

"Sell-Out!"
Chapter Three.

The Girls from Santambrogio Investments.

Security come on the speaker and announce my next appointment.

"Dr. Santambrogio is here, sir."

"Good."

"With three colleagues."

"Well, bring them up."

"With pleasure, sir," says the voice excitedly.

The screen shows Santambrogio Investments of Milan, Miami and Monaco. They seem to be in many different businesses from ships' chandlers to vineyards and the Net Worth Analysis is excellent. So we'll see what they want. The door opens and Security, with a broad smile, ushers in the visitors. The first through the door is a statuesque young woman dressed in a short yellow skirt and tailored yellow jacket. She is followed by another beauty in an identical skirt and jacket, except hers are black and she wears enormous glasses. Then a third sways in, again dressed the same but in red. They each carry colour-matched portapads. Finally Dr. Santambrogio enters - sleek, grey crew-cut hair, with a camel overcoat slung over his shoulders.

"I am Dr. Santambrogio," he says. He indicates his colleagues one by one.

"This is Dottoressa Angela Viretti, this is Dottoressa Carla Blu and this is Dottoressa Margarita Collone." We all shake hands, everybody smiling. I ask them to sit down.

"But," says the Dottore, "we are not from the 'ospital!" We all laugh.

"No. We are from Santambrogio Investments Company. In Italy, we 'ave many qualified people. Eh." He looks approvingly at his girls. They all smile.

"So. You 'ave many things to sell?"

"It depends on your line of business," I say with a smile.

"Eh," he says. The girls all look encouraged.

"We 'ave many businesses in our company. But we are 'ere for mainly only one."

"Excellent," I say. And we all smile again.

"I hope we can do business," I say.

"Eh," he says. 'Eh' seems to have many meanings for Dottore Santambrogio. I presume in this case it means yes or perhaps, good. He continues.

"We are interested to buy," he pauses, "What is..ah si. We are interested to buy your Island of Wiggut."

"My Island of Wiggut?" I ask, puzzled.

"Eh," he says, looking pleased. The beauty with the glasses leans forward,

"Scusi, Dottore," she says to him and whispers in his ear.

"Ah si. Your island of Wyatt. Is what I mean," he says.

“My Island of Wyatt?” I am still puzzled. The girls are now wrinkling their exquisite eyebrows and looking worried. The one with the glasses looks at me and says,

“White. The Island of White, Dottore Briggs.” Now I understand.

“Ah. Right. You want to buy the Isle of Wight.”

“Eh,” says Dottore Santambrogio, “Essato!” We all smile and relax.

“That could probably be arranged.” I say. “But why do you want to buy the Isle of Wight?”

“I know.” he says. “Is ‘orrible place, no?”

“Well, it has its good points,” I say,

“Si, si,” says the Dottore looking at his girls. “Is true, eh?” The girls all nod their beautiful heads and look at me expectantly.

“But,” I add and I am becoming a little confused by all of this, “There are parts of it which are less good. As it were.”

“Eh. You are right. Is not a problem. We fix.” The girls smile confidently.

“You can sell?” asks the Dottore. “Do you ‘ave the pox?”

“Scusi, Dottore,” says the girl with the glasses, looking shocked, and whispers in his ear again.

“Sorry,” says the Dottore, grinning amiably. “Do you ‘ave the proxy? The proxy to sell?”

“Ah,” I say. “I see what you mean. Yes, I am empowered to sell most national assets.”

“Empower-red,” repeats the Dottore, slowly. “Is very nice this - no?” he says to the girls and they all nod and smile.

“So,” he continues, “we tell you why we want to buy.” He looks at the girl in the yellow jacket.

“Angela, per favore.” Angela sits forward, crosses her legs, shakes her hair back, fixes her eyes on me and says at almost breathless speed,

“Santambrogio Investments has many holdings in the leisure, including for example Portofino, but there is shortage of good marina sites in Europe, too much over development, too many resorts of concrete, not enough places for the people with money, only mainly for the cretini. Santambrogio Investments do the analysis of other places close European continent but not on Mediterranean seas, suitable places for improvement, bring up to standards attractive for our customers. Isle of Wight large potential.” The Dottore turns to the girl in the large glasses.

