



Ilya Bushmin

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«Издательские решения»

Bushmin I.

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An elusive gang is terrorizing the city. Criminals are kidnapping one prominent businessman after another and putting collar bombs around their necks. The deadly device is equipped with a camera and radio transmission; it cannot be removed or blocked, and the victim has no chance of escape. If the businessman does not pay the gang the ransom they demand, the blast will blow his body to smithereens...

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Prologue

When a butterfly hit his dirty windshield with a disgusting squish, Jerry shuddered. He reflexively turned on the wipers and pulled the washer knob, before remembering that the windshield wiper tank had been empty for a week. Once again he made a mental note to fill it, knowing full well that he would forget it again. Jerry took a sip from his beer can and, belching loudly, switched the radio to another station.

The dirty pickup made its way along the night road toward the city, the dim light of its dusty headlights illuminating the pavement ahead. The city lights ahead were almost impossible to make out through the dirty windshield. But somewhere in the east there was a glow: Soon it would be morning.

There was some kind of ridiculous comedy program on the radio. Through the wheezing old speakers he could hear a girl laughing, with an amazingly vile, squeaky voice:

“What? Don’t you know, a wedding in Vegas is no joke! That’s a real wedding!”

“That was funny when you weren’t even born yet, you idiot,” Jerry grumbled, belching again, and tried another station. The old speaker coughed out country music. Nodding with satisfaction, Jerry – a corpulent, bearded man under 50, almost as unkempt as his truck – reached for the beer.

His pickup drove past a brightly lit construction hypermarket that had opened a few years ago, three miles outside the city. He had heard on the radio that the city government had quarreled with the county over this site, since a hypermarket would be a tasty morsel for both of them. In the end, the city won and the city limits were formally extended along the highway to the hypermarket. Then the suckerfish, as Jerry called them, started to appear – smaller shops for construction supplies, eateries, offices of construction firms. But life in these parts was in full swing only in the daytime; in the pre-dawn hours it was as deserted as a cemetery. Only the street lights, devouring hundreds of dollars for nothing, and emptiness. And Jerry’s lone pickup truck crawling toward the city.

Taking the last swig, Jerry crumpled up the can, tossed it onto the back seat, and reached for another beer. With his peripheral vision, he thought he noticed some movement ahead.

He frowned, squinted, trying to peer through the dirty windshield.

Fifty yards away, to the right along the ramp to some sort of office or construction goods store, a shadowy figure was running, discernible against the brightly lit building. The shadow waved its arms and seems to be shouting something – Jerry thought he heard a voice over the blare of the music.

“What the hell?”

He slowed down a bit and craned his neck, trying to make out what was going on. A man was careening toward the road, waving his arms. The dim headlights showed him running to the curbside. A suit, tie, face contorted, eyes wide from horror. Over the wheezing of the music, Jerry clearly heard the cry: “Help!”

Screaming and waving with one hand, the man seemed to be grabbing at his throat with the other. Jerry frantically glanced from side to side (where’s his car, for crying out loud? Is this a trap? How did he get here?). He tried to gather his wits, decide whether to slow down or drive past. The man was just ten yards ahead when Jerry suddenly noticed, in the dim light of the headlights, his gleaming metal collar. A circular pipe a couple of inches thick. Jerry looked in amazement at the stranger running towards him, screaming with holy terror in his eyes: “Please! Help me! Take it off...!”

“What the...?!” Jerry was thunderstruck.

But he never got as far as “... hell.” Because the collar around the neck of the suit, who was by then practically under the wheels of Jerry’s vehicle, exploded with a deafening roar, blinding Jerry, shattering the dirty glass of the pickup, and leaving its driver stunned. Amid the roar of the explosion, he was peppered with debris traveling at the speed of a bullet, ripping into his face, piercing his skin, stabbing his eyes and throat.

The pickup zoomed past the man, flew onto the shoulder, flipped over, and crashed, wheels up. But Jerry didn't feel it. He was already dead.

The suit, with his head blown off, kept running a couple of yards out of inertia, then also collapsed on the asphalt.

And then there was silence, broken only by the wheeze of Jerry's radio from the wrecked, upside-down car.

Chapter 1

Troy Brown was not completely against moving to Perte. Shelley's main problem was not with him, but with their daughter Carol. Which meant they had to explain at great length that the school girlfriends of a seven-year-old are not the most important thing in the life of a family. But hell, when Brown couldn't even find his favorite coffee mug in the morning because Shelley had already packed it – now that was too much.

"Shelley, don't go off the deep end," he grumbled, rummaging around in the box for the mug. "We've got a whole week ahead of us, so there's no need to pack dishes, clothes... and my mug! What am I going to drink my coffee out of? Plastic cups?"

"We don't have any plastic cups," she smiled, pushing Brown away from the box. "Cut it out, before you get all steamed up. I'll find it."

In the kitchen, Carol was finishing breakfast, drinking juice and chattering:

"When will we get there? Are we going on vacation? I promised my classmates."

"You will have other classmates," Shelley muttered, fumbling in the box.

"Mom!" Carol whined.

"What? We've already discussed this a hundred times. Hell, where did I put it? Wait. Maybe the mugs are in the other one."

Shelley left the room. Seeing his daughter's skeptical look, Brown patted Carol on the head.

"Eat up. If you like, I'll drop you off. And everything will be fine. You'll like the new house."

Carol did not think so, and stared sullenly at her plate. Shelley returned, triumphantly handing Brown his mug. And while he poured his coffee, Shelley said, with a dreamy smile,

"I can't believe it. You've started your last week. Five days, and you're free."

That was when Brown's cell phone rang.

As he drove along, Brown counted six patrol cars on the highway. Only one lane was open, with two patrolmen directing traffic, letting the cars by in one direction at a time. The yellow tape of the police cordon was tied to the cars' mirrors, blocking off a solid stretch of road. Crime Scene Investigation people were milling around on the pavement, inspecting something. The corpse had been covered with a cloth, with just a pair of expensive boots sticking out.

