

“Vokharova!”

Little Tony cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled. The chunky Italian didn’t care if he woke up every dilapidated tenement on Brightwater Court. He wanted his money.

It was three a.m. on a bitter cold February night in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. The wind swept in from the Atlantic Ocean across the boardwalk barely a block away, picked up his voice and carried it off.

“You goddam Commie bastard! Where’s my fuckin’ money?”

The pudgy mobster grabbed a handful of gutter gravel and hurled it at the 3rd-story window. It splattered harmlessly on the smog-stained, bird-flecked, double-paned glass.

He reached into his overcoat pocket and pulled out a Ruger Hunter .44 mag. He fired two quick shots at the windowpane and the sound of shattering glass echoed in the street.

The driver’s door of a steel gray Lincoln Town Car sprang open. After a quick glance up and down the dark street, Bennie grabbed Little Tony by his cashmere camel coat collar and yanked.

“Your father says get your fat ass back in the car.”

There was more gravel in his throat than on the street.

Two doors slammed shut.

Little Tony whirled in his seat, waving the gun over his head.

“Goddam Commies! I told you we never shoulda done business with those bastards. No fuckin’ trust.”

“Shut your yap and put that thing away. You talk too goddam much. I wouldn’ pay you neither, on account of you make so much fuckin’ noise.”

Big Tony sat in the back seat, legs crossed, one hand propped against Bernie’s headrest, the other holding a sheet of paper under the reading light.

“Me, I can’t stand the Russians neither,” he said. His voice resonated with a hollow nasal twang. “But they got balls. Big, fuckin’ balls. Especially King Kong up there.”

He tapped the sheet.

“But you can’t argue with these numbers. Brooklyn is slippin.’ Vokharova’s computer guy was supposed to make us go up, not down.”

The words seemed to slip right out of his nose. He waved the sheet at his son.

Little Tony unbuttoned his coat and unwrapped his maroon silk muffler.

“I told you before, Pop, you want computer jocks in the business, go to Madras. Best thing Indians do is dick around with software all day, and they’re only a dime a fuckin’ dozen. But three months now, Vokharova stiff us. Three months! We protect his shit and wipe his filthy ass, he treats us like peasants. This is *our* backyard and I say it’s gone on fuckin’ long enough. He’s goin’ down.”

The Town Car purred, its lights off. Inside it was womb-like and warm.

Big Tony took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He pushed against Bennie’s headrest, leaned over on one cheek and let out a slow sissler.

The two front windows whispered down, almost simultaneously.

“Jesus, Pop, how many times we got to tell you,” Little Tony said, without looking back.

He waved a hand in front of his face.

“Not in the fuckin’ car.”

“I don’t care. Too much stress, is what it is. You pop your fuckin’ wop magnum, vents your frustration. Doc says I bottle it up. You want Indians, trust me, you’ll get worse than that.”

“Yeah, well, keep it corked for Chrissake,” Bennie said.

Gusts of frozen air knifed in through the open windows, dissipating the bouquet. The windows purred back up.

“Somethin’ must be goin’ on, he won’t pay,” Big Tony said softly. “Somethin’ big. Lights are shinin’ up there, you can see their shadows movin’ behind the shades. Go buzz ‘em again, but get in this time. Somethin’ big goin’ down, we want a piece of it.”

“Bullshit. They won’t even answer. King Kong’s freakin’ deaf.”

“I don’t give a shit, just get your lazy ass upstairs. You’re not leavin’ here tonight without some good-faith cash, you want to learn this business.”

Little Tony wrapped the burgundy muffler tightly around his neck and rebuttoned his overcoat. He stepped back into the cold, slammed the door, and stomped across the street.

“How much longer, *how much longer?*”

Dmitri Vokharova paced nervously behind the young blonde seated at the keyboard of a 2GHz Optiplex-III Pentium-V Inspiron 8100 laptop, watching the little symbols dance on her flat thin-film transistor XGA screen. He rubbed a meaty hand across the black fuzz on top of his head, the same dark fuzz that covered his face.

