

★ **Untraceable**

**Sergei Lebedev**

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Two hardened men seek to relive their grisly pasts in Sergei Lebedev's thriller, *Untraceable*.

A former Soviet agent who's living in exile is murdered with an untraceable poison. This sets off a chain of events, altering the lives of two very different but equally determined men: Kalitin, a terminally ill chemist who once specialized in untraceable poisons, and Shershnev, the aging lieutenant colonel sent to kill him. Both think back on their glory days as they hurtle towards their inevitable, intertwined destinies.

*Untraceable* explores recent Russian history through the perspectives of its central characters, who embody the worst of the Soviet Union's obsessions and excesses. Kalitin and Shershnev are ruthless, self-absorbed men who never once question the rightness or wrongness of their actions. Their singleminded focus prevents them from realizing what they really are: relics of a faded empire whose carefully cultivated lack of morals will prove to be their undoing. This makes the narrative intense from start to finish.

Though they are despicable, Kalitin and Shershnev are also fascinating. Smooth prose is used to explore their psyches, proving far more insightful than the characters themselves are. Their histories breed paranoia; pressure mounts as small details go awry during these, their most important of missions. Both feel that something is amiss, but rather than read the writing on the wall, they forge ahead, shoving aside all distractions, heedless of the consequences. Their refusals to accept warning signs for what they are brings the story to a tense, fitting end. Shershnev and Kalitin can forget, ignore, and excuse the past all they like, but the past is always there, beneath their feet or waiting around the corner.

Intelligent and stunning, *Untraceable* is a character-driven thriller about the price of control.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (January / February 2021)

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