When Brown got out of the air-conditioned car, the heat slammed him. That's really what he wasn't going to miss in the cooler climate of Perte – this scorching heat. Nodding at the patrolmen, one of whom obligingly lifted the cordon for him to pass, Brown walked over to the corpse. A puzzled and somewhat confused DiMaggio appeared.

"Good morning."

"I don't know about that, Troy." DiMaggio was already soaked in sweat. He squinted wistfully along the road, where a sparse line of cars stretched toward the city. "Just our luck. Half a mile further ahead, and the state would be dealing with this, not us."

"Killers don't give a damn about geography, didn't you hear?"

"Want to take a look?"

DiMaggio motioned toward the corpse. With a frown, Brown stepped toward the sheet covering the body and, after lifting it for a second, instinctively turned his head in revulsion. The corpse looked as if some giant had just torn off the guy's head. Brown couldn't get the image out of his mind.

"What the fuck..."

"Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"Who is he?"

"Eric Pickman, age thirty-eight." DiMaggio checked his notebook. "Owner and director of Plate Build Construction. That's the office, over there."

DiMaggio motioned toward the two-story building along the side of the road.

“That’s what it looks like, I guess, when your job blows you away.” Brown tried to joke, not having regained his composure.

“Only it wasn’t work that blew him away, but a bomb or grenade. Did he stick it in his mouth, or what? Can you imagine? The guys from the lab have already collected fragments, and promise to give us the information as soon as possible.” DiMaggio nodded at the overturned pickup which had been moved over to the shoulder, where the patrolmen and CSI guys were checking things out. “That guy was just passing by. And then, kaboom! Bummer.”

“Uh-huh, in the wrong place at the wrong time. When did it happen?”

“The 911 call came in at 5:40 a.m. A patrol car was here in five minutes. The body was still warm.” After a pause, the usually swaggering macho DiMaggio could no longer contain himself. “Troy, Pickman’s head just exploded! And the explosion was so big that we have two corpses instead of one. This is... Damn, how could this happen?”

It was a rhetorical question, really. Moreover, Brown was now interested in something else.

“At 5:40? What the hell was the boss of the company doing around the office at 5:40 on a Monday morning?”

The Plate Build Construction office was a two-story building made of glass and concrete — Pickman had clearly been trying to impress potential customers. Several detectives from Brown’s department had interviewed staff who were just coming to work. Brown went into a room with one of them, Sergeant Chambers.

“There was no security at the office at night, only an alarm,” said the security guard apologetically, “and also a surveillance camera.” There was a picture on the monitor. At Brown’s request, the guard fast-forwarded the recording to the relevant time.

A black van was driving toward the building, but stopped suddenly, 20 yards away. The numbers in the corner of the screen recorded the time: 5:27. The man in the suit, Eric Pickman, got out of the van. Like a zombie, stumbling as if in shock and clearly not seeing anything in front of him, Pickman made for the office door. The van disappeared around the corner of the building.

“What’s that thing around his neck?” exclaimed Brown, looking at the monitor. When Pickman arrived at the office, the camera showed not only his face, contorted in horror, but the strange contraption around his neck. A metal collar a couple of inches thick, with a tiny, square mini-camera fastened to the front.

“I’ve never seen the boss wearing anything like that,” the guard confessed.

“It’s a bomb.” Chambers was impressed. “Pickman came to the office with a bomb around his neck!”

Meanwhile Pickman disappeared from the monitor’s field of view and entered the building. Brown gestured at the monitor, asking the guard: “And the van? Is that your boss’s car?”

“No, sir. He drives a BMW. I’ve never seen this van here, sir; it’s not from the company.”

“They turned the corner. What’s over there?”

“The dumpster, that’s all,” Chambers replied. “The guys from the lab are trying to find traces of the tread.”

“We should send them this clip. Maybe they’ll be able to make out the van’s license plate.”

For seven minutes the camera didn’t pick up anything else, but then headlights flashed and the van came around the corner again, pulling onto the freeway at high speed. And less than a minute later, Pickman came charging out the door, slamming it open so hard that the image on the monitor shook. Stumbling, waving his arms, and tugging at the collar, Pickman raced after the van. Brown and Chambers stared at the screen, waiting for what was about to happen. And after half a minute came the answer: Something blazed up brightly for just a moment, somewhere over on the side, and the image shook again.

“The blast save,” Chambers muttered. The security guard involuntarily closed his eyes and whispered, “Oh, my God...”

“They put that damn thing on him to make him do something for them in the office.” Brown hesitantly began to put together an argument. “But why the hell did they leave? Why did he run out empty-handed?”

“And why didn’t he call the police, if he was alone in the office?” Chambers added.

A patrolman looked into the room. Seeing Brown, he announced, “Lieutenant, they’ve found something on the second floor.”

One of the shelves in the safe was full of papers, the second completely empty. A pale woman in a suit, upset and confused, looked at Brown and Chambers.

“There was cash in there, nearly \$500,000. It was just there on Saturday. And now...”

“\$500 K, not bad,” whistled Chambers. “Did Pickman have the combination?”

“Of course, he was the owner of the company.”

Brown went over to the window, taking a glove out of his pocket just in case, which helped him to open the sash. He looked outside. The front office. An asphalt walkway around the building, with the dumpster at the corner. Under the windows, one of the crime scene guys was studying the pavement. Brown nervously wondered what Pickman had been through in the last minutes of his life. Emptying out the safe in a panic, throwing the money into a bag or package. Opening the window, throwing the money out. The people in the black van seizing it and racing off. Realizing that they had left him with the collar on, Pickman in a panic rushes downstairs as if he might have been able to catch up with the van... Guided by instinct. Brown imagined that the only thought in Pickman’s head as he careened toward the road, was “TO LIVE!” But the guys in the van had other plans. BAM! And Pickman’s head burst, like a watermelon falling from a skyscraper.