“Forever, if you don’t sit down and get off my back.”

Tatyana Ilyushin Noyanovich depressed the Alt key and punched in some code. Without taking her eyes off the screen, she reached down and flicked on a scanner. She pulled the sleeves of a charcoal Shetland up her forearms and slinked down in her chair, crossing her long legs at the ankles under the flimsy folding table.

The man they call King Kong unbuttoned his midnight blue blazer and stood behind her, thick hands on wide hips. His cold, olive-black eyes watched the screen as its pale light flickered across his leathery face.

“You know these transfers have to be done tonight,” he said.

He shot a cuff and glanced at his Rolex.

“The banks have already opened in Frankfurt and London. You’re cutting it too close.”

“Well, your boy Yevchenko said the mainframe in the wire room at Manhattan Trust would be running maintenance protocols tonight,” she said without turning around. “But they just now got their routines in loop so the packet-filter router can be bypassed. I’ve got a dozen accounts to manipulate here, so I’m telling you again, leave me alone so I can concentrate.”

Not moving, Vokharova crossed his arms, his eyes still glued to the screen.

Tatyana pressed the scan button and watched a full-color high-resolution image of herself, identical in every respect except for the dark hair, fill the screen. She clicked and dragged the cursor horizontally across the top of the face, highlighting the eyes.

Activating an application-level protocol that scanned the irises, she toggled a pull-down menu and clicked on “Save as

Object.” Then she dragged the object onto the icon for TimeWarner’s high-speed wireless broadband modem and sat back to watch the handshake with the bank’s computers.

The hard leather boot steps of Boris Popov echoed on the unfinished parquet floor.

“Boss, is that prick Little Tony DeLuca again. Is downstairs leaning on the buzzer. Fucking dago won’t go away. Is ignoring him before, what do you want me to do now?”

Vokharova finally turned away from the screen.

“*Gavnyuk!*” he growled. “That shithead. You know I talk only to his father. What the hell does that fat bastard want now?”

Popov straightened his tie and smoothed the starched spread collar of his end-on-end tailor-made shirt.

“Is screaming about the money. Is putting two shots through the window when he couldn’t get your attention. You sure is right thing to do, give those guys the finger? You just make them mad, Boss.”

“Is exactly what I want to do,” Vokharova said.

His consonants were guttural, hard and heavily accented.

“They nickel-dime us on every damn invoice, pad their numbers like amateurs. They think I am stupid? I fucking give them new business on a silver platter and they try to rake me over. Well, fuck them. We overpaid for three months, so now we underpay for three months. They get mad and want to fight, fine, we can kiss them off and get those Colombian niggers to do the work.”

Popov shivered.

“Boss, is New York, not Miami. You’re worked up, nervous about the wires. Let me go downstairs, give Little Tony some cash. Enough to make him go away, maybe half a month’s worth. Don’t forget, Brooklyn’s still their territory.”

Vokharova pushed Popov aside and walked toward the empty, unfurnished living room.

“I’ll get rid of him,” he said. “Fucking dagos think with their dicks. Brooklyn is our territory now, whether they like it or not. You think the Italians are still in charge, you’ll always be a pawn, Boris.”

Little Tony DeLuca stood in the cramped vestibule and stamped his elegant Italian calfskin cap-toes from foot to foot to buffer the cold. He leaned his left elbow against the buzzer, his hands stuffed deep down the cashmere pockets.

He knew the Russians would never let him in. That would be too hospitable, too civilized. Little Tony knew they were way too crude to have manners.

The dull light of a naked 40-watt bulb illuminated the littered entryway. Months of junk mail sat tossed in a corner, unopened and unread. Half the mailboxes had no doors; the rest had long since been pried open by occupants who forgot their keys or by neighborhood punks looking for uncashed checks.

Sidewalk slush soaked through an old hemp doormat, turning it black and dingy. Mildew ringed the edges. Yellow newspapers siphoned off what dampness the doormat couldn't absorb.

