



**Zoë Beck**  
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Sample translation by Rachel Hildebrandt

*London, near future*

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Red, white and blue were not her colors.

Morayo Humphrey was black.

Mo passed the protesters on her way home. They were peaceful, even the trashing of the construction site had been relatively low key. Stuff only happened after dark, and since the homeless had taken over the site, nothing except the construction vehicles had been vandalized. The sit-in had remained non-violent, but the demonstrators were active and efficient in their use of the social media. Their main goal was to cause annoyance, and their posters and banners reading “Olive Morris has not been forgotten!” were always in sight.

The ones who were not opposed to violence and conflict were the counter-protesters. Rumor had it they were being paid, and they were always loud and ready for a fight. Perhaps they really were getting something on the side. In any case, they were well-organized, and showed up on set days and times. Today was one of those days, and Mo started home at her normal time. As usual, the protesters had moved into the excavator and crane cabs, where they carefully unfurled their banners. The counter-protesters goose-stepped past them, barking their usual slogan, *red, white and blue*. When they caught sight of Mo, some of them broke rank and tried to surround her. One guy grabbed her hair, yelling: “Go home! You don’t belong here.”

He yanked so hard she thought he was going to scalp her: hair, skin and all.

Mo rammed her elbow into his stomach and ran. She knew this neighborhood and which alleys to slip down. Now she was home and just wanted to unwind.

She could still hear them, muffled but clear - *red, white and blue*. Maybe it was just in her head. Either way, she could still hear them, despite the fact the windows were shut and the

door was bolted multiple times. No one was in the apartment except her, and everything else was silent. It all would have been just fine if the voices had not followed her, *red, white and blue*. They had apparently slipped inside with her.

Mo woke up her computer, which promptly displayed the latest news. Now there were images inside her apartment as well. The demonstrators and counter-demonstrators, framed by ads for the referendum. The pictures made her feel nervous, so she shut the machine back down.

She called up the playlist on her phone, and Mogwai began to blare through her speakers. After stretching out on the couch, she closed her eyes and focused on the music, her breathing. Nothing worked, instead she felt increasingly anxious. Her scalp still stung, and her heart was galloping unevenly. Standing up, she started pacing, biting hard on her lips, her tongue. She crossed her arms and dug her fingers deeply into her skin. No good. She knelt down and tried a little yoga without a mat but realized right away how ridiculous this was. Getting back on her feet, she went into her bedroom and pulled everything out of the hiding place in the closet: her tube, aluminum foil, H, lighter. She returned to the couch, sat down, and spread it all out on the coffee table. She rubbed the foil flat with her sleeve, creased it, sprinkled the H across it, and heated it. The stuff was so pure and good it melted instantly, the oily substance flowing gracefully across the foil.

“Go home,” the guy had said, the one who had almost ripped her hair out.

She was on her way.

追龙.

Hunting the dragons.

Chased by the monsters. Red, white and blue - fading into the distance. A few minutes later, Mo's head was on the armrest as she stared at the ceiling, no longer vulnerable to the pain or anxiety.

This stillness.

This bliss that outshone everything else.

She was floating in a bubble of pure euphoria, as the red, white and blue filth slipped off of her like teflon. For the next few hours.

And whenever she wanted to feel like this. She alone determined the dosage.

Just like now.

As silence reigned.

It had been five days since Leigh had heard anything from the man under the floor. He was slowly beginning to relax, and it had been a long time since he had been able to do that where this man was concerned. He was the reason Leigh's life had become so extremely unpleasant, particularly over the past few months. In all honesty, Leigh was feeling better now that the situation was clearly on the upswing. Right after putting the man in his floor, he had wondered if he would ever feel like this again. But everything had been quiet the past five days. Finally.