“Pickman did everything to get them to take that collar off,” Brown said grimly, closing the window. “But they had other plans.”

They’d been working at the crime scene for almost half a day. With a tow truck, they pulled away the dirty pickup truck of the poor bastard who had just happened to be driving by. A CSI crew gathered up all the fragments of the collar and what was left of Pickman’s head, which were scattered about the road within a forty-yard radius. Then the road was opened to traffic. The detectives interviewed all the company’s employees. Pickman was single and lived alone in a house outside of town. A police cruiser immediately headed there. The patrolmen and DiMaggio found the owner’s BMW in front of the house. When DiMaggio climbed into the car, he noticed the driver’s door ajar. Automatically putting his hand on his holster, he noticed something on the front lawn. He bent over: It was the car keys.

DiMaggio turned to the patrolmen. “They waited for him here. When he arrived and got out of the car, they stuffed him into the van,” DiMaggio inferred.

Brown had already found this out on the way to the Police Department, where he had gone with Chambers. When DiMaggio called him to report, Brown had just arrived at the underground parking lot.

“Get on the horn and get the CSI guys,” he ordered. “And go canvas the neighborhood with the beat cops. Talk to the neighbors. Hopefully, someone suddenly saw a black van. Dave?”

Instead of a reply, a kind of croak came from the telephone. Repeating DiMaggio’s name and not hearing anything, Brown looked at the screen of his phone and saw no bars at all. The connection was lost.

“Fucking wireless. Why do you always lose the connection underground?”

“Because we are right under the evidence repository here,” Chambers said as he got out of the car. “It’s got thick walls. Directly above us.”

Brown still had no idea that the repository would save his life. There was a lot more that Brown still didn't know.

Together they walked to the elevator. Chambers looked at Brown.

"Is Carol still on strike?"

"She is positive that her friends are friends for life," Brown replied, pressing the elevator button.

"Did you explain it to her what life in a new two-story house with a swimming pool is going to be like? That there's not going to be any shortage of new friends?"

"She is not yet such a callous, cynical pig as you are, Rick," Brown chuckled, stepping into the elevator. "At the age of seven, we all think that classmates and friends are the most important thing in life."

"I don't know about seven-year-olds. At forty, I'm more concerned that we have a good going away bash to celebrate your transfer. Booze's on you, of course."

"Rick, Shelley wants us to go to Perte on Friday. We are supposed to spend the entire weekend settling into our new home. You know, unpacking the stuff. Trying out the grill in the backyard. That kind of thing."

"Never mind, we'll get wasted on Thursday. Troy, you just can't wiggle out of it, buddy! You've been head of the division for almost a decade. An important milestone in life, and all that."

"Do I have to explain to you that life in a new two-story house with a swimming pool is much cooler than boozing it up with a bunch of losers like you?" Brown laughed.

"Oh, may the termites eat your house," Chambers retorted.

Brown and Chambers had worked together for eight years, since right after Chambers was hired by the homicide division, where Brown was a sergeant. After six years as partners, Brown was promoted to lieutenant and head of the division. They spent a lot of time together, and such conversations had become a sort of tradition long ago.

When they got to the floor where their division was, Brown met the youngest detective, Tommy Porras.

"Troy, the captain wants to see you."

"The Plate Build Construction Company had closed a large deal," reported Brown, sinking into an easy chair. "They built a motel in the next county over. At the end of the week, their account at Rentier Bank had 700,000 bucks in it. The accountant and two guards cashed a check for \$500,000 on Friday. The guys with the collar somehow found out about it. They nabbed Pickman in front of his house. Now we are trying to find out exactly when."

Captain Tierney listened to Brown with a scowl, tapping a pencil on his desk. The city's Deputy Chief of Police was going to have a tough week, and had already had a headache since morning.

"What the hell? Wouldn't it have been easier to go with him and take the money out of the safe? Why these tricks? And this collar... Fuck, I've been in the police force for twenty years, and I've never even heard of crap like this."

Brown nodded grimly. After a pause, he delicately approached the main point:

"Captain, who are you going to refer the matter to? The Organized Crime Division or the Robbery Division?"

Tierney frowned, peering intently at Brown, as though trying to imagine his reaction to what Tierney was about to say. During his years on the job, Brown had learned very well what that look meant, so he immediately protested:

"No! Don't even think about it!"

"Troy, wait, don't you get all pumped up about it."

"Bob, this is my last week! Five days! More precisely," Brown demonstratively checked his watch, "four and a half. I'm almost not here at all, get it?"

"Troy, there's no one else I can trust with this."

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Mack from Organized Crime is in the hospital. Henry from Robbery is too fucking stupid...”

“Bob, what do I care?!” Brown resisted. “My wife has already packed everything! Even my mug, damn it! Now I am just closing out all my old cases! The Perte police are expecting me next Monday! Forget about me, do you hear?”

Waiting until Brown stopped talking, Tierney raised his cheerless eyes, showing that he was not about to change his mind.

“Almost half an hour ago I spoke with the Mayor. The press is grabbing this story and tomorrow information about exploding heads will be in every newspaper and on every TV and radio channel. Do you do realize that this is the number one news item?”

“What’s it got to do with me, Bob? It’s my last...” But Tierney brusquely cut him off:

“The Mayor and the chief of police want the best person on this case. And you’re my best. You know it, Troy. So, do what I ask. Take the case. Just consider it a favor to the old man who has covered your ass a hundred times.”

“Fuck me Freddy,” said Brown fatalistically, imagining what Shelley would say when she heard about it.

