

LOOKIN'
FOR
TROUBLE.

© Morris Kenyon 5th December 2011

* With threats against his family giving him little choice but to flee his home city of Odessa, Nicolae Caramarin must recover a gang boss's missing valuable painting if he ever hopes to return. He follows the trail to Britain's windy and rainy city of Manchester. There, he soon falls into his bad old ways with the local underworld. But things soon escalate out of control. Who can he turn to for help? Who can he trust? Soon Caramarin finds himself relying on his strength and wits in a battle for survival where just staying free is a bonus.

* **WARNING:** This book contains scenes of a sexual nature, graphic violence, strong language and drug abuse. It is not intended for those easily offended or persons under eighteen years. Or Mancunians. You have been warned, so if you read on, don't blame me.

* The names, characters, places and events in this book are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any similarities to real persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organisations is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

* **Licence Notes:** Thank you for downloading this e-book. This book remains the copyrighted property of the author, and may not be scanned, reproduced, copied or distributed for commercial or non-commercial purposes whatsoever without written permission from the author except in the case of brief quotation embodied in critical articles and reviews. If you enjoyed this book, please encourage your friends to download their own copy where they can also discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

* The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.

Hannah Arendt – 1906-1975

* We all know that art is not the truth, art is a lie that makes us realise the truth.

Pablo Picasso 1881-1973

* The devil made me do it.

Clerow 'Flip' Wilson 1933-1998

LOOKIN' FOR TROUBLE.

INTRODUCTION.

Well, what do you think? Sometimes you have no choice except to walk into trouble. Some fools stumble into it but brave men walk right into it eyes wide open and all senses alert. Like you are drawn to it like a moth to light or an iron filing to a magnet. Because sometimes you have a choice but still go ahead anyway looking forward to all the risks and dangers.

Because really what's the alternative? A life of numb boredom, gradually rotting away? Being told when to get up, when to work, what time is left over for yourself? Taking your orders

from some straw boss? Looking up at the clock every few minutes ticking away the hours of your life. Then once you get home worrying about paying the rent, the car, and hire purchases while your woman is nagging you to fix the leaking washing machine? Your selfish brats around your knees whining for attention.

Does trouble seem so bad now? And as both options lead to the grave in the end you might as well grab all the fun you can along the way. Live a little. Drink a little. Toot it up a little. What did some old guy once say? Some ancient Roman guy, wasn't it? Make love to all the women you can while you're alive 'cos you've got no chance once you're dead and buried.

And who knows, you might come out ahead for a short while. And that's all any man can expect this side of the grave.

That's what I think, if you're asking.

CHAPTER 1. TUESDAY NOVEMBER 17, 10:30.

One word. That's all it took for trouble to find Nicolae Caramarin.

"In." One little word. Two letters only.

The black BMW 7 mounted the sidewalk in front of him. It had tinted windows so he had no idea how many were in the car. That was not a good sign. The passenger's door swung open blocking his path. A big man unfolded himself from the seat and stood before Caramarin.

The darker skinned man stood a shade less than two metres tall. Muscles bulged under his grey suit. Despite the overcast day, the man wore mirrored shades. Caramarin saw his startled face reflected in the lenses. The man stood with his clenched right fist half-hidden in his left hand. Tattoos in a strange Cyrillic language covered the backs of his hands.

Caramarin looked up and down the street. There were hardly any people about and those few who were kept their eyes averted. No way did they want to get involved.

"In," the man repeated. Caramarin made no move until the man shrugged his jacket back. The butt of a pistol showed for an instant. Caramarin was left with little choice. Maybe his options were as simple as die now or die later. He pulled open the rear passenger door and stepped into the BMW's darkened interior. Dying later seemed the least worst option.

A second man sat on the rear seat. Caramarin noticed two things. This man had a lantern jaw. But more importantly another semi-automatic pistol covered Caramarin. The giant swung back into the shotgun seat and then the BMW's driver pulled smoothly away from the kerb. None of the men spoke on the short journey.

The BMW pulled up in front of a modern office block on Primorskaya Street, one of Odessa's main thoroughfares. The giant and lantern jaw hustled Caramarin through the designer

inspired lobby and into the elevators. Lantern jaw pushed a button and the cabin glided up. Soon after the elevator doors opened up onto a corridor. A garish abstract print opposite caught Caramarin's eye. Then the big man opened a door and showed Caramarin inside.

Caramarin didn't catch the name on the doorplate. But he didn't need to. Before him stood one of the men in Odessa he wanted to see least. A hard man called Timur Ozgan. The mobster nodded to his two associates and spoke in a language Caramarin guessed was Abkhazian. Then Timur Ozgan led Caramarin into his personal office and explained what he wanted the ex-Paratrooper to do. Caramarin was astounded. This was completely unexpected.

