can steer us.”

We were heading for a shallow junction, where our road merged with another. If we’d been coming in the opposite direction the road would be forking, but from the south we were merging into a broader, busier route.

“Ursula, end this now,” I shouted. “There’s no point—”

“You’re so right,” she said. “No point. No point at all.” She looked over her shoulder, checking for oncoming traffic on the road we were going to join.

“You’re at the front. You’re the one who’s going to get hurt.”

“You’re sure about that?” I felt the accelerator slip away from my foot as Ursula, in the car ahead, pressed down and increased our speed. The gauge ticked up through ninety to a hundred as she reached, then crossed the junction.

I looked right, too, instinctively, and saw what she must have seen a second before. It was an old camper in two-tone beige, with thin bald tyres and a logo on its snout. It was heading towards us. Or, more accurately, it was heading for me. Instinct made me stand on the brake, but the brake was useless now. Ursula sailed past it. I turned sharply left, and Ursula’s car did the same, whipping around on the opposite side of the road. A moment later, Jonas’ car copied, but the van was upon him now. The two collided, and his front bumper drove deep into the van’s sliding door. I heard the crunch, then I heard the horns, and I heard Jonas cry out in his car. There were two hollow clacks as his helmet cracked on the window, bounced off, the cracked against it again. The van had slowed him, but hadn’t blocked him, and

the Virtual Latching Mechanism hauled his Senhoma forward, pushing the spindly camper out of the way. A moment later he was back on my tail as his car closed the gap to six inches.

“Someone is going to get killed,” I said.

“What would that make you, Carey? Killer or accomplice?” Ursula asked. “Or corpse?”

We had reached the top of the terraces now, and were riding high above the vines. To our left, the view gave out on Stuttgart, and the wide, slow Neckar, which from here looked like not much more than a dull brown ribbon looping past the city centre.

“Turn ahead,” she said.

I dropped my eyes to the dash, where the inset map showed the road twisting into a pass, with natural walls left and right, and as I looked up, I saw them. Rock pillars, the height of a mainsail, the track disappearing between them. It would have been a close call to get one car through at this speed, but three in a row?

“Brace yourself, Jonas,” I said, as the walls got closer and taller and darker. We slipped into shadow as the ground rose up to our left and Stuttgart disappeared. Ursula’s front bumper took a glancing blow, striking the granite at an angle as it cut in towards the road. It pushed her, as though her car was on rails, guiding her round with the sound of tearing metal as it shredded every panel on the passenger side.

I turned the wheel right, following the road as best I could, but it wasn’t enough for Jonas. Where Ursula’s car had struck the rock on its front quarter, Jonas’ Senhoma lost its back end. My turn was wrong for all three of us, and his rear bumper caught on an outcrop, bent, cracked, then released its hold on the tailgate. It broke free of the car and bounced down the road behind him, coming to an abrupt and undignified stop under the wheels of a truck.

The cars had separated slightly. Where previously we’d been inches apart, we’d gone into the pass with a yard between us, as each registered Ursula’s increased speed, and dropped back to give the onboard computers time to process each stream of data.

Now the road turned back on itself, all but running away from Ursula’s car. I kept my eye on the centre line and steered as I crossed it. By then, she’d already struck the opposite wall. Glass from her shattered headlamps sprayed up across her bonnet, was thrown above the windscreen by the wind and the momentum, and came down on my own Senhoma, right behind her.

The gap widened yet further. Each car spaced itself out, and I lost sight of Ursula’s car as the corner tightened, and Jonas’, too, disappeared behind the curve of rock. There was space for another car or two between each of our back and front bumpers.

Then the chime came again, soft and slow, a stark contrast to all that was

happening outside our three battered vehicles. Ilsa said something, and the range gauge slid into the central position on the dash.

“Jonas?”

“Not now, Remus.”

“What happens when we run out of juice?” I asked.

“What do you think?”

“All of us?”

“How much have you got?”

“Ten-k.”

“Ursula?”

No response. Either she was concentrating on driving us into the next wall, or she preferred not to admit to being in the same position.

“At this rate, it will be less than six,” Jonas said.

We came out of the pass on a headland, having turned through ninety degrees in the switchback and risen a couple of metres. The land rose sharply to our left and fell away to our right, barely beyond the edge of the road, to the vineyards far below. There was nothing but a low barrier, staked every few feet, to keep us off the screed and guide us round the next bend.

That bend was still several lengths away, but coming up fast. It skirted the edge of a parking space – more of a tuck-in, really – for the viewpoint beyond, where a man and a woman in hiking gear had stopped to take a picture.

“What say we take a closer look?” Ursula asked.

Jonas started shouting, but Ursula wasn't listening. She was singing.

*“Alle meine Entchen, Schwimmen auf dem See, Schwimmen auf dem See.”*

And as she sang, she pushed the car – all three of our cars – forwards, forwards, forwards. I couldn't swerve right: that would kill us. I couldn't swerve left. That way lay the slope: we'd bounce back, with much the same effect. And yet Ursula was speeding up, pushing her own car towards end of the headland, and dragging ours behind. The gap between us was getting wider. Ursula had what might have been called an unassailable lead – if this had been a race.

