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HELSINKI, FINLAND

Monday, December 6, 1999

The Russians were serious players. If things didn't go as planned, Sergei said, I'd be lucky to be shot dead in the hotel lobby. If they captured me, I'd be taken to a remote bit of wasteland and have my stomach slit open. They'd pull my intestines out and leave me to watch them squirm around on my chest like a bucket of freshly caught eels for the thirty minutes it would take me to die. These things happen, he had explained, when you mess with the main men in ROC (Russian Organized Crime). But I didn't have a choice; I desperately needed the cash.

"What's it called again, Sergei?" I mimed the disembowelment.

Eyes staring straight ahead, he gave a brief, somber smile and muttered, "Viking's revenge."

It was just before seven P.M. and it had already been dark for three and a half hours. The air temperature had been well below freezing all day; it hadn't snowed for a while, but there was still a lot of the stuff about, plowed to the sides of the roads.

The two of us had been sitting very still for the best part of an hour. Until I'd just spoken, our breathing was the only sign of movement. We were parked two blocks away from the Intercontinental Hotel, using the shadows between the streetlights to conceal our presence in the dirty black Nissan 4x4. The rear seats were down flat to make it easier to hide the target inside, complete with me

wrapped round him like a wrestler to keep him there. The 4x4 was sterile: no prints and completely empty apart from the trauma pack lying on the folded seats. Our boy had to be delivered across the border alive, and a couple of liters of Ringer's solution might come in handy if this job turned into a gangfuck. Right now, it certainly had all the ingredients of one. I found myself hoping it wouldn't be me needing the infusion.

It had been a while since I'd felt the need to precanulate, making it quicker for me to replace any fluid from gunshot wounds, but today had just that feel about it. I'd brought a catheter from the U.K. and it was already inserted into a vein under my left forearm, secured by tape and protected by an Ace bandage. Anticoagulant was preloaded inside the catheter's needle and chamber to stop the blood that filled it from clotting. Ringer's solution isn't as good as plasma to replace blood loss—it's only a saline mix—but I didn't want anything plasma-based. Russian quality control was a contradiction in terms, and money was what I wanted to return to the U.K. with, not HIV. I'd spent enough time in Africa not treating anyone's gunshot wounds because of the risk of infection, and I wasn't about to let it happen now.

We sat facing Mannerheimintie, 600 feet down the hill from our position. The boulevard was the main drag into the city center, just a fifteen minute walk away to the right. It carried a constant stream of slow, obedient traffic each side of the streetcar lines. Up here it was like a different world. Low-level apartment buildings hugged each side of the quiet street and an inverted V of white Christmas lights sparkled in almost every window.

People walked past, straining under the weight of their purchases, crammed into large shopping bags with pictures of holly and Santa. They didn't notice us as they headed home to their smart apartments; they were too busy keeping their footing on the icy sidewalks and their heads down against the wind that howled and buffeted the 4x4.

The engine had been off all the time we'd been here, and it was like sitting in a fridge. Our breath billowed like low cloud as we waited.

I kept visualizing how, when, and where I was going to do my stuff, and more importantly, what I was going to do if things got fucked up. Once the target has been selected the basic sequence of

a kidnapping is nearly always the same. First comes reconnaissance; second, abduction; third, detention; fourth, negotiation; fifth, ransom payment; and finally, release—though sometimes that doesn't happen. My job was to plan and implement the first three phases; the rest of the task was out of my hands.

Three members of the loud-tie-and-suspenders brigade from a private bank had approached me in London. They'd been given my name by an ex-Regiment (SAS) mate who now worked for one of the big security companies, and who'd been nice enough to recommend me when this particular commission had been declined.

"Britain," they said to me as we sat at a window table in the roof bar of the Hilton, looking down on to the gardens of Buckingham Palace, "is facing an explosion in Russian mafia-organized crime. London is a money-laundering haven. The ROC are moving as much as £20 billion through the City each year, and up to two hundred of their senior players either live in Britain or visit regularly."

The executives went on to say they'd discovered that millions had been channeled through Valentin Lebed's accounts at their bank in just three years. They didn't like that, and were none too keen on the thought of the boys with the blue flashing lights paying him a visit and seeing the name on all his paying-in slips. Their solution was to have Val lifted and taken to St. Petersburg, where, I presumed, they had either made arrangements to persuade him to move his account to a different bank, or to channel even more through them to make the risk more acceptable. Whichever, I didn't give a fuck so long as I got paid.

I looked over at Sergei. His eyes glinted as he stared at the traffic below us and his Adam's apple moved as he swallowed. There wasn't anything left to say; we'd done enough talking during the two-week buildup. It was now time to do.