"But why me? I don't even speak English!" The taller man looked puzzled and shrugged his shoulders.

"You must speak a little? All those western pop songs on the radio you listen to? All those Hollywood films on the television?"

"That doesn't mean I speak any English. The only words I know in it are 'yes', 'no' and 'fuck you',"

"That's enough to be going on with," Timur Ozgan grinned. "My nephew speaks good Russian so when you find him, you'll be all right."

"Yes, but why me? I mean, I'm grateful for the chance to clear my name with you but I would've thought you had better qualified men to do your dirty work."

"You want to know? I've done my research. The other month you brought down the whole of Maiorescu's gang and came out with only a few scratches. You're obviously a tough and resourceful man and I respect that. A man who will get the job done."

"And I'm expendable?" said the taller man with a grin. "Not connected to you in any way."

"That too," Timur Ozgan man said. "Also, you hold a genuine Romanian passport so you can enter Britain easily. Slip in under the radar, so to speak. As you may be aware, since September 2001 it's harder for a Muslim to travel to the west these days."

Nicolae Caramarin looked around the room. Quiet good taste defined the office. A large oak desk, clutter free. Abstract art on the walls. He didn't think they were prints either, they looked like genuine oils. Wouldn't have a clue how much they were worth but he reckoned people who knew about art would be impressed.

A large red and green Turkish carpet covered the centre of the floor, its intricate patterns a deliberate contrast to the bleached blond wood. One wall was dominated by a floor to ceiling picture window giving views over the Black Sea. An Italian cruise liner, glowing white in the fall sun, was entering the harbour. A big difference from Maiorescu's, his previous gang boss's, old dumps.

A thought came to Caramarin. "You'll leave the girls alone?" he said. "They've done you no harm. If I hear they've been hurt in any way, I'll come back and kill you."

"I trust you. You have my word on that. I have no quarrel at all with your woman, Valeriya. And I believe Maiorescu's wife, Natalya, is still in protective custody. She's probably at the other end of the country, out of my reach so she's safe. However, you can take Valeriya with you if you want."

"No, that's not necessary. I'll go to Britain for you. As long as you keep your side of the deal, I'll do as you ask." Caramarin stared at Timur Ozgan, searching for any trace of a lie.

Timur Ozgan nodded and invited Caramarin to sit. The two men were a complete contrast in appearance but underneath, both had that air of quiet confidence coming from an ability to handle themselves under extreme, even violent, situations. Both knew the other had come through very dangerous places and situations. They were both hard men and like all truly hard men didn't need to prove it all the time.

Timur Ozgan sat behind his desk and opened a drawer. The mob leader was wearing a grey, well fitted Iranian suit over a crisp white shirt buttoned to the neck. No tie – the man wasn't deferring to the west for anything. He was built like a weightlifter, only medium height but thick set

and powerful. He had intelligent, deeply set brown eyes above a hawk like nose and thin lips. He stroked a neatly trimmed beard greying now at the chin.

His visitor, Nicolae Caramarin was dressed in his usual combat jacket, a red and white Arab-style keffiyeh scarf and blue jeans. He was the taller of the two men, standing at just over one point eight metres; maybe not as powerfully muscular but with a strong, athletic build. He swept back his thick, long, dark hair from his forehead and looked at what Ozgan placed on the exact centre of the desk.

Caramarin picked up the cash and riffled the notes. A mixture of euros and British pounds.

His dark brown eyes widened.

"Must mean a lot to you," Caramarin said, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes, it does. As I said earlier, my nephew, Engin Hasanov, stole over one hundred thousand euros and a valuable painting. I want them back."

"And if I bring them all back, you'll wipe the slate clean? Forget our past err... differences?" asked Caramarin.

"Yes. You can do what you want in Odessa after – as long as you keep out of my way, that is," said Ozgan.

"Then I've no choice, have I? Okay, I'll do it," he shrugged.

"Good decision, my friend," said Ozgan. He slid over a computer printout. "That's the picture I want back. It's a Picasso. Painted in 1901. It's called *'Vielle Triste Pute Avec Vase'*."

The printout was of a picture painted in muted blue and grey tones. A sad, old woman was leaning on a table with an empty vase or urn on it. The woman was a nude, three quarters on, and Picasso had captured her ageing body and world weary expression.

"Very nice," said Caramarin. It must be valuable but he didn't think it was worth the kind of money people paid for famous paintings. But what did he know about art?

"It's very realistic," he finally said. "But I thought Picassos were like, modern art. You know all abstract with weird angles and everything all broken up?"

"This is from his earlier, Blue Period," explained Ozgan. "From 1901, Picasso painted a lot of bluish paintings after his friend, Carlos Casagemas, committed suicide. He must have been depressed or something."

