

# OPERATION SAMARIUM



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## 1. The theft

Under the cover of darkness, the two men had no trouble leaving the house, unobserved by anyone. It was early morning and the quiet calm of the neighbourhood was only disturbed by a few crickets. They walked slowly towards their security van, parked in front of the main entrance of the villa, one of the many in this luxury private estate designed exclusively for the rich and powerful of Marbella.

All the security cameras in the house had been disabled, just as they had been told they would be. The only evidence the police would later glean from them was two uniformed security guards carrying out a routine inspection of one of the properties.

No one would have suspected, even if there had been direct witnesses, that under his uniform one of them was hiding a work of art worth more than sixty million euros, owned by a wealthy businessman named Aaron Bukowski. They, of course, had been kept in the dark as to the identity of the owner and indeed the true value of what they had stolen.

As they drove back to the checkpoint to end their shift, they both agreed that they found it astonishing that so many security measures had achieved nothing. Nor did they understand why such a small drawing – a mere 40 x 30 centimetres – had been targeted, when they saw much larger pictures on the walls that were surely worth far more.

Up to that point, everything had gone smoothly and in exact accordance with the plan they had been instructed to follow. Thanks to the maps they had been given, they easily identified the private estate, its location and the villa to be burgled. They turned up dead on time. They presented their fake ID cards at the checkpoint, signed in and set out to do the job of patrolling, which would conceal their real intentions. At the appointed time, they went

to the designated property. They entered with the key they had been given and found the picture in the place that had been indicated. They took it, wrapped it up as they had been told to do, left the house, got into the security van, finished their shift and signed out. They drove to the place they had been ordered to make the exchange in the same van they had used to get to the residential estate. This vehicle had been provided to them the day before with precise instructions to use it exclusively for this job.

As they drove to the site chosen for the handover, Vasili, who was driving, began to have second thoughts. He was growing nervous and all types of dreadful scenarios were passing through his mind. He should have thought about it before accepting the job, but the smell of the money they had been promised was too much of a temptation for any objective consideration.

The truth was, they knew damn all about this individual they were about to meet, and that was a risk. They were told that it was an insurance scam, that in exchange for the stolen picture they would be given two envelopes, each containing two thousand five hundred euros, the remaining half of the agreed money.

While he was brooding on this, he turned to his friend, sat in the passenger seat:

‘What if this guy puts a couple of bullets into us to take us out of the picture?’ he blurted out.

‘It’s a bit late to think about that now, isn’t it?’ Grigori replied, looking alarmed. ‘What can we do? We’ve got no weapons and neither of us has ever killed anyone.’

‘You’re right, there’s nothing we can do, except pray. Are you any good at praying, Grigori?’

Grigori stared at him, saying nothing, feeling a mixture of concern and sympathy. He never imagined that his companion would end up thinking about praying to save his own skin. Vasili was always the one who took the initiative, who invariably saw the bright side of things, who came up with the most ingenious solutions to problems. He was his friend, yes, but he was also his mentor. And now he was talking about praying. He must have been really scared and that just wasn't like him.

Vasili continued blathering on, which made it clear to Grigori that his pal was indeed genuinely afraid. He only did that when he was really worried and things were getting out of hand.

‘Well, at least we know that the guy who hired us is called Oleg.’

‘Take it easy, Vasili. Sometimes I think you’re losing it. Let’s just look at things calmly. Firstly, that’s not going to be much use to you if you’re dead.’

‘You’re right about that.’

‘And if we live to tell the tale, I think you’d better forget about him. He’s not the kind of guy I’d like to have on my back.’

‘Yeah, you’re right about that too.’

‘Secondly, are you sure his name is Oleg? A guy who broke into our house, who knows where we live, who knows our phone numbers and who got us perfectly fitting uniforms, just to steal a small picture, worth who knows how much, is he going to tell you his real name?’

‘You’re right, Grigori.’

After a brief pause, Grigori thought that Vasili had got a grip on himself and accepting that the die had been cast, had calmed down and would shut up. But he was wrong.

‘And Marina? Her name was Marina, wasn’t it? You know, that waitress from the club. God, I’ve never seen longer legs in my life!

Did you see her tits? She was hot, huh?’