Little Tony was running out of patience. He glanced down at his wet Ferragamos and then stared up at the naked light bulb. The longer he leaned on the damn buzzer, the angrier he got. He pulled out his .44 and shot out the light.

He yanked his elbow off the buzzer and shot that, too. Twice. Then he put one slug through the front door lock and began tramping up the filthy linoleum stairs.

Outside in the Town Car, Big Tony leaned forward toward the front seat.

"You hear that, Bennie?" he said, the words sliding out his nose. "I told you Little Tony jus' needed a push. He's goin' up."

Tatyana Ilyushin Noyanovich tapped a foot and waited as the feedback loop passed her through the bank's secure-sockets layer. A single word flashed in a text box on the screen: "scanning."

Seconds later, she had confirmation that the iris scan was complete. Unfolding a long scrap of paper, she punched in the password protocol and smiled when she saw the screen clear.

She pulled the sheet toward her and began keying in account numbers and amounts. It shouldn't take long, she thought, now that she was in.

She tried to put the verbal clatter between Vokharova and Popov out of her mind, but their diatribe against the Italians had become an irritating distraction.

“Hey! Keep it down in there!” she yelled, her nervous eyes fixed on the screen. She blushed at the ferocity in her voice. But the truth was, she was more afraid than angry.

Popov leaned behind Vokharova and kicked the door to the side room shut.

Tatyana smiled again at the silence. Good. She could concentrate now.

“You can’t deal with Little Tony,” Popov repeated. “His father finds out, your status is shit. Let me go down, send him away. Is giving him a simple message.”

He tugged at the pistol under his armpit.

Vokharova jammed a forearm across Popov’s chest and shoved him against the wall.

“Is nobody going downstairs,” he growled between clenched teeth. “Not while she’s working those numbers.”

Popov pulled himself out from under Vokharova’s press, straightening his shirt and tie.

He walked to the window, drew the shade aside and glanced down.

“Is still there, the car,” he said with a nod. “I tell you, is not leaving until they get some cash.”

Vokharova laughed.

“Then they can freeze their fat asses while -- ”

A sudden pounding on the front door interrupted him. Vokharova could tell it wasn’t a hand or a fist. It was a metal object. A hard metal object.

A gun.

He reached under his jacket and pulled out a jet-black 7.62mm Tokarev automatic.

“Stop with the pounding!” the blonde yelled again from behind the closed door.

One by one, Tatyana punched in the alphanumeric codes for the accounts, followed by the specific dollar amount to be transferred from each one, then by the routing numbers of the receiving banks and the new account numbers to be credited.

She flipped the sheet over and keyed in the Manhattan Trust Bank’s 3-digit electronic wire-transfer codes for the year, the month, the date, and the day of the week, then the bank’s own 4-

digit ID and the 5-digit codes of the receiving banks, in order, and an 8-digit PIN.

Then she pressed Enter and watched as the software compiled its routine. The powerful microprocessor chattered like a summer cricket while a yellow Smiley Face icon floated on the flat screen, bouncing from spot to spot at random.

After each successful transfer, the word "Done" flashed in another text box, followed by a question: "Print Confirmation?"

Tatyana pressed the "Y" key a dozen times in quick succession to spool the print buffer and heard the laser jet engine begin to whirl quietly beside her. In less than a minute, she had a hardcopy record of all the transfers.

In the background, she heard Vokharova's hard leather boots pound across the parquet floor.

In three long steps, King Kong was at the front door.

"Who's there?" he shouted.

He held the Tokarev by his side, pointed at the floor.

"Little Tony, you bastard! The fuck you think?"

Vokharova smiled. He knew now the Italian had destroyed the entrance downstairs.

"Go home," he said. "Is your father I speak to, not you."

"Like hell," Little Tony shouted. "I'm not leavin' until I get some fuckin' cash."

"You want the money, do you?"

"The fuck you think?"

"Stand in front of the peephole, let me see your face."

"Yeah, yeah, fuck you."