"Right," said Caramarin.

"As you can see, he didn't finish this painting. I don't know why not but if he had, it would be worth many millions," Ozgan said.

Timur Ozgan then handed Caramarin a photograph of a young man. It looked like it had been cropped from a larger picture, maybe from a wedding party. The quality wasn't that great but it would do, unless this Hasanov character had radically changed his appearance since.

Caramarin folded the printout and photo and dropped them in his pocket together with the money.

"Where will I find your nephew? I suppose this Manchester is a big place?"

"Yes, it is. One of the biggest cities in Britain. However, to narrow it down for you, I've heard from a friend of a friend that he's been seen in a Turkish coffee house, the Kugulu Parki, a few times. Where he's been more than once, he'll probably go again."

Caramarin nodded. That made sense.

"So the idea is for me to hang about this coffee shop and take this painting and money off him?"

"Yes, but remember he's family. No violence. Or no more than strictly necessary."

"I understand. I'll do it," Caramarin said. He wanted to get out of Odessa for a while anyway. Before Ukraine's notorious *Militsiya* hauled him in for aggressive questioning about his recent activities.

Ozgan stood and opened the door.

"And the women will be safe? You guarantee that?" Caramarin asked.

"Of course, Nicolae. You want me to swear on the Holy Qu'ran?"

"No, that's all right."

Knowing that a man who would break his word would break it whatever he swore by. All the same, there was no need to make it obvious he doubted the man. Even though Caramarin didn't trust the Abkhazian any further than he could throw him. In his world, trust would get you killed. They shook hands at the door, then Timur Ozgan kissed Caramarin on both cheeks.

Caramarin took the elevator down and stepped out of the office building into the afternoon sunshine. He felt apprehensive with a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

CHAPTER 2. THURSDAY NOVEMBER 19, 05:00.

Noise, jostle, confusion. Bright lights glaring. Tannoy announcements in a language he didn't understand. Confusing symbols on signs. People pushing, shoving, all in a hurry. Too much sensory input. Caramarin followed the crowd to the carousel and waited for his rucksack to trundle round. And waited. At five in the morning, no one feels at their best. After a back achingly long flight from Kiev with several changes of plane en-route, Caramarin wasn't at his best.

The suitcases and bags came out of their hole, through the rubber strips like long term prisoners wearily released. No sign of his rucksack even though he was sure that the yellow case after the push chair had been round twice. Eventually, there it was. The scruffiest old bag of the lot. Like it was a lifer shocked to be given parole.

He swung the khaki rucksack onto his shoulder, and then followed the stragglers through passport control and the deserted customs. Caramarin thought he might have some trouble with passport control but the bored woman just scanned his passport and then waved him through to the other side. She gave him a tired smile and he returned it.

Then he was through and into Britain itself. He stepped through the terminal's glass entrance and breathed in the air of the west. It smelled of damp and petrol and tobacco. Pretty much the same as Ukrainian air. Caramarin didn't know what he was expecting really. From those he knew who had already gone to the west, maybe something better perhaps?

He was standing in a grey concrete tunnel with a road running through it. No wonder it smelled so strongly of gasoline and diesel. To the left, under the glare of the roof lamps, he saw a line of taxis. Caramarin walked past a tired mini bus driver loading bags for a noisy hen party, all the girls in white t-shirts and pink cowboy hats. They shrieked and giggled as he walked past and

one tried to pinch his bum. Even if he was in the mood for it, Caramarin wouldn't have been interested, but he smiled anyway. Overweight, blotchy, drunk women were never his thing.

Caramarin stood in the taxi queue, until his turn came. He glanced at a slip of paper.

"Manchester City Centre," he said in his best English. He repeated it. The driver, a man probably from some desert oasis in North Africa nodded and pulled away. A disc with Arabic writing and beads dangled from the mirror. Discordant middle eastern music wailed from the CD player.

Caramarin had no idea Manchester Airport was so far from the city centre. However, he remembered that Timur Ozgan had told him it was one of the biggest cities in Britain so maybe the distance wasn't unusual. From what he could see from road signs as they flashed by in the orange sodium street lights, the cab went through pleasant leafy suburbs of Altrincham, Cheadle and Stockport in a long, long loop before the buildings closed in and the city became more built up.

Tired now, Caramarin paid off the cabbie at a place called Piccadilly Gardens. If this man was like the Odessa drivers then he suspected he'd been ripped off, so he left no tip. But if the airport was really as far as he'd been driven, then the man had already made some good money today. At this rate, his wedge of British twenties wouldn't last long. The man swore but Caramarin didn't care as he couldn't understand a word.