“I called Perte.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“They are willing to wait. As long as necessary, if you aren’t finished by the end of the week. And they wish you good luck. Would you like to be a captain in Perte? If you solve this case, that cushy chair will be yours. So it’s in everyone’s interest. What do you say?”

“My wife is going to kill me,” said Brown gloomily, getting up to go.

Fifteen minutes later, he called his detectives together for a quick briefing. Trying to be optimistic, Brown realized that if he tried hard and solved the case by the end of the week it would be the best-case scenario. Shelley would be happy, and so would Tierney – and Brown didn’t want to let him down.

“Our main lead is the money. The guys with the collars somehow learned that Pickman had a large sum handy. Therefore, the number one question is, who told them?”

“Someone working for the company. That would be the most natural explanation,” said Porras.

“Okay, you take care of that. Check them all out, each and every one of them. Convictions, rap sheets, parking tickets – everything. Get their call logs too, both business and personal.”

“Got it, boss.”

“Dave, go see the owner of the motel that Pickman’s company built. Check him out fully. Find out what the local police have on him. DiMaggio, you take Pickman’s personal relationships. His whole social circle: who he slept with, who he drank with – everyone. Gilan, you take Rentier Bank. There may be a leak there. On Friday, the accountant withdrew cash from the company account.”

“I’m more worried about the explosives,” Chambers said. “The collar wasn’t big. But did you see the flash from that explosion on the video?”

“Contact the Feds, maybe they know something,” Brown agreed. “Now everybody pay attention. As you know, Friday is my last day at the office. So by Friday we have to get these guys.”

“By Thursday,” said DiMaggio cheerfully, with a nod at Chambers. “Rick said on Thursday we’ll go boozing.”

Brown grinned, then became serious again.

“We’ll see about that later. That’s what I wanted to tell you, guys. Pickman was killed, even though he had done everything they wanted, and paid them. Why?” The detectives, apparently not quite sure of what to say, simply looked at each other. Brown answered for them: “Because they need people to start talking about them. They need everyone in town to know they are serious and that you can’t mess around with them. And that means, they’re going to do it again.”

It was about six o'clock in the evening when Brown's car rolled around the corner and past the old houses on Thurmont Street. A kid pushing drugs at the crossroads clammed up, sensing the police presence. But Brown had bigger fish to fry. Taking notice of a car at the curb with three tough-looking guys inside, following the uninvited guest to their neighborhood with suspicious eyes, Brown drove up alongside. He knew one of the guys – he worked for Hash, and was known as Basso. Lowering his window on the passenger side, Brown barked out: "I'm looking for Hash."

Basso, exchanging glances with the others, nodded: "Wait around the corner. Hash will be there."

Brown drove on. Reaching the corner, he got out of the car, sat on the hood, and waited, toying with the knife he always carried with him. An old Spyderco, one of the first. Brown remembered his delight as a teenager, when he received the gift from his late father. A heavy, impressive, deadly sharp knife that could be opened with just a flick of the thumb.

Hash showed up five minutes later. He had an imposing and unhurried stride, afraid of nothing, and was sipping a cocktail through a straw. This was his turf.

"Long time no see. Problems, boss?"

"Not exactly," Brown replied, hooking the knife to his belt. "Have you been listening to the radio?"

"Yup," said Hash with a grin. "The guy with no head? They really blasted it right off? We've been arguing all day about how it could have happened. Were the explosives taped up to his noggin?"

"Hash, six months ago you passed me some information on those guys who were selling grenades. Do you still have any contacts with arms dealers? I'm interested in C—4."

"Plastic explosives? Oh, mama!" Hash shook his head with a smirk, but then grew serious. "People don't bring that kind of shit to me. I'm a peaceful dude. You know that, boss."

"You only have your peace because you have me, Hash," Brown reminded him.

Hash's real name was Tommy, but the nickname had stuck to him back in high school, where he started his street career selling weed. Tommy quit school, figuring that the main thing is to go into business and make money, and he knew how to do it. Also, there were rumors buzzing around school, and Tommy was afraid that he would end up in handcuffs. Almost immediately Hash switched to trading in harder stuff, pushing only to people he knew. His clientele at first was mostly former classmates and their friends. But this simple precaution did not help him, and before long one of his new customers turned out to be an undercover police officer. When he was arrested, Hash displayed unusual dexterity dumping the goodies. They had to let him go, but Hash still found his way into someone's Rolodex at the Police Department.

That was when he met Brown, who had an interest in an acquaintance of Hash's, another drug dealer. The pusher had decided to make himself a reputation for harshly punishing his debtors: He broke their arms. Brown arrested Hash with dope in hand, and offered him a choice: Go to prison for at least ten years or help catch the dealer. Of course, Hash chose the latter.

That was almost ten years ago. Now Hash himself had become a boss, king of the neighborhood between Griffin Road and Thurmont Street. His runners stood on the street corners selling meth, with secret caches and drop-boxes. Over the years, Brown had accumulated enough dirt on Hash to put him away for twenty years. But Hash turned out to be more valuable as an informer. "Use you brain, Hash, this is important. Ask around. Pretend you are just thinking about whether you should try dealing in something besides meth. Know what I mean? Check out carefully how much it might cost, whether you can actually buy C—4 in town. And if the answer is yes, find out who to contact."

"Listen, boss, I try not to get involved in this kind of stuff." Hash said. "I do business in my neighborhood and don't poke my nose into other people's shit. Boss, dope is one thing, or even guns. But explosives... Those guys, they really mean business, you savvy?"

“And I want to know who they are. Hash, they nabbed the director of the company when there was cash in the office. That means they have informants. So I think it’s someone local.”

Hash was skeptical.

“I’ve never heard of a crew like that. There’s been no buzz on the street about anyone out there about to hit the jackpot, nothing. And I’ve been on the street for fifteen years.”