Leigh was always the first one in his restaurant in the morning and the last one to leave at night. It had been a traditional English pub under his parents' management. Back then, Clapham had still been a fairly poor neighborhood, but times had changed, as had the clientele. Their customers started to have more money, which they enjoyed spending. The pub had always done good business, but it began doing even better thanks to the new locals, especially whenever major sports events were on TV. But when the smoking ban went into effect, their customers started to thin out. With his diploma fresh in hand, Leigh advised his parents to undertake an extensive renovation of the pub. They reopened as a steakhouse one month later, and things went well from there. As the number of vegan and vegetarian restaurants increased, so did their profits. Another smaller renovation a few years later transformed the steakhouse into an upscale establishment specializing in steaks and burgers, and yes, they even offered a veggie burger. The restaurant was at the top of its game, and its good reputation spread quickly. However, his father then died of a heart attack, and shortly thereafter, his mother was diagnosed with cancer. She followed her husband two years later, leaving Leigh in charge.

His restaurant was written up in various gourmet and travel magazines, which was why Leigh started to consider opening a second restaurant. However, he was soon forced to give up this idea, in large part due to the man under the floor.

"You have a pretty nice place here," the man had remarked the first time they met. He was wearing a dark suit, not especially expensive or particularly cheap, and carrying a nondescript black briefcase, also not especially expensive or particularly cheap. However, Leigh noticed right away that he was wearing very nice shoes and that his watch had cost more than a little. He was not wearing a Rolex or anything in that price range, but the understated silver timepiece must have fallen in the four-figure category. Leigh paid attention to details like this, just as his father had taught him. "You can tell who you're dealing with by their shoes," his father had said time and time again. And: "A watch will show you how much they earn. Or how much they'd like to." Leigh had learned a lot about people from his father, and from his mother, he had learned the ins and outs of running a business.

Neither of these things helped him much that evening, when shortly before closing, the man took a seat across from him at the bar and expressed his approval of the decor. Leigh thanked him politely, sincerely apologizing that the kitchen was already closed for the day. Could he offer him something to drink instead, a glass of wine or a whiskey? The man gratefully accepted and ordered the most expensive Brunello Leigh had in stock before making himself comfortable on the barstool. He watched attentively as the last of the guests prepared to set off, obviously intoxicated, leaving behind a huge tip for George, the waiter. After that, he asked for

a menu (“Just want to take a look!”) and studied it with such intensity that it seemed as if he meant to memorize it.

The man was still sitting on the stool after George cleaned up and disappeared in the back to change. Leigh was now alone with the strange guest, and he asked him if he would like anything else or if he was ready for the bill, a suggestion that almost pained him, since he had never needed to be so impolite to a customer before. But there was something different about this man, who remained stuck to his stool like a piece of ancient gum and ordered another glass of wine. Only once George and the boys from the kitchen left did the man stretch out his back with a sigh, smile a little wearily, and say with a nod: “Alright then.”

“The bill?”

“The books.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Leigh let a note of irritation creep into his voice.

“Show me your books.”

“What?”

“You know what I mean.”

For a few moments, Leigh wondered if the man was from Inland Revenue. An unannounced audit. Or someone from the public health department who thought he could throw his weight around here. In those first few seconds, he really did not get what the man wanted. Annoyed, he watched him set his briefcase on the counter, before opening it and pulling out an iPad.

“Fine,” he said amiably. “If you won’t show me your books, we’ll do this another way. How many square meters is this?” He scanned the space and glanced toward the kitchen, but did not stand up. “About two hundred all told, right? One eighty? Let’s call it one eighty since the wine is so good. Do you rent this place or own it?”

Leigh stared at him grimly, refusing to answer and polishing glasses instead.

“It’s yours, isn’t it? Your parents worked here for decades before you did.” He began to tap away on his iPad, quietly murmuring a string of numbers while counting the tables, his lips pursed in apparent concentration. He even flipped through the menu a little before finally saying: “What do you think? How about we start with 2,500 pounds a month?” The man winked at him cheerfully.

Leigh continued to polish the glasses. “The wine is on the house,” he said. “Now get out of here. We’re closed.”

The man laughed: “Of course, the wine’s on the house, just like the food from now on! Did you think we were going to nickel and dime the price down?”

“Get out!”

“Your family has owned this place for a long time. When did your grandparents leave that Yorkshire village and move to London? Right after the war, right? Your mother was born here, just like you. You grew up behind this bar.”