The conference of European Council members was due to start in Helsinki in two days. Blue EU flags already lined the main roads, and large black convoys of Eurocrats drove around with motorcycle outriders, heading from premeeting to premeeting. The police had set up diversions to control the flow of traffic around the city, and orange reflective cones and barriers were springing up everywhere. I'd already had to change our escape route twice because of it.

Like all the high-class hotels, the Intercontinental was housing the exodus from Brussels. All the suits had been in the city since last

week, wheeling and dealing so that when the heads of state hit town, all they'd have to do was politely refuse Tony Blair's invitation to eat British beef at some dinner for the media, then leave. All very good, but for me security around here was tighter than a duck's ass—everything from sealed manholes to prevent bombs being planted to a heavy police presence on the streets. They would certainly have contingency plans for every possible event, especially armed attack.

Sergei had a folding-stock AK—a Russian automatic, 7.62mm short assault rifle—under his feet. His cropped, thinning brown hair was covered by a dark-blue woolen hat, and the old Soviet Army body armor he wore under his down jacket made him look like the Michelin man. If Hollywood was looking for a Russian hardhead, Sergei would win the screen test every time. Late forties, square jaw, high cheekbones, and blue eyes that didn't just pierce, they chopped you into tiny pieces. The only reason he would never be a leading man was his badly pockmarked skin. Either he'd steered away from the Clearasil in his youth or he'd been burned; I couldn't tell, and I didn't want to ask. He was a hard, reliable man, and one I felt it was okay to do business with, but he wasn't going to be on my Christmas-card list.

I had read about Sergei Lysenkov's freelance activities in Intelligence Service reports. He had been a member of Spetnaz's Alpha Group, an elite of special-forces officers within the KGB, who used to be deployed wherever Moscow's power was under threat or there were wars of expansion. When hardline heads of the KGB led the 1991 coup in Moscow, they ordered Alpha Group to kill Yeltsin as he held out in the Russian White House, but Sergei and his mates decided that enough was enough and that the politicians were all as bad as each other. They disobeyed the order, the coup failed, and when Yeltsin learned what had nearly happened he took them under his direct command, cutting their power by turning them into his own bodyguards. Sergei decided to quit and make his experience and knowledge available to the highest bidder, and today that was me. It had been easy enough to make contact: I just went to Moscow and asked a few security companies where I could find him.

I needed Russians on the team because I needed to know how Russians think, how Russians do. And when I discovered that Valentin Lebed would be in Helsinki for twenty-four hours of R and R, and not in his fortress in St. Petersburg, Sergei was the only one

who could organize vehicles, weapons, and the bribing of border guards in the time available.

The people who'd briefed me on the job had done their homework well. Valentin Lebed, they were able to tell me, had been smart during the fall of communism. Unlike some of his gaucher colleagues, he didn't keep the designer labels on the sleeves of his new suit to show how much it had cost. His rise was brutal and meteoric; within two years he was one of the dozen heads of the "mafocracy" who had made ROC so powerful around the world. Lebed's firm employed only ex-KGB agents overseas, using their skills and experience to run international crime like a military operation.

Coming from dirt-poor beginnings as a farmer's son in Chechnya, he'd fought against the Russians in the mid-nineties war. His fame was sealed after rallying his men by making them watch *Braveheart* time and time again as the Russians bombed them day after day. He even painted his face half blue when attacking. After the war he'd had other ideas, all of them involving U.S. dollars, and the place he'd chosen to realize them was St. Petersburg.

Much of his money came from arms dealing, extortion, and a string of nightclubs he owned in Moscow and elsewhere, which served as fronts for prostitution rackets. Jewellery businesses he had "acquired" in Eastern Europe were used as a front to fence icons stolen from churches and museums. He also had bases in the United States, and was said to have brokered a deal to dump hundreds of tons of American toxic waste on his motherland. In the Far East, he'd even bought an airline just so he could ship out heroin without administrative hassle. Within just a few years, according to the guys who'd briefed me, such activities were said to have netted him more than \$200 million.

Three blocks on the other side of the hotel, parked in a car that would be abandoned once this lift kicked off, were two more of the six-man team. Carpenter and Nightmare were armed with 9mm mini-Uzi machine guns, a very small version of the Uzi 9mm, on harnesses under their overcoats, the same as the BGs (bodyguards) we were going up against. They were good, reliable weapons, if a little heavy for their size. It was ironic, but Sergei had obtained the team's Uzis and old Spanish, semiautomatic suppressed 7mm pistols from one of Valentin's own dealers.