He glanced around then shouldered his rucksack. First things first. Somewhere to crash and then start looking for Engin Hasanov. A rumble from his stomach reminded him he hadn't eaten since a small mid-air snack shortly after leaving Kiev. This time of the morning, the Gardens were quiet. Some early morning business commuters swerving past the very last of the late night revellers looking the worse for wear. A barefoot girl in a short dress walked on the damp pavements, carrying her heels and leaning on her friend. The barefoot girl was crying.

In the moist, still air he followed his nose to a twenty-four hour burger joint. A young African lad was mopping the floor around a yellow sign. Or, more accurately, leaning on his mop

and idly swirling the water over the tiled floor. Caramarin smiled politely, stepped around the water then approached the counter and pointed to the pictures above the counter.

The young African woman had an impressive collection of tribal scars on her face. She shrugged and passed him a rubbery burger in a plastic bun and thin, bitter coffee. He took his food to an empty table and wolfed it down. Hunger satisfied for now, but he couldn't say it tasted good.

Back out on Piccadilly Gardens, the night sky was just starting to lighten. Black turning to a sooty dark grey. He turned up his collar against the damp chill and wrapped his keffiyeh around his neck. At a newsagents, Caramarin bought a bottle of milk and a street map of Manchester. Flicking through the index, he looked up the address of the Kugulu Parki coffee shop and walked. The damp turned into a fine drizzle, misting over his clothes and he swept the wetness out of his hair.

He walked north out of the city centre, losing his way only the once. Office blocks and businesses shrunk in size and became more run down and scruffy. The coffee house was not the sort of place he expected a nephew of Timur Ozgan would be seen dead in. A man who had a hundred thousand euros and a Picasso oil that must be worth many times that.

It was just an ordinary cafe, mostly serving its community. This time of the morning, the neon sign was unlit. Glancing in through the steamed up window, he saw a few men sitting having tea or coffee or breakfast. The plastic topped tables and plain chairs were purely functional, as was the linoleum floor.

Behind the counter, were some pictures of Turkish buildings. He recognised the Blue Mosque and Topkapi Palace but had no idea what the others were. None of the men were Engin Hasanov. They were all far too old.

Figuring it was far too early for a man with a hundred large burning a hole in his pocket to be up and about, Caramarin carried on. There were more people on the sidewalks now, queuing at bus stops or hurrying along. They all looked totally miserable. Heads bowed down against the drizzle with scowling, unhappy, screwed up faces. They looked like a tribe of beaten refugees.

Many had earphones glued in and were locked into their own individual worlds. None took any notice of each other or Caramarin. It seemed so different from the sunny streets and boulevards of Odessa.

He passed a large row-house with 'VACANCIES' in red in the front window above several other signs. Even with his lack of English, that was similar enough to the Romanian word '*vacante*' for him to work with. He knocked on the door, waiting an age for it to open. A well rounded, middle aged woman dressed entirely in grey opened.

"*Vacante* – err vacancies?" he stumbled over the English word. The woman nodded and stepped back. Caramarin stepped into an overheated hall. Like the airport there was too much input all at once. Busy floral wallpaper, deep red patterned carpet, a vase of flowers just on the turn. Prints and photos on the walls. More framed signs and warning notices on the walls. A rack of tourist leaflets on a small table.

To the side, he saw a dining room. A number of tables were laid out and he saw a heavy, dark carved sideboard with boxes of unfamiliar cereals on it. A strong smell of floral air freshener overlay the smell of fried food. A radio played in the background. He set down his rucksack.

The woman said something. Caramarin shrugged. "No English," he smiled apologetically. She passed him a leaflet written in several languages. He pointed to the right language and then read the rules in misspelt Russian. The woman produced a calculator from the small table, and then typed in some numbers. He mentally calculated the conversion to Ukrainian hryvnia and nodded. Cheaper than he thought.

He handed the woman enough money for a few nights stay. Filled in a form. Taking his time, Caramarin realised there were enough similarities between written English and Romanian that he could complete most of it. And with the rest he could use his own common sense. He showed the landlady his passport and that was that. He was in.

The woman gave him a room key on a plastic fob and led him upstairs. She talked all the way up. The only thing he caught was 'no prostitutes'. She said that phrase a few times. Didn't know why but he grinned to himself. What did she take him for?

The room itself was small but clean with a narrow bed, a flat pack wardrobe with a crooked door and an easy chair. Dim light from a small window crept into the room. The woman closed the door behind her as he dropped his rucksack and stretched out on the lumpy bed. Now all he had to do was find Engin Hasanov.

Easy.

* * *

Later that morning Caramarin found himself sitting at a table at the Kugulu Parki and watching the door. He nursed his coffee as long as possible, and then ordered another. And another. Then he had a quick piss, worried that the man he wanted would come and go while he stood at the porcelain. Then another coffee. There was no sign of Engin Hasanov, or anyone remotely looking like him. He was aware the man behind the counter was watching him but didn't care. As long as he was buying drinks reasonably frequently, the server wasn't too bothered. Not like he needed the table.