“They don’t seem like some new guys in town.” After a pause, Brown decided to try another angle: “Hash, I’m moving to another city. If the gang continues to operate, the Feds will come in, and the cops will shake up the whole city to find these suckers. Businesses like yours will suffer. But I won’t be around, you’ll have no one to cover for you. So it’s in your interests too.”

“I’ll give it a try,” said Hash reluctantly.

“Get me the information, and you’ll be completely clean before the law. I’ll destroy all your files. Does that sound like a good deal to you?”

Grinning and slapping Hash on the shoulder, Brown got behind the wheel and started the engine. But he couldn’t resist saying, before driving off:

“And tell those three sleeping beauties of yours that a reconnaissance detail should stand watch on the perimeter, not smack in the middle of the neighborhood. Your pusher noticed me before they did. You are getting too soft, man.”

The explosives expert in the city Police Department’s forensic laboratory was a cheerful fellow by the name of Holtz. Despite his rather advanced age, Holtz adored gadgets and gizmos. That’s why he had stayed late in the lab. He was almost ecstatic.

“Just look at this! A hollow aluminum tube two inches thick. It had compartments separated by a partition. So far I’ve counted ten segments. A portion of the explosives was in each of them.”

Fragments of the explosive were lying on Holtz’s table: blackened bits of aluminum, burnt-out wiring, a scorched chip, and other bits and pieces of the device. Brown picked up one of them, trying to figure out what it was. “What kind of explosive?”

“Plastic, C—4.”

“You sure?” Brown frowned.

“One hundred percent, Troy. Although I haven’t seen any C—4 for 10 years. Where did someone get an explosive like that in our sleepy town? And the most interesting thing is that they weren’t exactly stingy: There was about a pound of C—4 in the collar.”

“Is that a lot?”

“Let’s just say this collar would be the envy of any suicide bomber. If the explosion had occurred in a crowd, our morgue would have had nowhere to put all the corpses.”

“That’s just great,” Brown commented glumly. “Have you figured out how it worked?”

“Oh, that’s the most interesting part of all. Hell, it’s a real gem! These guys knew their business, Troy. Look here.” Holtz took one of the fragments of aluminum with partitions. “A web camera is attached to the front of the segmented tube packed with C—4, and there’s a cell phone on the side. This is a chip you see here, from the phone. The phone was for transmission. And the camera on the front transmitted the image in front of it to the phone and from there it went to someone on the other end, via a wifi connection. That is, the criminals saw everything that was happening to the victim and around him. What he did, where he was going, what he picked up – everything.”

“Now I see,” Brown nodded. “That’s why Pickman didn’t even try to call the police. He just did what they wanted. He gave them the money. But they still pushed the button.”

“In all the years I’ve worked in the police force, Troy, I’ve never seen anything like this! Don’t hold back,” said Holtz cheerfully. “This case is going straight into the textbook!”

Brown has already started to think along the same lines, but with much less enthusiasm.

The story of the explosion on the outskirts of the city got top billing on the 10:00 evening news. Half of the split screen image showed a picture taken by a cameraman at the crime scene: the cordon, a hearse from the city morgue, patrolmen. The anchorwoman, looking at the audience from the other side of the screen, announced:

“According to the Police Department, the victim, Eric Pickman, was the owner of Plate Build Construction. The criminals made off with \$100,000 which was in the construction company office.”

But in the Browns’ apartment, nobody was looking at the TV screen. Shelley, combing her hair in front of the mirror, indignantly snapped at her husband:

“I knew this would happen! I knew it!”

“I wonder how you knew, if even I didn’t,” muttered Brown in reply, flopping on the bed with a bottle of beer in his hand.

“Oh, don’t give me that!! You and I made an agreement!”

“What can I do about it? I’m the head of the homicide division, not a traveling salesman. They ordered me to do it, so I’m doing it.”

“You’ve been making such excuses your whole life!”

“It’s not an excuse, it’s an oath!”

“Oh yes, of course!”

Carol appeared in the doorway, with interest and timid hope in her eyes.

“Mom, we’re not going?”

“We’re going! Carol, go to your room. Or go look at cartoons, whatever!”

Not accustomed to people raising their voices, Carol ran off.

And immediately, as was usual with her, Shelley was ashamed. Sighing deeply, she went over to Brown and put her arms around his shoulders. “We had agreed on everything. On Monday they’re expecting me at my new job. They’re also waiting for you at the department in Perte. Don’t forget that in a couple of years the captain there will be retiring, and there are no candidates to replace him. Troy, that means a career for you.”

“Don’t worry.” Brown hugged his wife and drew her close. “There’s almost a week to go. I’ll do what I can, and on Friday I’ll turn in my badge. And on the weekend we’ll be setting up our new house.”

“Promise?”

Brown wanted to believe it, but to avoid answering, he raised the bottle: “How about a beer?”

But at the morning briefing, Brown realized that they were almost at an impasse. Porras had checked out the employees at Plate Build Construction, but a full day’s work had yielded nothing. No suspicious phone calls or suspicious conflicts with Pickman or suspicious movements in their bank accounts.

“The key thing is the cash,” Porras added. “So they can keep the money to themselves. But all the banks have been warned. If someone brings in a large sum for deposit, we will be immediately notified.”

The company that paid Pickman for the motel was clean, according to both the police and the IRS. Detectives visited Rentier Bank, but with no results there either. The branch of the bank where the accountant of Plate Build Construction cashed the check employed about 30 people.

“And what about the Feds?”

“Nothing about any explosives, Troy,” said Chambers. “Or they just don’t want to share it.”

“This case sucks, big time,” Brown admitted. “If Tierney finds out that we have no leads, he will rip me apart. So let’s do something.”

“I suggest we go through the archives and files,” said DiMaggio, after some hesitation.