I stood on my useless brake pedal and pressed hard on the horn. One long honk, then bi-bi-bi-bip-bip. The hikers turned round and instinct took over. They saw Ursula's car heading straight for them. Silently. Stealthily. At speed. The woman pushed her companion away. The man fell to the side and rolled, and Ursula passed between them. On and through and over the edge. Her car split the barrier, and a moment later was airborne. There was no heavy engine beneath the bonnet to tip it forwards, so gravity had free will to do as it chose, and perhaps it was Ursula's weight, so inconsequential on firm ground, that tipped the balance – quite literally.

*“Köpfchen in das Wasser, Schwänzchen in die Höh...”*

Her car leaned left, then turned, and turned, and turned. She was spinning

sideways as she fell, still dragging myself and Jonas towards the edge.

But then the Virtual Latching Mechanism spotted her changed orientation, as it had when we'd passed over the hill on the track on that first test drive. It severed the invisible cable between us, and as it returned control of the brake and accelerator to my own Senhoma, the wheels locked. I released them, then turned to the right and braked again. The car span once, twice, then stopped as Jonas' car shot past me. His arms were rigid, pressing hard on the wheel, lifting him high in his seat. He must have been on the brakes, too, but they were softer, or he'd pressed them a moment later, or his car was heavier, for it continued up to the lookout, then across it, and I thought he wouldn't stop.

Until.

Until the front wheels went over the edge and the car, with insufficient momentum, was grounded on the ridge. He was balanced, precariously, but at least he was balanced, with his front wheels touching nothing but air, and his back wheels up on the pavement.

I jumped out of my car and ran over, just in time to see him vomit, noisily and copiously, through the visor in his helmet, and down the front of his shirt.

Ursula had done it again.

# Fifteen

Bichard was as good as his word. I was back in Guernsey by the end of the week, eating crab and chips on a blanket with Odette. He'd promised us dinner wherever we chose, whatever the bill, but that's not our style. Neither would it fit my persona. My *real* persona. My *home* persona. The persona that fits Odette's, like an ormer fits its shell.

She asked me how my week had been, and the tourists who'd hired me to take them out in the boat. So I told her all about Jonas and Ursula, holidaymakers from Germany, and of their daughters, Lena and Ilsa, who hadn't stop talking the whole way out, all the way back, and the whole time we spent with the rods.

I didn't tell her the truth: that Lena and Ilsa had been silenced – taken offline, at least for the time being. It was now obvious that they'd not been involved in Gunther Beck's dissection, the boiling of Uwe Zimmerman, or Jürgen Wolf's fiery end in his battered Senhoma Mark Two. It was also assumed they'd had nothing to do with the death of Ursula Vogel's mother. With Ursula herself now dead, there was nobody left to argue against accusations of irresponsible driving. Indeed, the manner of her own passing only gave the accusations more weight.

The Senhoma Mark Two was put on ice, indefinitely, and Striadus pared back its research into electric vehicles as a whole, and intelligent vehicles in particular. It was already several years ahead of its competitors so, should it decide to return to that field in the future, at least it wouldn't be starting again from scratch.

That only left Jonas Frank. He'd been suspended pending disciplinary action, and although he may have come good in the end, I didn't feel any great sympathy for his predicament. He'd been the architect of his own downfall, so it was only right that he faced the consequences, whatever they may be.

I didn't imagine they'd amount to much. The consortium was still sniffing about in Zaragoza, and since his suspension it had been more vocal – and more public – in making clear it valued his skills and would gladly discuss opportunities should he feel like making a move. Perhaps that was just what he needed: proof that he was undervalued at Striadus, and the ammunition he'd need if he demanded a raise.

But somehow, I couldn't see that happening. Not any time soon, anyhow.

# Editor's note

It's difficult to say when the events in this book took place.

Although we remain bound by the agreement that we signed upon securing the first of Remus Carey's written reports and still can't reveal which government agreed to hand them over, we can confirm that, for the most part, they continue to be delivered with only minor redactions. In most cases, it's possible through deduction, elimination, and research, to fill in the gaps and present a complete record of every mission.

But one element remains classified: the date or dates of the events described. It's not always clear why this is, but the logical conclusion would be that it's somehow related to protecting the identities of those who were involved. This naturally suggests that, in some cases, names have been changed prior to release.

So, when did the events in this book take place? We can't say for sure, but Carey does drop a few hints. He mentions that he had been married for some time – long enough for he and Odette to have stopped counting – and, when he says that he hoped she had gone out with her friends to celebrate, there was no mention of a minder for Ollie. We can perhaps assume, therefore, that their son was approaching his teenage years.

Moreover, the technology he discusses, while now commonplace, was then in its infancy, and it's likely that Lena and Ilsa would now seem quite primitive compared to modern 'intelligent' agents. It's likely, therefore, that while not his last mission, Carey's trip to Stuttgart came ten to fifteen years into his ad-hoc employment with Europol. It was one of his later missions – but how late, we might never know for sure.

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