Carpenter and Nightmare weren't their real names, of course;

Sergei—the only one who spoke English—had told me that was how they translated, and that was how he referred to them. Just as well, as I couldn't have pronounced them in Russian anyway.

Nightmare was living up to his name. He certainly wasn't the sharpest tool in Sergei's shed. Things needed to be demonstrated twenty or thirty times before he got the idea. There was a slight flatness to his face that, together with his constantly shifting eyes and the fact that he didn't seem too good at keeping food in his mouth, made him look a bit scary.

Carpenter had a heroin habit that Sergei assured me would not affect his performance, but it certainly had during the buildup. He had lips that were constantly at work, as though he'd swallowed something and was trying to recapture the taste. Sergei told him that if he screwed up on the ground he would personally kill him.

Nightmare was like a big brother to Carpenter and protected him when Sergei gave him a hard time for messing up, but it seemed to me that Nightmare would be lost without him, that they needed each other. Sergei told me they'd been friends since they were teenagers. Nightmare's family had looked after Carpenter when his mother went down for life for killing her husband. She'd discovered he'd raped his own seventeen-year-old daughter. As if that wasn't enough, Sergei was his uncle, his father's brother. It was *As the World Turns*, Russian style, and the only thing I liked about it was that it made my own family seem normal. Carpenter and Nightmare would be in the hotel with me for the lift; perhaps I could keep some control over them if I had them with me.

The last two on the team I'd christened the James brothers and they were in a green Toyota 4x4. I wasn't so worried about them; unlike the other two, they didn't have to be told what to do more than twice. They had the trigger on the target's three black Mercedes, which were about a mile and a half away from the hotel. They also had folding-stock AKs and AP (armor-piercing) rounds in their mags, and, like Sergei, they wore enough body armor to cripple a small horse.

The target was well protected in the hotel and his vehicles were securely parked underground so that no device—explosive from his enemies or listening or surveillance from law enforcement—could be placed. When they finally moved out to pick him up from the hotel with the rest of his BGs, the Jameses would follow. Carpenter

and Nightmare would then take up their positions in the hotel, along with me. Sergei, Jesse, and Frank would take on the vehicles.

The Jameses were both ex-Alpha Group, too, but unlike Sergei they were far too good-looking to be straight. They'd been together since their time as young conscripts in Afghanistan, leaving after the previous Chechen war in the mid-nineties, disillusioned with the leadership that had let them lose against the rebels. Both were in their mid-thirties, with dyed blond hair, very clean shaven and well groomed. If they'd wanted a change of career they could have become catalog models. They had never been parted during their military career. As far as I could make out, all they wanted to do was kill Chechen rebels—and swap admiring glances.

I knew I could trust Sergei, but I still wondered about his selection procedure. He obviously wanted to keep most of the cash I'd promised him and had decided not to bring the A team.

It was the most unprofessional job I'd ever been on, and I'd been on a few. Things had got so bad that I'd even taken to sleeping with my door barred and my weapon ready. If the team wasn't complaining to him about my planning, Sergei said, they were moaning about who was earning what and how they might get ripped off when it came to payday. Carpenter was so homophobic he made Hitler look like a wet liberal, and it had taken as much effort keeping the two pairs away from each other as it had preparing for the job. I did my best to keep out of their way and concentrated on dealing exclusively with Sergei; he was the one I had to keep happy, because he was the only one who could help me get the target into Russia. But they'd got me nervous; people were going to die today, and I didn't want to be one of them.

I was with a scary crew, against a scary target, with the whole of Western Europe's leadership due in town, bringing along enough security to take on China. This wasn't a good day out but, fuck it, desperation makes people do desperate things.

I blew out another cloud of breath. The digital display on the dashboard told me another twenty minutes had passed—time for a radio check. Reaching into my inside jacket pocket, I felt for the send button of my very yellow Motorola handset, the sort that parents use to keep tabs on their kids on the ski slopes or in the shopping mall. All six of us had one, each connected to an earpiece which was hooked in place. With so many people using headphones

on their mobile phones, we wouldn't be conspicuous wandering around with them in.

I pressed twice, the squelch sounding off in my ear, then checked with Sergei. He nodded; I was sending. Jesse and Frank replied with two squelches, then Carpenter and Nightmare followed with three. If I'd hit the send button and there was nothing from the Jameses, Carpenter and Nightmare would have waited thirty seconds and replied anyway. We would have no option then but to close in on the target and wait for the Mercs to arrive—not good, as it exposed us three in the hotel and messed up coordination. There was radio silence for two reasons. One, I couldn't speak the language, and two, EU land security would be listening in. With any luck, a few clicks here and there wouldn't mean a thing. There were many other standby comms I could have used, mobile phones for instance, but everything had to be kept pretty basic for Nightmare and Carpenter. Anything else to remember and they would have blown up. The old principle of planning—keep it simple, stupid—rang true yet again.