“Archives and agents – that’s all that we’ve got. Go talk to your informants. You can offer a reward, more than usual, for any information; if need be, we’ll get more money. And then get on the

databases. We're interested in all extortionists, arms dealers, people recently released from prison – any clues at all.”

Brown's cell phone rang. “Brown here,” he barked in his usual brusque manner. He heard Hash's voice:

“Under the overpass in an hour.”

Between the pillars of the overpass, there was a vacant lot that served as a nighttime refuge for junkies looking to shoot up. It was one of Hash's and Brown's regular meeting places. Hash never asked Brown to come to his own neighborhood, so as not to scare away potential customers with the type of person that every addict, with an unerring instinct, recognized as a cop. After the briefing with the detectives, Brown dropped in on Captain Tierney, assuring him that the investigation was moving ahead, and then went to the rendezvous. Hash arrived with what was, for him, amazing punctuality. He was accompanied by Bosso, who stayed in the car.

“Last night I was at the club at Nash,” said the informant. “I chatted with a couple of guys about this little thing of ours. Both said pretty much the same thing. Deuce.”

“King,” Brown parried. “What are we playing?”

“That's the moniker the guy who can get it all goes by. From any kind of piece to fragmentation grenades.”

“How about C—4?”

“I'm not sure about explosives. But the guys said that if there's anyone in town who can get that stuff, it's gotta be Deuce.” “The men guys...,” Brown repeated sourly. “Okay, Hash, let's suppose it's true. So who is he?”

“That's the problem, boss. Nobody knows.”

“Hold on,” Brown frowned. “You give me a nickname, which could belong to fifty people in the city, which would take me a couple of years to check out, and the best you can do on top of that is “nobody knows”? Hash, we don't work that way, and you know it. This is not enough.”

“I don't know who he is,” Hash repeated emphatically but nervously. “And nobody knows. Boss, I've heard that nickname a couple of times before. They say that Deuce is a tough customer. And very careful, you know what I mean? Very. Even more than us. He never attracts attention and does not work with strangers. And nobody knows who he is. But if you want someone who can get C—4, it's Deuce.”

That was the information that was going to lead to a slaughter that would shake the Police Department to the core. But Brown didn't know that yet.

Chapter 2

In the evening, Brown and Chambers met at a bar two blocks from police headquarters on Main Street – a favored watering hole where cops often gathered in the evenings to quaff a few beers or maybe something stronger. Chambers grinned, pulling out some papers from his bag and watching Brown put two mugs of lager on their table:

“What’s up, Troy, don’t feel like going home?”

“Drop dead!” said Brown half-heartedly, lighting up a cigarette.

“Shelley?”

“She’s called me five times. There’s always a different reason, but all the calls boil down to: ‘We’re leaving on Friday, it’s decided.’” “She’s called me five times. There’s always a different reason, but all the calls boil down to: ‘We’re leaving on Friday, it’s decided.’”

“Have you changed your mind?”

“Of course not. I’ve had it up to here with our hot weather.”

“Does Shelley have relatives in Perte?”

“Yeah, they helped her find a job,” Brown nodded. “An aunt or a cousin, God knows who. It’s all very complicated. Anyway, to hell with it. What have you dug up?”

“There’s nothing on Deuce. We’ve never arrested a man by that nickname on weapons charges. Just in case, I sent an inquiry to the state police, but I doubt they’ll have anything. It seems he is really a very cautious fellow.”

“If he exists.”

“Oh yes he does, Troy. Look here.”

Chambers opened a folder and handed Brown a police file. Brown looked at a photo of a dark-haired, grim-looking fellow.

“Peter Adamidi,” he read. “And who’s that?”

“His nickname is ‘Greek.’ He’s in jail now. The guys from the 13th Precinct brought him in a month ago. Do you remember the shooting on Ross Avenue?”

Brown remembered. About three months ago, several guys got into a fight at night at a gas station. One started threatening another with a pistol. His opponent, in a rage, snatched an AK-47 from the trunk and went postal.

“Smashed up the gas station,” Brown recalled. “The bozo opened fire with a Kalashnikov and wounded two people.”

While the guys from the 13th Precinct were looking for the shooter, they squeezed his broad to find Greek, who had sold him the gun. Under the guise of being customers, they met Greek and nabbed him when he tried to sell them three banana clips for a Kalashnikov.”

“And what does Deuce have to do with all this?”

“I called the guys at the 13th Precinct. They recorded all their conversations with Greek. He boasted that he works for Deuce. And since he works for Deuce, that means his goods are top quality.”

“Really?” Brown was surprised. “How is it that Deuce’s weapons are now a top brand on the street, and we know nothing about it?”

Well, better late than never. So on Wednesday morning, Brown went straight to the city jail. He turned in his pistol and knife at the entrance and was led to the interrogation room. The guard brought in Greek, wearing an orange jumpsuit. The prisoner gave Brown a long, penetrating look.

“What do you want?”

“I am Lieutenant Brown, homicide division.”

“And?”

Greek was clearly not eager to cooperate and tried to take the initiative in the conversation. Brown offered him a cigarette to loosen him up, even though smoking was forbidden within these walls. He looked Greek in the eye, but the con man didn't flinch, answering with a calm and composed demeanor.

"Greek, who's Deuce?"

"A card. Lower than a three. Anything else?"

"Very funny," Brown snorted. "Several times you've mentioned a man named Deuce. We've got it on tape."

"Listen to the recording again, carefully. Maybe I also mentioned little green men. So what?"

Brown paused. "Could Deuce get C—4?" He kept watching Greek closely and saw him tense up. Smiling at his own thoughts, Greek drawled: "I heard the news. Some guy got his head blown off. That's what we're talking about, right?"

"Do you know anything about it?"

Greek put out his cigarette. Apparently, he was not inclined to beat around the bush. "Maybe, lieutenant, and maybe not. Why should I talk to you? What's in it for me?"

"What do you want?"