“Carla.” Carla sits forward with her knees together and smooths back her hair. In impeccable English she says,

“There is, of course, much work to be done. Most of the island is low grade tourist material and would need to be refurbished. We know how to do this effectively and are ready to do it. If the price for the island and all its appurtenances is acceptable.”

I look at Margarita who is sitting quietly with a pout on her lips. When she sees I am looking at her, she gives me a radiant smile and then continues pouting. The Dottore does not ask her to speak, so I say,

“That is most interesting, Dottore Santambrogio.”

“Is true, eh? We ‘ave look all over the island. Is ‘orrible mostly. Caravans and tents. Old cars. Disgusting ristoranti. Children every place. Dirty pubs. ‘Orrible, mostly.”

The girls all nod, sad expressions on their beautiful features.

“But we buy everything. We fix. Make nice...” He pauses and Carla whispers in his ear again.

“Make nice and very charming.” The girls are now smiling.

“There are,” I say, trying to raise the ante a little, “many nice places on the island already. The eastern shore, for example.”

“Of course. We are not stupid. We know,” he says. Carla, who now crosses her legs to match the others, says, “The island is a striking example of under-utilisation of good resources. If all of it were rendered as pleasing as the eastern part, revenues would be hugely improved.”

I look at Margharita who is still pouting and she flashes me another radiant smile. The Dottore selects a gold-coloured cigarette from a slim gold case and Margharita lights it for him with a gold lighter.

“Is incredible, this island,” he says, blowing a smoke ring into the air.

“In what way?” I ask politely.

“You know, in England, you ‘ave the bad weather, mostly. But ‘ere in this island, is good. Palm trees and other tropical greens. Is like Portofino. Maybe.”

“There could be problems with the residents,” I point out. “They are rather conservative.”

“Don’ worry. We fix. Is not a problem. We pay.” The girls nod in agreement.

“What is the price?” he asks. I say that I will have to make some calculations, fair to both sides of course, and that I will get back to him.

“O.K. When you get back?”

“Tomorrow morning I should have a price.”

“O.K. Another matter, now.”

“Another matter?” I say, with an expectant smile. Then I notice that everybody else has stopped smiling.

“Si, another matter. Is very important. Don’t ask me how we know this. But we know. The Sultan of Kef Ismel want to buy your SAS, no?” What is going on here? How on earth does he know that? And what has it got to do with him, dammit?

“I don’t see that this has anything to do with your Investment Company, Dr. Santambrogio,” I say, “Even if the information is correct.”

“Eh. Is correct. Don’t worry.” The girls all nod their beautiful heads sadly. He continues:

“Is not a good idea. Not for democracy in the country. Not for you. And not for growth of tourism.”

“Ah. Tourism. I see.” I think for a moment while they watch me. After a while I figure it out.

“You have an interest in the future of Kef Ismel. Presumably with the opposition party.” I may as well show that I’ve understood the scenario.

“Eh. Essato. You are right, Dottore Briggs. Listen. You make a lot of money if you sell the SAS to the Sheikh?”

“I’m sure it’s worth a lot.”

“No. Is not what I mean. You. You make a lot of money. For yourself. Eh. Bonus. Your fee, commission, what is called?”

“My remuneration is my affair, I think. Not yours.”

“Listen. We pay you the same commission as you get for selling to the Sultan - only

you don't sell. And you make another commission for selling SAS to somebody else. Double commission. Is good, eh? What you think?"

"Let me see if I've got this right. You want me to refuse to sell the SAS to the Sultan. If I do this, you will re-imburse me the lost commission?"

"Si. But maybe is not enough for you. We can discuss."

"I'm not concerned about the level of your bribe. I'm concerned about the fact that it's a bribe. A bribe to divert the course of government business." He looks at me pityingly. The girls are studying the floor.

"Eh. Government. What is? Is not important. We are all 'ere to make money and to live content, no?" He stands up.

"Dottore Briggs. Think. Is a good offer. You make friends. Is good for your future. Is important, the future, no? We can discuss if something else you want. We are very" He looks at Margharita who opens her mouth for the first time and breathes: "Accommodating, Dottore."

"Si. Accommodating. Think, Dottore Briggs." The girls all get up and smooth their skirts.

"Tomorrow in the afternoon," he continues. "We come to this office. Take a coffee. Thank you very much, Dottore Briggs." He turns at the door.

"Eh. Think."

They leave and I start thinking.