“I can also call the police.” Leigh reached for the phone.

The man kept talking. “You know that Chinese place, Old Town at the corner of Grafton Square? I’m sure you heard about what happened. It had been in the same family for decades, too. Would you believe the kitchen caught fire? Almost took the pub next door with it.” The man shook his head regretfully. “They called the police, but for whatever reason, they never show up in time.” He smiled, gesturing broadly. “Let’s make it three.”

Leigh knew he had been lucky. His number could have come up years ago. The reason why this man showed up today of all days was beyond him, but what he did know for sure was that he would have to give up his dream of a second restaurant. This man would now get the money with which he had planned to finance the new venture. He thought for a moment, then put away the glass he had spent the last five minutes polishing before responding: “Three thousand is too high. I’ll show you the books.”

The man laid the iPad back down on the counter and raised his glass with one last slosh of Brunello in it as a toast.

Things ran smoothly for a while. The man who wanted to be called Gonzo, despite being an Englishman with no obvious roots anywhere else, scaled his demands in line with Leigh’s books. The restaurant was supposed to keep going, not go bankrupt, and Leigh viewed these payments as a kind of nondeductible monthly insurance premium.

One year ago, without any obvious cause, Gonzo accused Leigh of deceiving him with falsified records and demanded more money. Leigh had no chance to say, “Let me talk to your boss,” although he really wanted to. He knew that Gonzo worked for people who made their money from drugs, weapons and prostitution. The protection money was only a small part of their income. He suspected that a clan from Croydon was behind this, the one that some people affectionately called the Croydon Boyce, Boyce being their family name. At the same time, Leigh was not sure about this, and he would never have risked asking Gonzo.

He haggled the man down some, but still ended up paying more than he could actually afford, and each month brought with it a renewed discussion about the authenticity of Leigh’s books. At some point, he decided to make a copy of his tax returns, which he then had notarized. He showed this to Gonzo, who rejected it with a wave, calling it a cheap counterfeit not worth the paper it was printed on. He then increased his financial demands slightly as a result of his bad mood.

Leigh was slowly running out of money, and with that money faded his patience. The man was convinced that business was running great, but Leigh could feel the impact of Brexit. Wealthy tourists from the continent were increasingly avoiding South London. The university students from the EU were growing rarer, while at the same time the British students were becoming more frugal in the face of rent and tuition hikes. Many EU citizens had been forced to leave the country as their companies pulled out of Great Britain, and the local residents were now tighter with their money, due to the volatility of the pound and the uncertainty of whether they would still have their jobs come tomorrow. London’s newcomers now came from China and Russia, and they tended to keep to themselves. For the first time since Leigh’s grandparents opened the restaurant seventy years ago, business was lukewarm, and the situation had become dire because of the payments to Gonzo. Leigh had to dig into his savings. When the freezer broke down, taking with it not only the expensive beef and several kilos of bison but also the wooden floor in the storeroom, the expenses threatened to bury him alive. He had already had to take out a loan in order to make it through the summer, and he doubted if the bank would be all that eager to give him a second one. Gonzo simply shrugged apathetically.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. I’m sure we’ll reach an agreement by then,” he said. Without asking, he grabbed two expensive bottles of red wine from the shelf and walked through the empty restaurant out onto the street. He paused in front of a large window, the bottlenecks

craning out of his briefcase and a smoking cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He grinned and waved before disappearing down the street toward Clapham Common.

Even after all this time, Leigh knew nothing about this man, not even if he took the e-shuttle or the subway. He might even just walk over. He had no idea how old Gonzo was, if he had a girlfriend (he definitely was not gay), if he really liked to drink red wine or if it was just an act to get on his nerves.

Leigh wondered if perhaps he could speak with someone from the Boyce family after all. It could hardly be in their best interest to drive his business into the ground. They had made a lot of money off of him because his business had been doing well. And now they wanted him to go bankrupt? Did they want the property or to take over the restaurant?