The café filled up with the lunchtime crowd. Some women in long coats and head-scarves walked in carrying lots of shopping bags. They were chatting noisily in their own language. At least he thought so, as it didn't sound like English. They sat at the table between him and the door blocking his view.

Caramarin realised he was hungry again. He pushed away from his table and made his way over to the counter. His lack of English was more of a problem than he thought it would be. When the server brought out a tray of food, Caramarin pointed to an omelette then himself and made it clear he wanted one. The man nodded warily and Caramarin sat down again.

The lunch crowd thinned again. Only a few old men remained, huddled around one table. The men watched two of their number play backgammon and chatted. Probably talking about the good old days. Or football. Caramarin envied them their companionship. He'd never felt so isolated and alone in his life. Every time the door opened, he looked up. No sign of Hasanov.

The server's shift ended and another man came on duty. Couldn't mistake the first man quietly pointing him out to the second as a stranger. As with lunch, Caramarin pointed to something he fancied. The food was all right. Not great, not gourmet nor Michelin star but far better than that horrible fast food burger.

Caramarin stood up. He couldn't take any more today. Couldn't stomach any more coffee or being watched himself in turn. He nodded to the man behind the counter and let himself out. Despite the early hour, it was dark again and the drizzle made orange sodium halos around the street lights. Wrapping his keffiyeh scarf around his neck against the damp, Caramarin felt so tired and bored. He couldn't face doing anything else so made his way back to his guest house. Lay on the lumpy bed and watched incomprehensible TV until he could take no more.

Then he did the five knuckle shuffle before falling asleep.

CHAPTER 3. FRIDAY NOVEMBER 20, 09:30.

It was raining harder the next day, a steady, persistent drizzle that never dried up or became heavier. His mood as low as the dark grey clouds, Caramarin couldn't face another day sitting on that hard chair drinking coffee while staring at the Kugulu Parki's door. As he stepped out of his lodging house, he looked up at the skies, scowled and wrapped his keffiyeh scarf tighter around his neck to stop the rain leaking into his jacket, soaking him. He shook his head.

Instead, he walked along Cheetham Hill Road, looking into the shop windows, numbed hands thrust deep into his jacket's pockets against the chill. The buildings had been built of some sort of shiny, red engineering brick he'd never seen before. Coated in moisture from the drizzle, the buildings glistened in the dull light. Rain water gurgled and spilled across the sidewalk and into the gutter from a broken down spout.

He glanced at the people walking along. Without exception, they all looked unhappy. Hunched over, heads down looking at the pavement. A real deep down unending misery written on their faces when they looked up. Many of them had headphones wedged into their ears, locking them into their own worlds as if hearing another human voice would be the thing that tipped them over the edge. Young and old, male or female, all looked fed up and resigned to their lot. Not surprising really, living in a place modelled on God's own dripping urinal.

The people all mostly wore black or dark coloured clothing, especially the groups of youths hanging about the street corners. The only colours he saw were robes or trousers of vivid hues, under their coats, of some Indian women. He smiled at the women but they totally blanked him.

He understood how they felt. He'd never felt so unhappy or alone in all his life. And he'd only been here two days. Caramarin seriously couldn't face the idea of living here long term. If he

was faced with that prospect, he thought he'd head back to his lodgings and slit his wrists in the bathroom. Caramarin hoped he'd find this Engin Hasanov soon so he could return to beautiful – and sunny – Odessa.

As he walked along, he noticed one shop with a yellow 'Western Union' sign outside. He stepped over a puddle and figured the shop was also a pawn broker of some kind. A number of second hand electrical goods were listlessly displayed in the window together with a few musical instruments and golf clubs. The display looked as distressed and forlorn as the people.

Caramarin riffled through the money in his pocket and wondered about buying a small personal radio he saw in the window. He figured it would take the edge off the boredom when he had to face up to returning to his watch at the Kugulu Parki.

Making the decision, Caramarin pushed open the door and stepped into the overheated interior. After the damp chill, he enjoyed the blast of warmth. Inside, locked behind a glass cupboard, he saw several more small radios, MP3 players and CD players. He was comparing them and their prices when a young woman approached him.

"Are you Romanian?" she asked in his own language.

Although Caramarin had lived in the Ukrainian city of Odessa for several years, he was proud to call himself a Romanian national and that was his first language. "Why yes, how did you know?" It felt so good to talk to someone, anyone again.

"You were talking to yourself."

Caramarin hadn't realised just how lonely and unhappy he'd been the last couple of days.

"Sorry," he said with a little smile. "I don't usually make a habit of that."