Once again, Grigori gave him a concerned look. His friend was trying to escape from reality, dreaming of a woman who was only available to millionaires and classy people. In addition, Oleg had already made it clear to them that this waitress was his property. You could tell by the way he gave her instructions, with a simple nod, and because at the end of their meeting he had warned them both that she was out of bounds.

‘Vasili, listen to me, that guy Oleg or whatever his name is, told you to forget about her. And you’d better do it. That little beauty wouldn’t even say good morning to you. She’s out of your league.’

Finally, they arrived at the spot where the exchange was to take place. It was a relatively remote area and at that time of day there was nothing going on. What’s more, they didn’t know the individual by sight, they had just been told to wait for someone.

Suddenly, there was a flash of headlights from among the parked cars and they headed that way. Vasili stopped the car, about ten metres from the other vehicle. It was a distance he considered prudent and safe in case of complications. Then a man got out of the other car and walked straight towards them with his hands in his jacket pockets.

‘Vasili.’

‘What?’

‘Tell me it’s going to be alright.’

‘I hope so, Grigori. I bloody hope so. But just in case, I want you to know that you are the best mate ever.’

‘And you feel you have to tell me that at this precise moment?’

The man approached the car. Bending down, he looked at the men inside, still dressed in their security guard uniforms. Vasili and Grigori were scared



to death. And the fake smile of the man standing at their window did nothing to reassure them.

‘*Privet*,’ he greeted them in Russian.

‘*Privet*,’ Vasili responded.

Then Vasili turned around, took the stolen goods from the back seat and handed it over to the stranger. The man took his hands out of his pockets and without even verifying the package, reached into the inside pocket of his jacket. At that moment, Grigori and Vasili both flinched and for a few seconds wondered whether to knock the guy out and run away, saying goodbye to the money, or whether they should beg for mercy. They were sure he was about to pull out a gun with a silencer and they would be found rigid and dead the next morning. Vasili’s idea of praying didn’t seem so stupid now, though it sure as hell wasn’t going to save their skins. In any case, Grigori was as good as praying, repeating over and over to himself something his mother had taught him as a child.

The guy did not pull out a weapon. Instead, he handed them two envelopes. They looked in them and found two thousand five hundred euros in each. He got into his car and drove off. They both took a deep breath. Their legs were shaking and their hearts were beating so fast they felt like they would burst. They would have given anything to have a shot of vodka at that moment. But the job wasn’t over yet.

When they had caught their breath a little, following the instructions they had been given, they changed out of their uniforms leaving them in the car that had been provided and putting on their own clothes which they had left in Vasili’s car, parked there the day before.

‘Grigori.’

‘Yes?’

‘We need new phone numbers.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘Burners, I reckon.’

‘Sure.’

‘And we need to move house.’

‘Yeah, I agree. I’m not having Oleg, or whatever his name is, rummaging through my wardrobe again.’

They took the SIMs out of their mobiles and threw them out of the window.

‘OK, then. Where do we go from here?’

‘No idea. Any suggestions?’

‘No. But anywhere’s better than here.’

Vasili started the engine and they headed for the motorway, with no clear plan, but in the direction of Algeciras. All they wanted to do was get the hell out of there as soon as possible. Then Vasili saw the headlights of a car in the rear-view mirror. He hadn't seen anyone arrive while they were stopped. In other words, whoever it was, had already been there keeping watch. Vasili kept his eyes on the mirror, but without saying anything to his friend, who hadn't noticed anything. Finally, just before they merged onto the motorway, the ghost car turned and Vasili took a deep breath. They were not being followed. Or so it appeared.

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The man now in possession of the stolen picture went directly to Puerto Banús following the orders he had been given. When he arrived, he left the car he had been given and walked to the pontoon they had specified. A huge yacht was moored there, with the name *IRINA* in gold letters on the side. That was the spot where the handover was to take place.

He approached the access ladder at the stern of the boat. As he set foot on the first step, several figures appeared on the deck at the top of the ladder. The one who appeared to be the boss was protected by three others standing behind him, all of them giant short-necked monsters with enough weapons to launch an invasion. The man figured that every one of those necks was pretty much the width of his thighs. They must have weighed a hundred and thirty kilos each and stood about two metres tall. Their suits looked as if they were about to burst open at any moment. The whole effect was unsettling, and if that wasn't intimidating enough, he wasn't reassured by the distrustful looks that greeted him. But he couldn't back out now. He climbed to the top of the ladder. All he had to do was complete the job: deliver a package. That's what he did. No one said a word. In return, the boss handed him an envelope, then turned away while his bodyguards stood there waiting for the visitor to leave. He, too, turned away from the gorillas with a slight nod of his head, accompanied by a forced smile, half out of politeness, half out of panic. It was only when he stepped back onto dry land that the heavies withdrew inside the yacht. He opened the envelope and checked that the money was as agreed and headed for a taxi. His job was done.