Vokharova flipped the metal cover up and pressed his eye to the fish-eye lens. He recognized the fat face instantly.

"Don't move," he said. "Stay there, is coming right back."

He put the barrel of the Tokarev up to the peephole and pulled the trigger, twice.

Popov jumped.

"Jesus Christ, Boss! What the hell -- ?"

"Shut up and listen."

Tatyana yanked the side door open and stuck her head through, eyes wide as moons.

"What's going on out here?"

Vokharova waved her aside.

"Forget it, finish your work."

He kicked the flimsy door shut.

Popov put his ear to the front door. He shook his head.

“Is nothing.”

Vokharova looked through the gaping cavity in the door where the peephole used to be. He saw nothing.

He opened the door.

Little Tony was sprawled across the hallway floor, a bloody crater in his face.

“Pull the body in here and shove it against the wall. Use the wop’s coat to mop up the blood.”

Popov grabbed the lapels of Little Tony’s overcoat and dragged the corpse inside. When he saw the remains of the face, he doubled over in the corner with dry heaves.

Vokharova walked quickly to the front window and pulled the shade aside. His feet crunched on the broken glass. He unlatched the jagged window and raised it.

Leaning out, he fired two quick shots at the parked Lincoln below. One splintered the windshield into a spider’s web of cracked glass, the other punched a hole in the rear door not two feet from Big Tony’s head.

The headlights of the Town Car flashed on instantly and it roared off, tires screeching in the dead night.

Pistol in hand, Vokharova pulled the shade back over the shattered window and glanced down at the dead mobster as he walked back toward the side room.

The door whipped open again.

“What in the world do you think you’re doing?” Tatyana asked, her eyes twitching with fear. “You told me this was strictly a business deal, not an all-out gang war.”

Vokharova ignored her whining. He saw the printout she was holding.

“Is that it?” he asked. “Is finished?”

She nodded nervously and took a step back.

“It’s done, a billion and change,” she said. “A dozen accounts, about eighty million from each, more or less, like Yevchenko said. I can leave now.”

“Is not going anywhere yet. Let me see that list.”

She tried to hide the printout behind her back but he snatched it from her hand.

His eyes narrowed, then widened with pleasure as he saw the big numbers. He smiled and folded the sheet and stuffed it in an inside pocket.

Tatyana edged slowly backwards into the little room.

“Look,” she said, “I don’t know what you guys are up to and I don’t want to know. But you promised to let my father go if I accessed the bank’s computer and I did that. So you can get word to him now. I’m done.”

She reached down to pick up her pocketbook and coat.

“You know you’re never done, my love. Is not going anywhere either, your father.”

When he leveled the Tokarev at her, she swung her purse but he blocked it with his free hand.

He reached up and grabbed her roughly by the neck, spinning her around. As she choked, struggling to escape, she tripped on her coat and stumbled against the table.

Vokharova pressed the Tokarev to the base of her skull and fired once.

The large-bore slug exited through her left eye socket and smashed into the computer screen, spraying it with blood. Sparks flew as it went dead.

He let her lifeless body slump to the floor.

At the sound of yet another shot, Popov sprang through the door, his own gun ready.

“Is okay, Boss?” he asked.

“Is fine.”

Popov looked at the mess on the desktop and saw the blonde on the floor.

“Jesus,” he said. “Is getting the hell out of here.”

He grabbed Vokharova’s sleeve and tugged.

The man they call King Kong pulled his arm free.

“Come on, let’s go,” Popov said. “Police is coming if we don’t get out. Now!”

“*Tirunda*. Nonsense. You think another dead body is unusual? Nobody calls the police in Brooklyn anymore after our Muslim friends attacked Manhattan. Is a free-for-all here. Is not Moscow, where police shoot first and ask questions after.”

Vokharova straightened his blazer.

“Take the girl. I’ll bring the computer equipment.”

He pocketed the sheet of codes she left on the desk.

“What about the dead wop?”

“Leave him. After the neighborhood punks loot him, the rats and cockroaches can have a little feast.”