The woman was younger than him; maybe late twenties. Certainly no older than thirty at the most. She was of medium height and build. Not slim but certainly not overweight. Her dark, brown hair was piled up in a loose pony-tail.

Under her dark, prominent brows, her eyes were a deep, dark brown – almost matching his own; set off with eye liner and bluish eye shadow on her eyelids. Sultry was the word that came to mind for them. Gold hoops in her ears. Not that it mattered but her nose was very slightly bent to the left. Seemed to suit her face somehow.

"I'm sure," the woman said, matching his smile. "Can I help you with anything?" she asked.

"Which one would you recommend?" Caramarin said, pointing to the little radios. This time of the morning, the shop was empty so they chatted about the radios for a while. He chose one; she unlocked the cupboard and took it over to the till. The woman knocked the price down by a third.

"You're supposed to haggle," she explained. She also threw in some batteries and cheap earphones for it.

Caramarin thanked her. What the hell, he had nothing to lose, he thought. He just couldn't stand the idea of being so lonely and knocking one out in his bedroom again later that evening.

"Are you doing anything tonight?" he asked. His words came out in a rush. "I mean, we've only just met but..."

"Why not? It's all right," the young woman said. "I finish at six tonight. It's really nice to speak to someone from back home."

He grinned. Still had the old magic.

A young man in a hooded sweatshirt and tracksuit pants was waiting to be served. The woman murmured a quick apology and then stepped around Caramarin.

Caramarin smiled and left. The encounter, brief though it was, had lifted his spirits like nothing else could. He felt able to get on with his mission now and the afternoon went more quickly at the Kugulu Parki. Sitting at the same table as yesterday, he fiddled with his radio. Ignoring the talk shows he found a hit music station he liked because there wasn't too much talk between the songs. Even with his lack of any English, he learned and was able to repeat the advertising jingles towards the end of the afternoon.

Another cup of coffee finished, Caramarin wiped condensation from the window and watched the sidewalk and door. But there was still no sign of Hasanov; just the same bunch of elderly men killing time. As was he and as five o'clock came and went, Caramarin was checking his Casio every few minutes, hoping that Hasanov wouldn't show now and disrupt his plans.

He was outside the pawn brokers at least ten minutes before six. The young woman came out wearing one of Manchester's nearly compulsory bulky dark coats, a large bag slung over her shoulder. She saw him standing in the doorway and slipped her arm into his.

"I'm sorry, I never even asked your name," he said. "I'm Nicolae Caramarin."

"Narcisa Ganea," she replied.

"That's a lovely name." The old compliments are still the best. "Where would you like to go? Would you like something to eat?" Anywhere other than the Kugulu Parki would be fine by him, he thought.

She nodded, and led him to a nearby wine bar further up the road. A small group of women were at one table with a collection of bottles on a marble table in front of them. A shriek of laughter rode over the background music. The song was one of those he'd already heard three times that day on his hits music station. He almost knew the words by now.

Narcisa sat down and looked up at Caramarin. He hesitated.

"Aren't you going get the drinks in? Mine's a vodka and coke..." Narcisa waited for Caramarin to respond. After a moment the silence became embarrassing. "You can't speak any English, can you?" she said with a slight frown.

Caramarin shook his head.

"Only 'yes' and 'no'," he said. He left out his third phrase and the advertising slogans he'd learned that afternoon.

"How do you expect to get work here if you can't speak English?" Narcisa asked. She put her bag on the floor beside her and unbuttoned her coat. Caramarin liked what he saw of her figure.

"I'm not really looking for work here," he admitted at last.

"Well, you're not here on holiday. No-one in their right minds would come to Manchester for a break. So, you're a millionaire? An oligarch? You don't need to work for a living?" Narcisa looked at his clothing. Caramarin wasn't exactly dressed like you'd expect a millionaire to look, standing there in his camouflage jacket and jeans. No tuxedo nor a cashmere pullover oh-so-casually slung over his shoulders.

"No, I'm looking for a friend of someone from back home," he said. Shit, he wasn't going to tell anyone. Bit too late now.

Narcisa looked intrigued. "You can tell me more after you get the drinks in."

"What do I ask for?"

"Think it's time I started your English lessons," she grinned.

She told Caramarin what to say. It took him a few attempts to get it nearly right. Satisfied, Narcisa sent him over to the bar, past the group of women who laughed loudly as he passed.

The girl behind the bar looked up.

"Vodka and coke and pint of lager," he said. What's a pint, anyway, he wondered?

The girl said something, he had no idea what. It could have been anything.

He said his phrase again.

The girl shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. That was a universal gesture he understood. Narcisa appeared at his shoulder and more forcefully repeated it. Scowling, the barmaid poured the drinks and Caramarin peeled off a couple of notes and paid.