The head man made a phone call to report back and get further instructions.

‘You already know what you have to do,’ was the order he received.

‘Very good, sir.’

He hung up and went to find the captain in his cabin. He knocked, and the captain, looking sleepy, opened the door.

‘We’re leaving, Captain.’

‘Destination?’

‘Monte Carlo.’

‘Very well, sir. We’ll be departing in a short while.’

After shaking himself awake and putting on his uniform, the captain made his way to the bridge, rousing the rest of the crew as he went. While he waited for them to arrive, he poured himself a strong cup of coffee and spent a few minutes checking instruments and charts and calculating how long the trip would take.

The yacht *Irina* was one of those vessels that attracted attention wherever it docked. Its three decks and forty metres length provided comfortable accommodation for ten passengers and eight crew members, not to mention the owner’s extravagances, including a sauna and gold bathroom fittings.

The captain checked the radio and confirmed that all the instrumentation was functioning correctly. Then he calculated the time of arrival. Her two diesel engines with a total capacity of six thousand horsepower gave her a top speed of twenty-five knots, without pushing it to the limit. Her diesel tanks, filled to the brim, held up to twenty-nine thousand litres, giving her full range to make the journey without stopovers.

Ahead of them lay some seven hundred miles of sailing through a calm autumn Mediterranean, which meant almost two days of voyage at an average speed of seventeen knots.

The night was warm, the sky was full of stars and the weather forecast indicated that the sea would be calm. It would be a peaceful crossing, although it was important to keep an eye out for the surprises that night at sea can bring: boats full of immigrants trying to reach the Spanish coast, others lost and without bearings, smugglers speeding across with their powerful outboards in search of the mother ship, all of them without running lights.

But none of that could hinder or slow the yacht’s progress. The instructions were clear and precise.

## 2. Grigori and Vasili

Once they had exchanged the merchandise for money and checked that no one was following them, Vasili seemed calmer. In fact, the irrepressible jabbering of earlier was replaced by complete silence, much to Grigori's relief. It meant he could snatch a quick nap.

While Vasili was driving the car to get them away from Marbella, he considered how they had got themselves into this dodgy situation and embarked on a review of recent events. At this time of day, traffic was non-existent and he was cruising at a moderate speed, so he could let his mind wander.

The range of possibilities for entertainment offered to Grigori and Vasili was fairly limited. It basically depended on their financial resources, which fluctuated between meagre and pitiful. Their usual habit - if the budget did not allow for more, which was most of the time - was to go into a bar and drink a few beers while watching a football match on TV. If their finances were a bit more buoyant, they could replace beer with vodka, albeit cheap and of abysmal quality. Only occasionally, and under certain special, infrequent and singular circumstances, could they afford to treat themselves to a visit to a nightclub, striptease included, even if the dancers were a little well upholstered and had probably left their grandchildren in the care of a neighbour.

So it was that on that Thursday, one rash midweek day, they decided to go to San Pedro de Alcantara and treat themselves to a special night out. Little did they imagine what they were about to get involved in.

While they were enjoying the spectacle - sad, decadent and pathetic - drinking a third-rate vodka and hoping to be able to convince one of the

women in the room to have sex at a reasonable price, a guy came up to their table.

The man, whom they had never seen there before, started talking to them, commenting on the strippers' bodies and in particular their tits. Then, out of the blue, he made them a proposition:

‘Would you like to earn yourselves some easy cash? Then you could up your game and fuck a far classier tart than any of these here.’

The idea of being able to afford a whore that was above their usual standard got them on the hook. Besides, the stranger had told them that it would be easy money. They wanted to believe him.

The man had style. He spoke with an educated accent that sounded like it was from eastern Europe, although they couldn't be sure he was Russian. He was no small-time punk. He dressed well, in an expensive suit, so he must be successful in business and know how to earn a penny. In fact, they wondered how such an individual, looking like that, had stumbled into a dump like that.