"Deuce might be able to get C—4," said Greek, after a pause. "He knows a lot of important people in different states. Do you need him? Fine, I'll give him to you. No problem. But only if you get me out of here."

Brown frowned. "We can discuss it."

"There's nothing to discuss," said Greek firmly, seeing his opportunity. "I'll get you Deuce, and you get me out of here. They've got me in here for arms trading. That's not a serious crime, and I know that you can spring me out. I want a deal, and that's all there is to it. I'm not interested in anything else."

Negotiations with the 13th Precinct and the prosecutor's office presented no problems, and after dinner, accompanied by detectives Gilan and Porras, Brown returned to the jail with signed papers which stated that Greek would be set free until his trial. On the way out, Brown watched Greek collect his belongings with obvious satisfaction – keys, watch, wallet. He led him to the parking lot. Then all of them, including the other two detectives, got into two cars for the ride back to the city.

"I've done my part," Brown began. "Now it's your turn, Greek. Who is he?"

"Where are we going?"

"To a motel. Until we get Deuce, you'll be staying with my detectives."

"That wasn't part of the deal," said Greek apprehensively.

Brown cut him off: "I'm not going to risk you suddenly backing out. Or warning your buddy that the cops are hunting for him. I will only let you go when I have Deuce. Then you can go do what you want. But for the time being, I too need guarantees. If you're not happy with it, you can go back where you came from."

This was clearly not what Greek had in mind, but he just nodded sullenly. "Whatever you say, boss."

"Great. Who is he?"

"His name is Matt Highley."

"How do we contact him?"

"You don't. I know his phone number, but he will only speak on the phone to people he knows personally."

"Fine. Clear your throat before you dial the number. Is Deuce connected or something? I mean, if they learn you sold them down the river, would it come back to you?"

"I'll take care of my own business, thank you," Greek said drily, and turned away, looking out the window as the suburbs flew by.

Brown didn't like him. There was something not quite kosher about him, but what exactly it was, Brown didn't know. Anyway every criminal had his own fish to fry. Brown was interested in only one thing: that the conversation with Deuce would be a slam dunk. On the Department's tab, they checked in to a room at the back of a quiet motel on the outskirts of town. They decided to use the phone in the room to make the call. A technician came down from the Department with the recording equipment they needed. When everything was ready, Brown instructed Greek how to behave, and handed him the phone.

After three rings, Brown heard, through the headphones, a cautious male voice:

"Yeah."

"Deuce, it's me."

There was a pause. "Where are you?" the voice asked.

"They let me out. I was lucky with my lawyer. It's a long story, I can tell you when we meet."

"How long ago?"

"A couple of days."

"Why are you calling?" Deuce clearly was not dying to buy his good friend a brewskie.

"Deuce, I've got a buddy," Greek said, exchanging glances with Brown, who nodded to him, "go ahead." "He needs some wheels."

"Who is he?"

"A good buddy. You know, we got it all figured, but then the cops grabbed me, and the deal fell through. Yesterday I saw the guy, and he still needs the cars."

"Why don't you get them yourself?" There was a hint of malice in Deuce's voice. "You're a real bad-ass businessman. You've got everything under control."

"I just got out of the slammer," Greek blurted out. "I haven't even washed off the prison stink yet! I'm not such a moron as to draw attention to myself right away. I don't want to go back there. But I don't want to lose a client either. Deuce, it's a piece of cake, I tell you."

Deuce paused, as if listening to his instincts. Brown also sensed, judging from the silence, that Deuce was gauging the chances that this was a setup.

"I don't work with people I don't know."

"I'm telling you, his creds are rock solid. I've known him for a couple of years, and I did business with him twice. High-end wheels both times. Spare parts too. Deuce, have I ever let you down?"

The code they used was simple. "Cars" were weapons, and "spare parts" parts were ammunition. Not the most powerful cryptography, but criminals always feel more comfortable talking in code. Over the years, Brown had heard many epithets used by crooks over the telephone to refer to their goods: weapons, drugs, whatever. Anything from "cactuses" to "workers."

"What kind of cars are you talking about?" asked Deuce, after another pause. Brown exchanged glances with DiMaggio: Looks like he's rising to the bait.

"Ten sedans. Not used; nice and clean, you got it? If it comes together, my buddy will be ready to talk trucks."

Trucks were full auto rifles.

"Where is he going to drive them?"

"Not here," Greek hastened to reply, taking the hint. "He needs them to work in another state. No sweat."

Another pause. Then Deuce finally said what they had been waiting for: "Write down this number. He should call at exactly 2:00. Exactly. If he calls earlier or later, no deal."

Brown was standing at the curb in front of the supermarket. The large parking lot in front of the building was full, with cars pulling in and out all the time, parading before Brown's eyes in one incessant flow. Deuce had picked a good meeting place: It's a simple matter to lose oneself

in a crowd here. Brown was holding an ice cream cone, the signal that Deuce had chosen during their conversation, which took place at exactly 2:00 p.m.

One of the cars crawling past, a used and battered Toyota, suddenly stopped, and the rear door swung open. A tough-looking guy barked from the back seat: "Get in."

Glancing around, Brown dropped his ice cream and climbed in. The car instantly took off, drove past the parking lot, and headed for the street. Picking up speed, the Toyota sped toward the city center.

Behind the wheel was a scrawny, middle-aged fellow with a sharp, piercing look about him. He glanced at the rearview mirror every other second. Making sure there's no tail, thought Brown. The goon cornered Brown on the far right of the seat and began to quickly and professionally search his pockets and tap his clothes, feeling for a wire.

"Take it easy," Brown growled.

"Gotta check you out, bud. We don't know you."

"Are you Deuce?"

"No," said the goon tersely, fishing out the knife mounted on Brown's belt. Turning it over, he handed it to Brown, then curtly told the driver, "Clean."