While Sergei had gone for the Michelin man look, I was very much the businessman: single-breasted suit, jacket one size up, dark-gray overcoat, black woolen scarf and thin leather gloves, and the stress to match. Nightmare and Carpenter were dressed in the same style. All three of us were clean shaven, hair washed, and well groomed. Detail counts; we had to move about the hotel without anyone giving us a second glance, looking as if we were part of the all-expenses-paid, outrageously salaried Brussels freeloaders. Across my lap I even had today's edition of the *Herald Tribune*.

My overcoat was doing a good job of concealing the body armor under my shirt. Sergei's might be as thick as the paving slabs outside the Kremlin, but mine consisted of just twelve paper-thin sheets of Kevlar—not enough to stop one of Sergei's AP rounds, but enough to see off the mini-Uzis that might soon be trying to hose me down. There was a pocket in the body armor for a ceramic plate to cover my chest area, but unlike Sergei I couldn't wear one as it was far too bulky. Carpenter had refused to wear any at all because it wasn't manly, and Nightmare had followed suit. Fucking mad; if I could have, I'd have covered myself from head to toe in the stuff. My feet were in all sorts of shit; with nothing on but thin socks and a pair of lace-up shoes, they were as cold as bags of frozen peas. I could no

longer feel anything below my ankles, and had given up moving them around to generate heat.

I was carrying a South African Z88, which looked like a 9mm Berreta, the sort of pistol Mel Gibson uses in the *Lethal Weapon* films. When the world banned weapons exports to South Africa during apartheid, the boys just set about making their own gear and were now exporting more assault weapons and helicopters than the U.K.

I had three twenty-round extended mags, which meant an extra two inches hanging out of the pistol grip, looking as if it had partially fallen out. The two spares went into my left-hand overcoat pocket. If things went to plan I wouldn't even be drawing down. The lift should be—would be—silent and take less than a minute.

The body armor was the lightest I dared wear, but even so it made it impossible to draw or sit down with a pistol placed where I would normally have had it: center front, tucked down the front of my jeans or pants in an internal holster. I wasn't feeling happy about my new weapon position. Now it had to be on the right-hand side on my pants belt. I'd had to spend the last two weeks practicing and consciously reminding myself that the position had changed, otherwise I might go to draw down on someone and find my hand hitting Kevlar instead of a pistol grip. That was if I could get to it through all the layers of clothing. To be able to flick back the top layers quickly, I'd taped together some outlets from the set in the car and carried them in the right-hand pockets of both my coat and jacket. It was just one more thing making me feel uneasy. My only consolation was that this time tomorrow it would all be over: I'd get my money and never see these lunatics again.

There was rustling as Sergei unwrapped a chocolate bar and started to throw it down his throat without offering me any. Not that I wanted it; I wasn't hungry, just worried. I sat there waiting, with the sound of Sergei's teeth mashing and jaws clicking as the wind whistled around the wagon.

I sat and thought as he sucked his teeth clean. So far, Valentin had evaded the authorities, mainly because he had learned early on that it was good to have friends in powerful places and officials on the payroll. Key witnesses were routinely murdered before they could testify against him. Just a few months earlier, Sergei said, an American journalist who'd delved a bit too deeply into Val's busi-

ness affairs was forced into hiding, with his family, after a phone call was intercepted in which Val was heard putting out a contract of \$100,000, not just on the reporter's life, but also on those of his wife and child.

It was for those who betrayed his trust, however, that the worst fate was reserved. Two senior managers who oversaw his prostitution empire had been caught skimming a bit off the top at his Moscow brothels. Even though they'd fought alongside him in the *Braveheart* days and had been faithful lieutenants ever since, Val had had them taken out and staked to the earth on waste ground not far from Red Square, where he'd personally slit their bellies, pulled out their intestines, and waited patiently for them to die. The "Viking's revenge" appeared to have done the trick: Ever since then, not a single ruble had gone astray from any of his tills.

I heard six quick squelches in my earpiece. The three pickup Mercs were mobile toward the hotel.

I replied with two squelches, then heard another two from Nightmare and Carpenter, who should now be getting out of their car and heading for the hotel. All six of us knew it was time to start performing.

