

HOSTILE INTENT by Don Bentley – Excerpt

Chapter 5

Nolan floored the accelerator before I'd even fully shut the door. The Audi's turbo responded with a throaty growl.

Driving on the autobahn was both an exciting and humbling experience. Exciting because the stretches of unregulated road were made for testing your vehicle's performance limits or your own—whichever came first. Humbling because the cars that most often chased you from the fast lane were unassuming black station wagons.

Just like this one.

The Audi A4 allroad shot through a slot between two parked cars with about a millimeter's worth of clearance. I tried not to duck below the dashboard.

Nolan never flinched.

"So ho have ye been?" Nolan said.

From his casual tone, we could have been sitting across from each other Café Central instead of screaming down a Vienna side street. Nolan's appearance suggested otherwise. His unkept hair hung limp around his face, and his bloodshot eyes were framed by dark, puffy bags. His chin was covered in reddish stubble, and his shirt was wrinkled and untucked.

The Irishman was on the run.

"Great," I said, slamming the seat belt buckle home. "Thanks for asking."

"And your wife, how is she?"

Nolan spooled through gears as he spoke, shifting with a Formula One driver's precision. The acceleration crushed me into the bucket seat as he poured on the gas.

"Fine as well," I said. "Thanks to you."

"I heard about her injury," Nolan said, shaking his head. "Bad bit of business, that."

A woman and man strolling hand in hand had the audacity to consider stepping in the crosswalk. Nolan politely tapped the horn and downshifted, the engine screaming as he redlined the rpms.

The happy couple wisely stayed on the sidewalk.

The Audi's speedometer edged back past one hundred kilometers as Nolan clutched back into fourth gear, rocketing through the intersection.

"It was," I said, picturing the puckered skin on Laila's shoulder. "Nolan, why am I here?"

“Cutting to the chase, are we?” Nolan said, careening around another corner. “Fine. I need help, and I have information to trade for it.”

“What kind of information?”

“The Russian kind. The KGB is up to their old tricks.”

“Don’t you mean the SVR?” I said. “The KGB dissolved with the Soviet Union back in the nineties.”

“Bah. New name. Same men.”

Nolan spun the wheel violently to the left, turning off the main drag into a narrow alley. “Now be a good lad and grab the hardware beneath your seat. We’re in a spot of trouble.”

By *spot of trouble*, Nolan seemed to be indicating the two cars parked nose-to-nose in a makeshift roadblock fifty meters in front of us. A pair of plainclothesmen stood in front of the cars. Even if they hadn’t been carrying the collapsible-stock version of the AK-74 in the loose, easy grip of men accustomed to pointing guns at others for a living, their affiliation was plain. If you knew what to look for, that is. Slavic features and cheap suits bunched across thick shoulders and arms. Not to mention the twin looks of disdain for which their kind was famous. Whether they were in the employ of a billionaire oligarch or the nation-state that bequeathed them mattered little.

The gunmen were Russian hoods through and through.

As we careened toward them, the Russians raised the short-barreled rifles to their shoulders and settled into shooting stances.

Unlike the happy Viennese couple we’d scared back onto the sidewalk two streets ago, these men weren’t intimidated by the 3,726-pound car barreling down on them.

Lounging around in the Café Central suddenly didn’t seem like such an imposition.

“What the play?” I said, reaching under my seat.

Though our tactical situation was not ideal, I assumed that Nolan had a plan.

But I would never know.

Just as my fingers touched a hard plastic buttstock, motion registered in my peripheral vision. I turned to see a silver Mercedes symbol mounted on an enormous bumper. A bumper seemingly hovering outside Nolan’s Window.

Then steel met steel.

I pinballed between the door and dashboard, my head bouncing off the doorframe even as the airbag blasted me in the face. Nolan, who hadn’t been wearing a seat belt, collided with me, his shoulder catching me in the chin like a well-thrown uppercut.

The lights didn’t completely go out in Georgia, but they dimmed.

Significantly.

Rough hands dragged me from the car. I tried to resist, but my major muscle groups weren't cooperating. The Russians yanked me from my seat and dumped me on the ground like a pile of wet laundry. I tried to sit up, but my brain had other plans.

The world spun.

I slid into darkness.

A slamming car door roused me a second time. Opening my eyes, I saw two gunmen dragging Nolan's limp body toward one of the roadblock cars. Though his face was a mess of cuts, and blood streamed from his broken nose, Nolan's eyelids fluttered open. He offered me a weak smile before his captors tossed him into the backseat and climbed in behind him.

I pushed myself upright, trying to stand, but flopped onto my side instead. My legs were wobbly, and while the world was no longer spinning, it was still badly listing. Gritting my teeth, I closed my eyes, pressed both palms flat against the cobblestones, and pushed. Ignoring the gonging in my head, I struggled to my knees, swaying like a drunken sailor.

The kidnapping wasn't going down in a Karachi back alley. It was happening in broad daylight in a major European city known for its effective police force and almost nonexistent crime. To get away with this, the snatch team needed to minimize the information a potential witness could pass to the police.

So they needed to minimize me.

Heavy soled shoes crunching on broken glass lent a sense of urgency to my effort. In my current state, I wouldn't survive a round with Tinker Bell, let alone Russian killers. But firearms were the great equalizer. The Audi and the weapon secreted under my seat were just feet away. The violent crash sequence surely would have shaken it loose, but I'd take scrounging in the car for a gun over waiting for death in the middle of the street.

Since the world was off its axis, I kept my eyes closed to neutralize the vertigo and stumbled toward the car. After three lurching steps, my outstretched fingers found the Audi's cool metal frame. Wrapping my hand around the car's doorjamb, I tumbled into the inviting interior.

Or tried to.

Someone grabbed a handful of my shoulder and spun me around. My arms were wet noodles, but I threw an elbow as I turned, hoping to bury the pointy end into a Russian jaw or temple.

I missed.

My attacker ducked beneath the clumsy strike, hammering me with a body blow to the stomach, followed by a hook into the kidney. I'd taken a punch or two in my life, but nothing like this. The Russian had fists of concrete. Lightning sparked across my abdomen.

I doubled over, gasping, powerless to avoid the inevitable knee to my jaw.

It didn't come.

Instead, the Russian drew a pistol from the holster at his waist and pressed the barrel into my forehead. But rather than the thunderclap I was expecting, I heard two Russian words instead.

“Moskva rulit.”

Then he swung the pistol in a vicious arc.

I tried to get an arm up, but my nervous system wasn't taking calls. Steel bit into my skin and pain rocketed through my skull.

Then I felt nothing.

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