"I don't know you either," Brown remarked. "I agreed to meet with Deuce."

"You'll meet him," said the goon, and gave Brown a tablet computer.

"What's this for?"

"What guns do you need? Take your pick."

Brown was amazed, the more so when he turned on the tablet. Before him was an already opened photo gallery, showing dozens of photographs of pistols, which could be enlarged for close inspection.

"A catalog? What's on sale today? Any house specials?"

The goon grimaced and said nothing. The driver kept looking in the rearview mirror. The car raced along the busy street at high speed, weaving from lane to lane.

They did not realize that all the available cops in the city police force were taking part in the operation. Five carloads of detectives were following right behind them, switching every half mile. Ten more cars had scattered throughout the area at the start of the operation and were listening in on the police wave. As soon as the Toyota left the supermarket, unmarked police cars started moving on parallel streets, so they could all converge at the right moment. A police helicopter coordinated the surveillance, with a cop on board carefully watching through binoculars as the subject sped along the streets.

"Attention everybody, subject is merging into the far left lane. Turning onto Duval Street."

"Car 10—15. Copy that."

"11—8 and 10—12, proceed along Junior Street."

"Subject is moving east toward Walton Street. Over."

"10—16, don't get so close to him, move over one lane."

And in the Toyota, which dozens of policemen were following in person and via the airwaves, Brown handed the tablet back to the goon. The screen had a Sig P210 on it, magnified to the actual size.

"Here! This!"

"Ten?"

"Ammo too. Two boxes apiece, so twenty boxes."

"We can do it today. You got the money?"

"Not on me, of course. I'll bring it once I see the goods."

"You can transfer the money using Ray Pay," said the goon, giving Brown a piece of paper with numbers scribbled on it. "Here's the number. When we see the money in the account, we'll deliver the guns."

“Yeah, right,” Brown exclaimed. “I wasn’t born yesterday, man. When I see the guns, I’ll give you the money.”

“We don’t do business face to face, get it?” the goon growled in annoyance. “Delivery only. You got a problem with that?”

“Take it easy, okay?” Brown’s mind was racing. “How about this? You show me the guns. If everything is in order, I’ll call my man, and he’ll deposit the money into your account.”

The goon glanced at the driver, who, seeing him in the rearview mirror, gave a barely perceptible nod. The goon relaxed. “Yeah, that should work. We’ll call you.”

The car pulled over to the curb. The goon gestured at the door, indicating that Brown should get out.

“When?”

“We’ll call you.”

Brown got out and the Toyota raced off. Behind it, driving at high speed, was a nondescript sedan; Brown caught a glimpse of a familiar detective behind the wheel. The man was speaking into the walkie-talkie: “They’ve split up; subject is heading north along Cross Road.”

Following a jeep there were a couple more cars, and in one of them, Brown saw another policeman in plain clothes. Then Chambers’ car pulled up alongside Brown, and the passenger door opened. Sitting down beside him, Brown said, “It wasn’t Deuce. One of his people, but not him.”

As the car pulled off, Chambers handed Brown a thin folder that was lying on the dashboard.

“Is Deuce’s real name Matt Highley? We found his file, here it is.”

Now Brown was really puzzled: The goon’s driver was looking at him from the mug shot in the police file.

After that, everything went haywire.

The police kept following Deuce and the goon’s car, which seemed to be circling around aimlessly. The helicopter kept on coordinating the detectives, maintaining its distance and a good height, with a running narrative by walkie-talkie: “Subject is turning right on Heuman Street. 9—17, take a left. Over.”

The Toyota kept driving along. Deuce scowled into the rearview mirror. He felt something was up, but couldn’t quite put his finger on it. His intuition had never deceived him, so Deuce had learned to trust it, always and everywhere – that’s why he was still in business, rather than rotting away in prison. One of the cars behind him aroused his suspicion. But, casting another glance in the mirror, Deuce saw it turn left.

“What’s wrong?” growled the goon, looking back.

“I don’t know yet. It doesn’t seem like we’ve got a tail, but... I don’t know,” Deuce replied sourly. “I think something’s wrong.”

Chambers and Brown listened carefully to the radio chatter.

“Why they are they running in circles? Chambers wondered nervously.

“They’re checking.”

“Everything go okay?”

“I did everything as we agreed. They didn’t have any reason to suspect anything,” Brown replied, trying to think whether he had slipped up somewhere. It didn’t seem so. Yes, he had been unyielding, but that was rule number one in undercover work. There is nothing more suspicious than a buyer who agrees to everything immediately just to make the deal happen.

Voices kept chirping out of the walkie-talkie: “They’re turning toward Kirby Street. Heading down toward Mason.”

“9—8, take them starting at Mason.”

“Rodger.”

“10—13, take a left.”

Brown quickly looked through Deuce's file. "Two arrests and a year in prison for possession. No operational information about where he fits into the business. This guy is really good."

"There's a highway patrol car on Kinsey Street," the radio croaked. "Tell them to leave the buggers alone."

His eyes still on the rearview mirror, Deuce turned onto Kinsey. Just ahead, at the next intersection, was a police cruiser lying in ambush. Diddling his radar gun, perhaps, Deuce sneered under his breath. The second patrolman was walking around the car. They were still 100 yards away when the patrolman on the outside mumbled something into his walkie-talkie and hurried back into the car. But before that, he managed to cast a quick glance in the direction of Deuce's Toyota.

Deuce caught his breath and squinted. There was something wrong, right now. And there was a way to check.

"The main thing now is not to lose my nerve," he muttered, and stepped on the gas.

Accelerating quickly, the Toyota whizzed and roared past the patrol car. The policeman at the wheel was looking straight at it, and his radar was pointing that way too.

Crossing the intersection, Deuce looked carefully in the rearview mirror. If everything was normal, the patrol car would now turn on its flashers and go after them.

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