The stranger invited them to discuss the matter further, but in a more discreet place.

‘Do you have a car?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Follow me, please.’

They left the nightclub and watched as their new friend got into his car, an 800hp V-12 Lamborghini Aventador. They followed him in theirs, a second-hand Audi A4. He drove to Puerto Banús.

The club he took them to was right in front of the marina. Stopping at the entrance, they left the cars with the valet and went inside. A huge bouncer, his head shaved like a billiard ball, stood at the door, checking out the



visitors. When he saw who it was, he let them through and greeted their new friend as if he knew him and he was there frequently.

‘Come with me,’ the man ordered, as the gorilla gave a nod indicating that he understood the situation.

The place was called *Irina la dulce*, which was either a demonstration of the owner’s lack of imagination when looking for a name, or else a subtle irony with reference to the film *Irma la Douce* (Irma, the sweet one) in which the main character was a prostitute. In any case, Grigori and Vasili had never even heard of Jack Lemmon or Shirley MacLaine and had certainly never seen the film.

After passing the payment booth, they had to climb a staircase with a dozen or so steps, at the top of which there were security staff controlling access. Behind them were huge, heavy velvet curtains whose main function was to isolate the noise, ensure the privacy of the guests and maintain an intimate atmosphere. Behind these curtains and down three steps, you reached the restaurant area with a small number of tables and a bar on the left where you could have a drink.

The club was tall and spacious, in the shape of a huge barrel. At the far end was a brightly lit stage, with a central pole, where a topless dancer gyrated and performed intricate erotic moves to the rhythm of the music. In between the restaurant and the stage, there were tables arranged in a semi-circle where you could take your time to relax and enjoy a drink while watching the show.

As soon as they walked in, they could see that there was a big difference between the strippers they were used to and the ‘escorts’ that filled every corner of this club. Booths were located on the sides of the long barrel, to the left and right. They had curtains drawn across for privacy and a guard outside to ensure that nobody interrupted what was taking place inside.

The type of clientele was also very different. They looked like powerful businessmen, with a lot of money and an even greater desire to show that they had it. You only had to check out the cars parked around the place. They were a lot fancier than the ones they were used to seeing in the dives they frequented.

Their host was perfectly at ease in this establishment. It was obvious that he knew it well or might even be the owner or at least the manager. There were plenty of clues; the way the bouncer at the door greeted him, the reaction of the waiters and the girls when they saw him arrive and the manner in which he moved around without the slightest hesitation. What they did not understand was why a man with a car like that and associated with a place like this, would go out of his way to seek them out. Before the end of the night, they would understand his motives.

He took them to an office tucked away from inquisitive eyes, situated at the far end, to the right of the stage. Inside, it was so well soundproofed that they could barely hear the music accompanying the exotic dancer on stage. They could observe her perfectly through a viewing window, which allowed them to see the show from there without being observed from the other side. They sat on a crescent-shaped leather sofa facing the entertainment. No sooner had they made themselves comfortable than a waitress appeared who left the two guests with their mouths hanging open. She must have been six feet tall with blonde, shoulder-length hair, almond green eyes and amazingly long legs. She wore a miniskirt that covered very little and a white blouse, under which there was nothing but her bare breasts. Her chest must have been at least a size thirty-eight.

‘What would you like to drink, gentlemen?’

They would have liked to answer with the sort of inane banter they were used to, like ‘your juices, baby’, but even they realised that this phrase - or

anything similar - was out of place at that moment. As out of place as they themselves were.

‘Vodka?’ their host suggested.

They both nodded. They were feeling so self-conscious that they didn’t dare speak up and let their Siberian peasant accents show. But more than anything they were suspicious. They didn’t trust so much hospitality from someone they had just met. There was a hidden agenda here and they wanted to know what it was.

After a curt nod from the man, the waitress left and later brought a tray with a bottle of the best Beluga vodka and three small glasses. She placed it all on the table and as she bent down, they could see that indeed, under her blouse, only her naked firm breasts were visible.

The host made the same brusque gesture and the girl disappeared. He filled the glasses.

‘Here’s to women and business,’ he said, raising his glass.

The others followed suit and all three drank it in one gulp.

The vodka was excellent. Probably the best they had ever drunk.