He skirted the bar and went to the door to lock up. He hung up the sign he had prepared announcing to his customers that the restaurant would be closed for a week for renovation. A week without any revenue, but he would still have to pay most of the salaries. The new freezer had been delivered today, and the storeroom floor was going to be ripped out tomorrow and a new one put in. He could not afford to hire a carpenter, so he had figured out what he needed to do - as well as the details about materials, costs and time - by visiting a building supply store and several online forums.

George and a few of the boys from the kitchen were going to help him tear out the old wooden floor tomorrow. He would then be able to spread a concrete layer to even out the floor, insulate it, and create a surface for the tiles. Whenever he thought about the cost of the materials, he felt sick to his stomach.

Leigh turned out all the lights except for one small lamp behind the bar. He poured himself a glass of wine (he never drank during business hours) and sat down on a barstool to consider his options. By midnight, he was convinced that he could change Gonzo's mind. He would pull together all the renovation receipts and ask for an extension. He would then tell Gonzo about his idea for a second restaurant, which was a sure thing because it was just that good. Gonzo would simply have to be a little patient, but then he would earn more than he had before.

His hard-nosed behavior over the past few months might have any number of causes, but deep down inside, Gonzo had to know what it took to strike a good deal. Maybe he would even be willing to invest in the new venture, since it was probably easier for people like him to invest in a good business than to run one themselves. Hadn't Gonzo declared that they would definitely be able to come to an agreement? The man had never been violent, never openly threatened him, never even cursed. See, a businessman.

After draining his wine and climbing the stairs to his apartment, Leigh knew that in the end everything would work out well.

Twenty-four hours later, Leigh hoped that nobody could hear the roar of the mortar mixer. As he dumped in the gravel, cement and water, he wondered if he should cement the pistol in with the man in the floor or if he should keep it. He decided it should go in the floor. He had no intention of using the thing again, besides it did not even belong to him. It would be best for it to rest in peace in the cement floor alongside its owner.

Forty-eight hours later, Leigh thought he could hear sounds coming from the floor. Sometimes it was scratching, sometimes moaning or sighing. He could even hear the noises up in his apartment above the restaurant. Each time he stepped into the storeroom, he was afraid he would find a hand or a leg reaching out of the floor, but everything stayed smooth and intact.

Leigh's anxiety did not abate until he reopened the restaurant and the customers poured in as if they had not eaten in a week. He no longer heard anything from the man under his floor, not even after everyone had left and he stood all alone in the doorway to the storeroom, straining to listen. No, there was nothing, absolute silence. Leigh was content, even happy. A week and a half passed, and nobody came to take Gonzo's place.

The next day started out foggy, but the October sun was shining brightly by afternoon. Things were usually slow between lunch and supper, so he decided to poke around online to see what properties might be available for his new restaurant. Just to look. To dream a little and forge some plans. But he never made it off the news site, which was where he found the article about what had happened the previous night in the Port of Tilbury.

What he had set in motion.

Unfortunately, there were several men who had no idea what Leigh had done. They had their own theories about what had happened to Gonzo, and a restaurant owner in Clapham did not figure into them.

One of these men was Declan Boyce, and what Leigh would later read about online had not occurred yet. Declan had just closed his eyes and was wiping the blood splatters from his face with his sleeve. As he did this, he thought: I'll have to burn my clothes after we're done here. When he opened his eyes, he looked into the three faces turned toward him.

"Why do you want me to stop?" The hand that Leo had just been using was still balled into a fist, blood trickling down his knuckles.

The man he had been beating whimpered, wheezed and spit out red phlegm. Declan assumed a few teeth were in the mix as well. If Victor were not holding him upright, he would already be sprawled on the ground. Victor had also gotten splattered with blood, but it did not seem to bother him.

Leo repeated his question, and Declan finally said: "It's not helping."

"Speak for yourself." Leo turned back to the man in Victor's arms. For a moment, it looked as if he wanted to say something to him, but then he just punched him again. This time he aimed for the solar plexus, and with a muffled groan, the man crumpled, unconscious.

Victor shook him lightly.

"Great. Is he dead?"