"Thank you," he said. He drank the lager. If he hadn't been with a woman, he'd have spat it out and then smashed the glass on the tiled floor. He'd never been served anything so vile. Thin, gassy, tasteless yet with an unpleasant chemical undertone.

"People drink this?" he said, grimacing.

"It's a very popular brand here," Narcisa explained.

"Why? Can't they get anything better?"

"I suppose not," she said with a smile.

"So," she said, "It all sounds very exciting. Who are you looking for? Not your missing girlfriend is it?"

Caramarin told her the very edited details of his life and what had brought him from Odessa to Manchester. Much later, he was to regret this. She looked fascinated.

"You've led a very interesting life," she said when he'd finished.

"What about yourself?" enquired Caramarin.

Narcisa sent him up to the bar for another round. This time the girl understood what he wanted. Or maybe she just remembered as the place was not exactly packed. He managed to swallow the second pint. It went down easier than the first. But he'd have swapped it in an instant for a bottle of Ukrainian Zibert Lite lager.

* * *

Some of what Narcisa told him, he found out later on as he got to know her better.

However, Narcisa told him she had lived in Manchester for a few years now. She was born in a village about twenty kilometres out from Brasov, up in the southern arc of the Carpathian Mountains. She told him about her childhood, skiing on the slopes and helping her Mum clean chalets and ski lodges in the winter and in the summer going on long hikes through alpine meadows untouched by any trace of modern life. Picking flowers to make headbands for herself and her friends. It was obvious to Caramarin that Narcisa loved the high mountains.

Caramarin drew out of her that she even won some medals for skiing and was maybe being considered for entry to European competitions. Unfortunately, Narcisa had a bad fall when she was fourteen and broke her leg in several places which stopped her dreams in their tracks. An infection

set in, the hospital didn't have enough modern antibiotics and by the time the illness cleared up, she had lost too much ground. She missed a lot of schooling, too, during the time she was laid up in hospital.

After she'd recovered, she'd missed way too much education to catch up. And she admitted it's not like she'd been the cleverest in class, anyway. So she found work in a garment factory in Brasov. Long hours sewing and pressing clothes. The clothes were then shipped to the west where designer labels were sewed in. The clothes then became unaffordable to nearly all Romanians. But even with working long hours, she still didn't earn anywhere enough to live on. So she carried on living with her Mum in her cramped little house set in its little orchard way out of town.

Then her Mum took another man. He worked for the police as a dispatcher. This worked out fine for a few months. Until one night, when Mum was working late, her fella came back home drunk. Drunk and horny. Narcisa was on the couch watching television, her leg stretched out on a footstool. The weather was damp and her leg had been hurting more than usual. The lecher sat next to her, offered her a glass and then poured half a bottle of *tuica* plum brandy down her. He told her the *tuica* would dull the pain. But then he shoved his tongue down her throat and his hand down her bra. She struggled but he was much too strong for her.

Narcisa started crying tears at the bad memory. Caramarin draped his arm over her shoulders.

"It's all right," he told her. "Don't tell me what you don't want to."

She'd pushed him off that time but the tension between them made life harder for everyone. She worked even longer hours at the factory to stay away and to try and earn enough to finally move out. But until then Narcisa had to come home every night and Mum wasn't always there. Then one evening, Mum was called out to see to a sick neighbour. That was all the opportunity the man needed – the bastard forced himself on her. She was no match for his brute strength. He hurt her inside.

That was the first time. Narcisa was so ashamed, she couldn't tell Mum, couldn't tell anyone. Maybe the man thought she'd sent out the wrong signals but Narcisa knew she hadn't. Her Mum's fella was always boasting about his mates on the Brasov County force. One night, he brought one of his friends round. They both raped her while the other held her down. Narcisa knew she couldn't go on any more. She plucked up courage and told the men she'd tell Mum.

But it didn't go as Narcisa expected. Mum went wild and hit her with a saucepan. Her mother didn't believe her at first and then told her she was a slag and a whore. Luring her fella away. Narcisa fled, in tears.

So Narcisa had withdrawn her savings, borrowed some more off friends and having scraped together enough money she came over to Britain and lived with an aunt who'd left Romania shortly after the revolution in 1989. She stayed with her aunt a couple of years. However, the aunt had recently returned to Romania to look after her elderly mother but Narcisa had learned enough English by then and stayed on. She had a job and a life here. She shared a house nearby with a number of other girls, mostly Poles.

Narcisa looked down. She fiddled with the buttons on her blouse, twisting and turning one of them. Caramarin watched as the action tightened the material over her breasts. "I went a little wild after coming here. But I've calmed down now. I've got over what happened to me. I'm all right now."

Caramarin nodded. He could fill in the gaps for himself. Deadening the pain with booze, unsuitable men who just used her body for their pleasure, then tossed her aside like an empty vodka bottle.