Through the one-way window they watched as couples made their way to the private rooms in what looked like the prelude to a happy ending. The ‘escorts’ - all of them stunning - looked as if they had been snatched from a beauty contest. There were plenty of girls with Eastern European features, tall and blonde with blue eyes, but there were also some brunettes who looked South American or Cuban or some such, and a few Asian girls. It seemed that, no matter what might be the sexual predilection of the gentlemen who visited *Irina la Dulce*, their tastes were provided for. And there they were, two former farm labourers, enjoying vodka and the sight of women they had only seen in the cinema and, what’s more, for free. And on

top of that, they were going to be offered a business proposition. Something didn't add up and they still didn't know what it was.

From that point on, their host started talking about himself, basically to big himself up. He endeavoured to impress them by telling them how he had progressed from a squalid suburb of Kiev to there. What he had had to do to get all that he had now and what he was willing to do not to lose it.

He didn't seem to have any interest in hearing what his new friends had to say on any subject. As he talked and talked, the glasses were refilled again and again and knocked back in one gulp. But one detail did not escape Vasili's attention. His new friend spoke in the plural, as if he represented someone, perhaps some group, or more likely, a company.

The two farmhands kept drinking and drinking the vodka and after the second bottle they were beginning to feel its effects, while their host seemed immune to the alcohol. When he thought they were sufficiently mellow, he got to the point.

‘Well, gentlemen, let's talk business. Would you like to make some easy money?’

They might be a couple of peasant farm workers who had migrated there, but they knew all too well that making easy money was a false concept. However, they were willing to do anything to earn money, even if it was ‘easy’.

‘We want to earn money. If it's easy, all the better,’ replied Vasili on behalf of both of them.

‘Great! We need you to enter a house and take something.’

Although they were beginning to feel the effects of the dozen or so glasses of vodka that had slipped so easily down their throats, they still had a few functioning neurons left.

‘You want us to commit a robbery.’

The man poured another round and as he drank his vodka, he replied.

‘Well,’ he said, shaking his head slightly, ‘let’s say it’s a matter of retrieving something that shouldn’t be where it is. It’ll be a ten-minute job. No two ways about it. No risk involved. In and out. And five thousand euros each. But you must follow the instructions to the letter.’

They looked at each other and drank the latest shot their new friend had poured out. Five thousand euros! It had been a long time since they had seen that much money in one place. Grigori tried to remember the last time and remembered the bank heist in Sofia, with a couple of plastic guns. But that was a long time ago.

‘What do we have to do?’

‘Come back here in a week’s time. Thursday. Not before midnight. If the doorman gives you any trouble, tell him I’m expecting you. Bring a passport photo. I’ll give you your instructions then.’

‘And if the guy asks us your name, what do we say?’

‘Oleg. And your names are?’

‘I’m [Grigori](#).’

‘And I’m Vasili.’

‘Good. See you next Thursday then.’

As they got up to leave, they passed the blonde waitress who smiled at them with a half-professional, half-mocking look on her face.

‘Thanks for coming. We look forward to seeing you again soon.’

‘Thursday,’ said Vasili, turning his head, just as she turned her back on him and walked towards the booth to retrieve the vodka bottles and glasses.

Once they had left the nightclub, they got into the car and looked for a place where they could have a last drink and compare thoughts. They soon

found one, languishing in the middle of nowhere and barely visible, lit by a dim and flickering light that served to frighten off any doubtful customers. They sat down at a secluded table on the terrace and ordered two beers.

They waited for the waitress to bring them before they began to talk freely.

‘What do you think?’ Vasili asked. He had noticed that his friend was very quiet during the discussion at the club.

‘It smells fishy to me, but what do you want me to say? You know as well as I do that we need the cash, and we need it as soon as possible. We’re hardly in a position to pick and choose.’

‘Yeah, but if we get caught...’

‘Well, look on the bright side, Vasili.’

‘Oh, you reckon there’s a bright side?’

‘If they catch us, we get a short spell in comfortable accommodation with three meals a day. And I don’t think life is too bad in Spanish prisons. Certainly nothing compared to others we’ve been in.’

‘You’re right about that. But they won’t deport us, will they? They won’t send us back to Russia?’

‘They don’t do that here.’

‘So, shall we go for it?’

‘Let’s drink to the deal. We’re going to make five thousand euros really easily.’

‘I don’t think it’ll be that easy. There’s a catch here and I haven’t worked out what it is yet.’