"He'll be fine." Leo slapped the man. "Declan, get some water."

"Where am I supposed to get water around here?" Declan asked, looking around as if expecting a port pub to suddenly materialize any second out of the darkness between the giant containers.

"There's a bottle in the car," Leo said, tossing him his keys.

"Super." Declan Boyce was secretly glad to get away for a few minutes. The sight of blood always made him a little queasy, and besides that, he was cold. He set off, got lost between the containers which looked even more alike at night than they did during the day, and eventually located the car and the water bottle. He did not need to worry about anyone catching sight of him. Of the port constables working the night shift, at least one of them was plastered. The surveillance cameras were practically useless considering the crappy quality of the footage they shot at night. And down here along the Thames, everything was quiet. The ships had already been unloaded and were docked in the harbor basin. The dock workers would not pay them the slightest bit of attention.

They had been tipped off that the man would be at the Port of Tilbury tonight, and their informant had been right. The only problem was that their man had not yet provided the name of the person he had planned to meet. Or the rationale behind the effort to ruin their businesses. Or the motivation behind killing Gonzo of all people.

Gonzo had worked for Declan's father and older brother for years, making sure the businesses in South London ran smoothly. It was always hard to find reliable people. After all, this kind of work was done without work contracts or pension payments. You had to trust each other, though at the same time, you could not trust anyone.

Gonzo's real name was Gerald Miller, but he had gone by Gonzo since elementary school, and perhaps that really was the truth. After he had been missing for three or four days, Old Man Boyce sent his sons out to see what was going on.

Declan and his brother Mick discovered a wad of cash in Gonzo's apartment, hidden in his mattress: over one hundred thousand pounds. (Where the hell...?) Otherwise, they found no clues about what might have happened. The apartment did not look as if anybody had packed up to do a runner. Declan even found Gonzo's passport in a drawer that held all sorts of other documents, none of which proved helpful. The fridge was decently stocked. Restaurant leftovers were waiting to be warmed up, while an opened bottle of wine sat in the fridge door. They took the money with them and reported back to their father. They were lucky they had gotten there before the landlord had noticed that something was off with Mr. Miller and called the police to file a missing person's report.

Old Man Boyce listened to what his boys had to say, then considered his options before calling at least five different people. He eventually announced that they were all going to take a drive to the East End, which is where they met with Victor Thrift, who ran things in this part of the city. Only a few hours later, Victor Thrift, Old Man Boyce and his two sons, and Leo Hunter, the North London boss, were sitting around a table. They all agreed: Gonzo had gone over to the new gang. They had found someone who was not directly linked to the drug trade so as not to awaken any suspicion. For his part, Gonzo had been paid handsomely for his information.

There was no other logical explanation.

They also all agreed that Gonzo had to be dead. They were not deceived by the fact that his apartment looked as if he would return any minute. If he had planned to disappear, he would have staged everything to look just like this: food in the fridge, ID papers in the drawer. He would have had new papers forged and taken nothing along from his old life. But he never would have just walked away from one hundred thousand pounds in cash.

This, too, had no other logical explanation.

Declan could not leave it at that. "Why would they kill him? He was on their side, they were paying him."

"Maybe he was about to blow their deal, and they found out about it," his father replied. "He might have just pretended he was working for them when he was actually spying for us, not the other way around. They could have realized what he was up to." He glanced around the table. Victor Thrift and Leo Hunter looked doubtful. "I know what you're thinking, but I know Gonzo. He was my best man."

And so it was decided that they would focus on the new crew. They were gradually taking over more and more of the drug trade, so elegantly and subtly that it had taken the three bosses a long time to even notice what was going on. The three of them would never move into each other's territory. There were unspoken rules out there, and these were the ones they honored. If they wanted to expand their territory, then it had to be into areas no one else claimed.

Decisions were made jointly.

Negotiations were done face to face.

Deals were sealed with a handshake.

Promises were never broken.

This was why they would now work together: Gonzo had to be avenged.