Sergei didn't say a word, just nodded. He might speak English, but it had to be squeezed out of him. I nodded back, checking my weapon was still in position.

I got out of the 4x4 and left Sergei staring downhill. Pulling up my coat collar to protect me from the wind, I headed in the opposite direction, away from the main street. My route took me up the hill for one hundred feet, then a right turn to the next intersection. That put me on the road adjacent to the hotel and down to the main drag again.

I could see the large gray concrete hotel in front of me on the left-hand side of the road. Just short of it was roadwork surrounded by steel fencing; the cobblestones were up and the pipes were being repaired. I didn't envy the poor bastards who had to finish the job in this weather.

The noise from the main street grew louder as I walked downhill. The James brothers would be on it now, following the Mercs. Nightmare and Carpenter should be walking into the hotel from the opposite side and Sergei would be positioning himself so that he'd be able to move in on the Mercs at the front of the hotel.

I crossed the road, passing the hotel's rear service and parking lot entrance. Two white Hilux delivery vans were parked up on the red asphalt. There was a glass door giving access to the hotel beyond the delivery bays, but you could only get through it by buzzing reception, and I didn't want to make myself any more conspicuous than I had to. Neither of the two loading bays was open; it was far too cold. I continued downhill, the hotel now obscured by a line of high conifers.

Valentin Lebed's weakest point would be tonight, in Finland, in this hotel, before he left for the theater. He was on his way to see *Romeo and Juliet*. The theater was only across the road, a few hundred feet away to the left, but it was cold, he had always been a target for attack and he was incredibly rich, so why walk?

About one hundred feet short of the main road I hit the driveway from the Intercontinental's front entrance. It was a semicircle and one way. I turned left; in front of me, halfway down the concrete and glass building, was a large blue canopy to protect guests from the elements as they got in and out of their cars. The ground-floor walls were glass, through which I could see the warm and cosy-looking interior. Small trees lined the driveway; they had lost their leaves and were now covered in white Christmas lights. The snow made them look as if they'd been sprinkled with icing sugar. I carried on past the illuminated reindeer that stood on the lawn between the driveway and main drag, which was about one hundred feet down a gentle slope.

The plan was simple. Nightmare and Carpenter were to kill the close BGs that were protecting the target as he came from the elevator, then cover me as I took the target toward the main doors. While this was happening, the Jameses would have blocked off the rear of the Mercs with their 4x4, Sergei would block the front with the Nissan and all three would be controlling the other BGs and drivers with their AKs.

Once outside, I'd head for the back of the Nissan, dragging the target with me. We'd both lie under a blanket, with my pistol rammed down his throat while Sergei drove to the DOP (vehicle drop-off point), where the target would be switched to the trunk of a changeover vehicle en route to the border. Meanwhile, Jesse and Frank would be giving the area the good news with CS gas before leaving in the Toyota, along with the other two, to their DOP and

changing vehicles. We'd all RV (rendezvous) near the border and get into a truck that was rigged up with hidden compartments while Sergei drove us into Mother Russia. Then it was just a few hours to St. Petersburg and payday. Nice work if you can get it.

I walked under the canopy and through the first set of automatic tinted-glass and brass-effect doors. Once past the second set I was in, my face flushed from the downward blast of the heaters above the doorway.

I knew the foyer area well. It had the air of an expensive, comfortable club. I hadn't seen any of the rooms, but they must have been stunning.

In front of me, about one hundred feet away and behind a group of very noisy and confused Japanese tourists surrounding a mountain of matching suitcases, was the reception desk. In the far right-hand corner was a hallway that led to the restaurant, rest rooms, and the all-important elevators.

By now Nightmare and Carpenter should be at the far end of the hall, sitting by the restaurant entrance. From there they could keep trigger on the three elevator doors.

Immediately to my right, behind a dark wood-paneled wall, was the Baltic Bar. To my left, efficient-looking bellboys were buzzing around a sprinkling of sofas, chairs, and coffee tables. The lighting was subdued. I wished I'd just dropped in for a drink.

I headed for one of the sofas, sitting down so that I was facing the Japanese confusion at reception to my half right, with the hallway to the right of that, and the brass-effect elevator doors in view. Like me, Nightmare and Carpenter had placed themselves out of sight of the video cameras that were covering the reception desk. I sat, spread out the *Trib* on the coffee table, unbuttoned my overcoat and waited for the convoy of Mercs to arrive.

It was pointless worrying about anything now. There is only so much training and planning that can be done. I used to get worried when this feeling came over me, but now I understood it. Basically, I accepted that I was going to die, and anything beyond that was a bonus.