‘Relax, Vasili. Just think about what you’re going to do with all that money.’

‘You’re right. Let drink to the deal.’

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As instructed, the following Thursday they showed up at the club in Puerto Banús. When they got there, before the bouncer could raise any objections, they said:

‘Oleg is expecting us.’

The bouncer stepped aside and let them pass.

As they entered, they instinctively looked for the waitress, and when they spotted her, she motioned for them to follow her. She led them to the same private room as before, where Oleg was waiting for them. Before they sat down, Oleg signalled to the blonde and she made her way to the bar to serve the same drinks as last time to the boss and his guests. When she arrived with the bottle and glasses, they were again able to enjoy the view that was literally offered up in front of their eyes: the perfect breasts of the waitress as naked and as pert as ever, with their perfect proportions. At a gesture from Oleg, the girl remained in the room at a discreet distance.

He treats her like a dog, thought Vasili. With just a slight nod of the head she interprets and obeys.

‘Let’s drink to the success of our venture, gentlemen,’ said Oleg, raising his glass and inviting the other two to do the same.

After finishing the first toast in one gulp, Oleg continued.

‘In case there’s any doubt, you still have time to pull out. If you decide to continue, I want to make it clear that no foolishness on your part will be tolerated. It would be regrettable and, believe me, tragic.’

The two friends got the message.

‘No problem. We’ve made up our minds.’

‘Good. The photos?’

‘Yes, they’re here.’

As they went to hand him the photos, instead of taking them, Oleg signalled to the waitress, who took them away.

‘Don’t worry. She’ll be right back. I will now give you the information you need to do the job. Only the details you need to know. If you are not sure about anything, ask me. When Marina returns,’ Oleg continued, ‘she’ll come back with two IDs used by a security company. You, then, are going to replace two security guards on a residential estate.’

‘Are they ill?’ Grigori asked.

‘Something like that,’ was Oleg's answer.

‘How long are we going to be covering for them?’

‘One night.’

The disappointment and utter bewilderment on the faces of both of them was clear to see. They were going to be paid five thousand euros for just one night’s work?

‘Excuse me,’ Vasili interjected, ‘If I understand you correctly, we’re only going to work one night and we’re going to be paid five thousand euros each. Is that what you’re saying?’

‘That’s right. Exactly. I told you it would be easy money.’

‘OK’ said Vasili after letting out a long breath.

Next, Oleg explained the fine details of exactly what was expected of them.

‘The day before the hit, a car will be delivered to you. You will use it to get to and from the residential complex. After you have received the money in exchange for the picture, you are to leave the car there, at the site of the rendezvous. So, you will have to take another car to the meeting place to drive away in. Is that all clear?’

And he went on.

‘Here is a plan of the housing estate and its location in Marbella. It also shows the location of the house you are to break into. This other

plan of the interior of the house indicates where the picture is, and there's a key to enter the house.

It's essential that you follow these instructions on how to protect it, how to wrap it and how to ensure that it is not damaged. That is really important. If the buyer were to reject it because of damage, you would be held responsible and believe me, you don't want that to happen.

When you get to the security checkpoint you have to give the names that correspond to the ID cards. The signatures don't matter much. Nobody really checks them.

You must enter the house precisely fifteen minutes before the end of your patrol. After that, you sign out, leave the security van for the next guard and leave the scene. You go directly to the appointed meeting place to make the exchange. That information will be given to you 24 hours before the day of the operation.'

And to finish off, he gave them one final important instruction:

'Once you deliver the picture and receive the money, we will never see each other again. I don't want to see you turning up here. Oh, and you can forget about Marina, even in your dreams.'

That was the hardest part of the deal, especially for Vasili.

'Any questions, anything you're not sure about?' Oleg prompted.

'What about security systems? Alarms, cameras, dogs...' Grigori asked.

'You don't need to worry. We'll take care of all that.'

This "we" worried them. They didn't know how to interpret it. They weren't sure if it was something that provided security or some sort of stability, or if, on the contrary, it represented a threat to them.

'I have another question,' Vasili said.

'Go on'

‘If you have all the information and the resources, why don’t you, whoever you are, do it yourselves?’

‘Good question. It deserves a straight answer. A large number of highly competent people have been involved in this job. Each is an expert in his or her field, but none knows the name of any of the others. It’s called watertight compartmentalization and guarantees confidentiality. We have to preserve the identity of certain very important people who should not, cannot, be involved in something like this.’