They sent out informants, offered bounties, occasionally helped to jog memories with fists, combined the information being supplied to them, tore their hair out, and eventually concluded that the new crew was working in a decentralized manner through the exclusive use of the internet. One name finally bobbed to the top, and with that name, a time and a place: Jimmy Macfarlane, Port of Tilbury, 1 am Thursday morning. They grabbed him with the intention of beating out of him the details about his employer and about what had happened to Gonzo.

This is why they were there that night.

It took Declan longer to make his way back, because this time he got totally lost and was convinced that the others had gone somewhere else. He stopped walking and listened, hoping to hear something. He eventually called Leo, prepaid cell to prepaid cell.

Leo gave him directions. Declan had no idea how he was able to do that, but when he found them, Macfarlane was passed out on the ground, and Victor was pissing on him.

Declan knew it was better not to say anything, but he did anyway. "Couldn't you wait until I got back with the water?"

"We assumed you'd fallen in the harbor, kid." With a grin, Victor stuck his prick back in his pants and zipped up before wiping his hands on his jacket. He still had blood splatters on his face.

"Is he awake yet?" Declan asked.

Leo prodded the man on the ground with his foot. "Hey. Hey! Wake up, princess!"

The man groaned.

"See, he's doing better." Leo looked satisfied.

"Do you still need the water?" Declan asked.

"He'll be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in no time," Leo declared.

"I was actually thinking..." Declan trailed off.

"What? That you'd wash the piss off his face?" Victor's laughter ricocheted down the narrow alleys between the containers. Declan thought he heard a few gulls fussing overhead.

Leo kicked the man in the ribs. He curled up in pain and rolled onto his side, coughing. Declan set down the water bottle.

"Okay then. Good morning, we're still here," Leo remarked.

The man did not answer, at least not coherently.

"Who do you really work for?" Leo asked.

The man tried to get up on his hands and knees. He moved as if in slow motion, and Declan could practically feel the man's agony. He felt miserable. As Leo drew back to aim another kick at the crawling man, Declan stepped between them. He crouched down beside the man, trying his best to ignore the smell of urine, and said: "We know you're part of this group. We just want you to give us a few names. Who's your boss, and which of you killed Gonzo. If you talk, we'll let you go. If you don't talk, my friend here will get serious. In case you were thinking he was already playing hard ball, you should know he was just warming up."

Leo grunted in agreement.

The crawling man hung his head and whispered something. Declan asked him to repeat himself as he leaned closer and listened hard.

"I don't know any Gonzo." At least, that is what Declan thought he said.

“You don’t know any Gonzo?” He asked to be sure, and Jimmy Macfarlane’s bloodied head nodded wearily.

“Oh, I’m afraid that wasn’t a good answer, but I’ll give you one more chance. Maybe we should start with some easier questions. Who do you work for?”

Macfarlane shook his head.

“What do you mean? You don’t have a boss?”

“He’s the boss!” Leo cut in. “Sure, this pile of shit hired himself to get Gonzo out of the way.” Leo kicked the man who was up on all fours in the rear. He fell forward, knocking his head hard against the pavement where he remained flattened out, arms and legs splayed in all directions. He whimpered, apparently lacking strength to do anything else.

“No Gonzo,” he whispered. “No boss.” He coughed and spit out more phlegm.

Declan stood up and gestured for Leo Hunter and Victor Thrift. “Maybe we grabbed the wrong guy, and he really doesn’t know what we’re talking about.” As he caught sight of Leo’s expression, he quickly added: “I just want to be sure.”

Victor responded: “Our informant is solid, and he checked with several sources. Our little princess here,” he jerked his thumb at Macfarlane, “actually works for one of our suppliers. He knows when and where the deliveries are made since he’s the one placing the orders.”

“He works for you?”

“Indirectly.”

“Don’t talk shit with me. You know him?”

“Indirectly,” Victor repeated stubbornly.

“You know him, too?” he asked Leo.

Leo raised his hands defensively. “These are supply chains we’re talking about. It’s complicated.”

Declan studied the two older men, paused to think, and then said: “He supplies us as well?”

Leo and Victor nodded without making eye contact with him.

“Shit.”

They nodded again.

[...]