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The Professionals

Written by Owen Laukkanen

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THE PROFESSIONALS

OWEN LAUKKANEN



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**THE
PROFESSIONALS**



one

Martin Warner checked his watch as the train slowed for Highland Park. Quarter to seven. Not early, but not terribly late, either; time enough for a relaxed dinner and a couple hours babysitting the Bulls before putting Sarah and Tim to bed.

The train jostled and the brakes squealed and Warner stood, thinking about a hot lasagna and a cold beer and maybe, if Leanne wasn't too tired, a little bit of fun in the master bedroom before they turned in for the night.

It was dusk by the time he stepped onto the platform, the crisp October air and the chill wind off Lake Michigan already hinting at the long winter ahead, and Warner shivered involuntarily and pulled his coat close around him as he joined the rest of the Highland Park commuters, a uniform crush of tailored suits and tasteful ties and thousand-dollar briefcases, a collective desire to get home, get warm, get fed.

The arrivals streamed out of the station, and Warner moved with the current toward the far end of the parking lot, the herd thinning around him until only a few stragglers remained. When he was alone on the pavement, he stopped and surveyed the archipelago of cars,

searching in vain for his own. The light was dim in the back corners of the lot, and he couldn't see his car. He squinted into the shadows, turned around, and realized after a moment that someone had parked a van in front of it, a white Ford cargo van.

I must be tired, he thought, fingering his keys in his pocket and skirting the van to where his Lexus sat waiting. He pressed a button on his key fob and the car chirped in response as he reached for the door handle. Before he could open the door, however, a woman's voice called out behind him.

"Marty?" she said. "Martin Warner? Is that you?"

It was a younger woman's voice, a happy, what-a-coincidence voice, and Warner set his briefcase down and turned around with a smile to match. But when he turned to greet the mystery woman, hoping a little guiltily that her face was as attractive as her voice, he found no smiling beauty but instead two men, their faces hidden behind black ski masks. Behind them stood the van, its sliding side door wide open, and Warner stared inside, not comprehending, before someone wrapped something over his eyes and he could no longer see.

He felt hands grip his shoulders and shove him into the back of the van, and Warner heard the men talking around him, low voices tinged with urgency.

"Got him?"

"We're clear."

The door slammed shut, and Warner lay stunned in the rear compartment as the van rumbled to life and reversed. He was blindfolded, his hands tied behind him, and he had sudden nightmarish thoughts, visceral, involuntary images of his broken body, bloody and anonymous in death. "You're making a mistake," he said, his voice pitiful and weak. "Whoever you're looking for, I'm not the guy."

The woman spoke again. "You're Martin Warner of 15 Linden Park Place? Married to Leanne Warner, father of Sarah and Tim Warner?"

Warner felt like he was going to be sick. "Don't hurt them," he said. "Your kids are fine, Martin. Sit back and relax."

“Why are you doing this?” He twisted in his bindings, craning his neck toward the sound of her voice. “Where are you taking me?”

“Don’t worry about it now,” she said. “We’ll explain it all when we get there.”

The van drove fifteen, maybe twenty, minutes, before pulling in somewhere and stopping. Someone cut the ignition. “Have a look.” A door opened and slammed shut.

A minute later, the rear door slid open. “We’re clear.”

Someone lifted Warner to his feet and pushed him out of the van. “Hurry.” He let them guide him up a flight of stairs and down a long hallway before they turned him left, walked him a few paces, and deposited him on what felt like a bed.

“Sit,” said the man. “Listen.”

Warner sat up. Listened to the sounds around him: the rustle of feet on carpet, chairs being moved. A door shut and was locked.

“Okay, Marty.” A third voice, a man’s, youngish but assertive. “I apologize for the blindfold. Just a precaution. If you promise not to take it off, I’ll untie your hands. Deal?”

Warner nodded. “Okay.”

“If you take off the blindfold and see our faces, Marty, we’ll have to kill you.”

Warner swallowed. “I promise I won’t look.”

Someone untied his hands, and he rubbed his wrists gingerly. A glass was pressed into his hands, and he brought it to his lips. Water. He realized he was thirsty and drank, emptying the glass.

“You’re wondering why we’ve brought you here,” the third voice continued. Warner was already thinking of him as the boss. “Yeah?”

Warner nodded. “I . . . am.”

“It’s really simple. You’ve been kidnapped, Marty. We’re holding you for ransom. We don’t want to hurt you. We don’t even want to inconvenience you that much. If all goes according to plan, we’ll have you back home tomorrow.”

“The police,” said Warner. “They’ll find you.”

“They won’t,” said the man. “Because they’re not going to know about it. We’re watching your house, Marty. We have eyes on your family right now. If anyone calls the police, we’ll know about it. And then we’ll have to react.”

Warner swallowed again. “No police.”

Someone pressed a phone into his hand. “This is not a big deal,” the man said. “You’re going to call Leanne and tell her you’re all right. You’re going to tell her not to call the police. You’re going to tell her if she does call the police, she’ll never see you again.”

“How much do you want?”

“Then you’re going to tell her she can have you back tomorrow. Good as new. All we want is a small finder’s fee.”

“How much, damn it?” said Warner.

“Sixty grand, Marty,” said the man. “Unmarked twenties. We need it within twenty-four hours. Tell your wife she’ll get the drop details once she’s secured the money.”

“Sixty thousand dollars?” said Warner. “That’s absurd. I expensed more than sixty grand last year alone.”