‘But we’ve met you and we know your name is Oleg,’ said Grigori, letting his big mouth get the better of him.

‘Is that something I should be concerned about?’ growled Oleg menacingly, sitting up in his seat and looking hostile.

‘No, no, no. I’m very sorry, sir. My friend has expressed himself badly. What he meant to say,’ he said, shooting a withering look at his companion, ‘is that it seems like a contradiction. That’s all. You needn’t worry at all. I assure you.’

‘There is absolutely no contradiction. I have already told you that we will never see each other again. And that better be the case, because if not, as I said before, the consequences would be tragic. For you, of course.’

‘We’ve got the message, sir.’ Vasili replied. ‘Don’t worry, really. We have no intention of complicating things. Get in, get out, get paid and adios. You’ve made it crystal clear.’

‘I hope so.’

At that moment, Marina returned.

‘Here are the two ID cards and two bags. Inside are the uniforms you have to wear.’

‘What if they don’t fit?’ Grigori asked

‘They’ll fit; they are your size. We’ve already checked,’ Oleg replied.

‘How?’ Vasili asked, amazed and at the same time a little alarmed.

‘By going into your houses and opening the wardrobe,’ Oleg answered with a smile on his lips.

The answer chilled them to the bone. They turned so pale they looked like two corpses, and it was clear, if they didn’t watch out, that’s what they’d be in the not-too-distant future. It was then that they realised that there was indeed no such thing as ‘easy money’. But there was no turning back now.

‘Before you go, I want to offer you a gesture of goodwill to show our confidence in you.’

He’s still speaking in the plural, Vasili reflected.

‘Here’s half the money up front,’ and he handed them each an envelope with two thousand five hundred euros in it. ‘I hope you get a lot of pleasure out of it. Good night, gentlemen, and I don’t wish to ever see you again,’ Oleg concluded.

‘Goodbye,’ said Vasili. ‘And thank you.’

Before they got up to leave, they drank the last few dregs of vodka. They savoured it as if it were the last they would ever have. When they got up, their legs were shaking, they were ashen-faced and they were beginning to think that their lives were in serious danger. So much so that, as they left, they didn’t even dare to look at Marina when she said goodbye to them.

‘Good night, gentlemen.’

On this occasion, she didn’t add her favourite phrase ‘we hope to see you here again soon’, which was very significant.

They left the club carrying the bags and went straight to the car. Both remained in complete silence, staring blankly ahead, for several minutes.

Finally, Vasili, who always took the lead, said:

‘Grigori.’

‘Yes?’

‘I don’t want that vodka to be the last I ever have. Let’s get drunk with some of the money they just gave us.’

‘I’m with you all the way on that, but first, give me a moment.’

Grigori got out of the car and walked towards the sea, where the yachts were moored. Before he had got very far, he threw up.

Returning to the car, he said to his friend:

‘Whenever you like. I’m ready now.’

And they headed off to find a classy joint where they could use the two and a half thousand euros they had in their pockets. They were not at all sure that they would get to enjoy the rest.

Then one day they received a call which summoned them to the parking lot of a shopping centre in Marbella. There they were given the car they were to use for the job and they were told the location where they would exchange the picture for the remaining money. A quiet and secluded area where they could perform the operation undisturbed.

Once they had the car, they drove to the site of the handover and left their Audi there. That would be the one they would use to leave the scene.

Suddenly, the voice of Grigori, who was dozing in the seat next to him, shook Vasili out of his thoughts.

‘What are you thinking about, Vasili? You’ve been as quiet as a ghost for a while now. I can see you’ve calmed down at last.’

‘Well, I was just going over how we got into this mess. Everything that’s happened to us in the last two weeks.’

‘Well, in the end everything turned out all right. We got the job done, we got paid and we’re still alive.’



‘Yeah.’

‘But there’s still something that’s bugging you, isn’t there?’

‘Yes, there is. I’ve been driving all this time and I still don’t know where we’re going.’

‘Are you okay, d’you want me to drive for a while?’

‘No, no, I’m fine. Besides, driving relaxes me.’

‘When the sun comes up, which won’t be long, we’ll find a place to fuel up and have breakfast, okay?’

‘That’s a good idea. I’m starving.’

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