“We know that,” said the man. “And we know you made a million dollars last year speculating on oil futures, yeah? Sixty grand should be a cinch.”

Warner paused. “How do you know this stuff?”

“We did our research, Marty.” He could feel someone beside him, punching numbers into the phone. “Now, go ahead and make that call.”



two

Arthur Pender stared out the window of the restaurant, watching cars pull in and out of the parking lot as the night settled in beyond. Another perfect score, he thought. This is easier than flipping burgers.

Sawyer had purchased the van in Kansas City on Monday, the day after LaSalle's wife paid his ransom. The four of them had driven up to Chicagoland that night, arriving in Highland Park around four in the morning. They found a cheap motel by the highway and turned in at dawn. For Pender, it was the first time he'd slept, really slept, in a week.

Tuesday was decompression day. Mouse and Sawyer rented a little Toyota, headed into Chicago, caught a Blackhawks game. Pender and Marie hit Lake Michigan. Took a long walk. Ate a nice dinner. Got a bit drunk and made the best of their alone time.

They spent Wednesday doing preliminary intel, scoping out Warner, getting a feel for his routine. Confirming travel times. Double-checking Mouse's computer work with practice and old-fashioned observation.

Thursday: dress rehearsal. Everyone a bit antsy. Fraying tempers. Everything nailed down and nothing to do. Sawyer and Mouse fighting over the remote. Marie withdrawn, worried.

Friday was D-day. Pender didn't sleep much, as usual. Game day always gave him a rush. Like waiting for Santa Claus on Christmas Eve.

He kept Marie awake with his tossing and turning and finally left her around three in the morning, headed to Sawyer and Mouse's room. Found them watching action movies on cable. Watched for a while and fell asleep in an easy chair.

They spent the morning doing final recon work. Parked the van beside Warner's Lexus in the Metra lot, babysat Leanne Warner all day in the Toyota, and then headed back to the motel. The hostage room all set up. Marie locked in the bathroom, rehearsing her lines in the mirror. Sawyer taking a nap and Mouse watching TV. Loose.

They drove back to the parking lot in the late afternoon. Pender and Sawyer in the van. Mouse in the Toyota. Marie on the platform. Everybody focused. Everybody calm.

Ten to seven. The train arrived. Marie found Warner on the platform. Followed him out into the parking lot. Pender phoned Mouse and gave him the all clear. Mouse flashed the high beams at Marie. Point of no return. No quitting now. Go go go.

It played exactly as they drew it up. They snagged Warner no problem, got him back to the motel, made the pitch.

Warner called his wife. Calmed down a little. What's sixty grand to this guy? Probably kept that kind of change in a jam jar in his basement. Walking-around money.

Leanne Warner had no trouble producing the ransom. Had the money by Saturday afternoon with plenty of time to spare. No police. Mouse tailed her in the Toyota to be sure.

She drove a black Lincoln Navigator, and came alone, as instructed. Left the money in a duffel bag at the drop site and parked nearby to wait.

Mouse scoped the scene in the Toyota and phoned in the all clear. Sawyer and Pender drove up in the van, sunglasses on and hats pulled low. Pender grabbed the cash bag. Checked it, counted it, found it clean. All glorious, well-used twenties. Kicked Warner from the van blindfolded. Slid the door shut behind him and drove off into traffic.

Perfect execution.

Leanne Warner was good with instructions. She didn't try to follow. According to Mouse, she played the usual tune: ran to her husband, hugged him, took off the blindfold, tearful reunion. Then they drove home.

"No cops," Pender warned them both. "Even after it's over. We'll be watching the house. You call the cops, and we come for the kids."

They divvied up the money in Racine, just across the state line. Pender set aside twenty thousand for expenses: van, rental car, cell phones, motel, food, and gas. That left forty thousand for the team. Ten thousand apiece. Even split. Ten thousand for the Warner job and ten thousand from Kansas City made twenty for the month. Add it to the twenty-five or so from the September jobs and you had the makings of a decent autumn.

They stripped the van clean and abandoned it behind a warehouse in Waukegan. Pender and Sawyer paid cash for a GMC Savana on lease return at a used-car dealership in Lake Forest, and they threw the burner phones and the old plates into Lake Michigan when they dropped off the rental car.

Now they sat in a Denny's in Racine, trying to figure the next move. "We could do Milwaukee next week," Mouse was saying. "Won't take much looking to find something suitable."

"Milwaukee's too close," said Pender. "We pull a job in Wisconsin, there's a chance someone catches on. I was thinking Minneapolis. Quick, before it gets too cold. Then down to Detroit and then south to the sunny stuff."

"I like that," said Marie. "Can we do Florida?"

"Disney World," said Mouse.

"Disney World," said Pender. "You want to kidnap Mickey Mouse?"

"You know he's filthy rich," said Mouse. "Minnie pays the ransom and we're set for life."

Pender laughed. "How about it, Sawyer? Florida?"

Sawyer looked up from his Grand Slam breakfast. He nodded. "Would be nice to try some surfing."

“Cheers to that,” said Mouse, lifting his glass. They drank to the plan and then ate in silence, reflecting on the success of the job, and when the plates had been cleared and the bill was on the table, Pender cleared his throat. “All right,” he said. “Sawyer and Mouse, you guys drive up to Minnesota tonight. Grab a motel and try and find someone for us to key on.”

Pender smiled at Marie. “We’ll take the train, you and me. These guys can pick us up at the station tomorrow.” He pulled out his wallet and put cash on the bill. “Great work, everyone,” he said. “See you in Minnesota.”