"Do you miss Romania?" he asked at the end.

She blinked with surprise at his question. "Sometimes. Especially the weather," she replied.

Caramarin couldn't face another of these dismal British lagers. "Do you want to go for a meal?"

Narcisa glanced at her watch, a gesture making Caramarin's heart sink. She looked up with a smile.

"Yes, please," she said.

She made a call. "Just letting the girls at home know where I am. We look out for each other," she explained. Was that a warning? "Ever had an Indian?" Narcisa asked. "There's a good one down the road."

There were a few Indian restaurants in Odessa but Caramarin had been only the once. For the next two days after, his poor red hot arse had been welded to the toilet. Never again.

Despite his doubts, Narcisa persuaded him. The restaurant was busier than the wine bar, but on a week night evening there were more empty tables than full. Their waiter seated them towards the back; probably realising they wanted some privacy. Narcisa ordered for them both. The bottled Indian lager was better than the British draught he'd had earlier. Nowhere near as good as Ukrainian Zibert Lite but it went well with the food.

Caramarin chose stuffed mushrooms as an appetiser; a lamb shashlik naga, which was cooked in a clay oven with onions, capsicum and tomato, together with pilau rice and a peshwari naan bread with almonds and coconuts. Not what he was used to back home; but on a cold, wet evening it did the job and warmed his body.

Narcisa explained she had to be in work early tomorrow as the Manager was off. Caramarin nodded. Despite everything, he'd enjoyed the evening. It was good to meet someone friendly and uncomplicated who wasn't connected with the underworld he lived and moved in.

The rain had eased off and the air smelled clean and freshly washed as they waited at the stop. He took the bus with Narcisa up to the suburb of Crumpsall, memorising the route as the old vehicle rattled and swayed.

At the raised door to a tall three storey terrace, he waited outside while she let herself in. The hall light came on and he heard female voices calling from inside. Narcisa turned around in the

door, the light silhouetting her figure. She ran down the few stairs to the sidewalk, stopped on the bottom step, stretched up and kissed him on the lips. Only a chaste peck. But it was a start. Then she ran back in, the front door shutting behind her, cutting him off from the warmth inside.

Caramarin turned around and walked back to his bed and breakfast. Halfway down Cheetham Hill Road, it started to rain again.

CHAPTER 4. MONDAY NOVEMBER 23, 09:00.

The next few days, Caramarin spent at the Kugulu Parki with his little radio. Now he was some sort of regular, he noticed that the older men took no notice of him. Thinking about it, he realised they probably thought he was unemployed and whiling away the long hours of the day. Maybe they looked down on him for sitting there instead of getting out there in the rain, hustling for a job.

Every time he wiped away the condensation, the view hardly changed. Unhappy people hurrying past wearing dark clothing. Plenty of pram faced young women, their hair scraped back; their babies gumming on Gregg's dummies. But there was still no sign of Engin Hasanov. And still it rained. And rained. And even when it didn't rain, it had either just stopped or was just about to start again.

Caramarin had taken Narcisa Ganea out a couple of times since then, picking her up from the pawn brokers. Both enjoying the time spent getting to know the other but both slightly wary, not wanting to give too much of themselves away until the other opened up a little more as well. Narcisa had tried to teach him a few more words of English.

On the last occasion, when he had escorted Narcisa back to her home in Crumpsall, one of the other girls had teased Narcisa when she kissed Caramarin on the doorstep. The girl had wolf-whistled at him and shouted something in English when he walked away down the rain-wet street. He'd have to ask Narcisa what that other girl had said.

The café's door opened like it had for the twentieth or thirtieth time this morning. Caramarin wasn't counting. Engin Hasanov was standing at the counter with another man before Caramarin realised it. He blinked, double checked Ozgan's photograph and then waited for Hasanov to sit

before approaching them. Caramarin thought for a moment wondering how best to approach them. He didn't want to create a scene.

"Engin Hasanov?" he asked.

Caramarin drew up a chair and sat at the head of the table, between the two men. Hasanov himself was young, no older than his very early twenties. He was slim, almost skinny. Too thin to win as his old drill instructor back in the Romanian army used to say.

Hasanov's black hair was long and floppy, small raindrops on the tips of strands. He sported a narrow Errol Flynn moustache over narrow lips. He wore a dark grey double-breasted suit under a black leather jacket. The only splash of colour was a bright blue and red silk tie. If Caramarin was asked, he'd have to say the young man was handsome in a weak willed way. Not that Hasanov did anything for him!

Hasanov looked startled and glanced at his companion who was a much bulkier man.

"Who wants to know?" Hasanov asked in Russian.

"I'm working for your uncle, Timur Ozgan. He says you've taken some things that don't belong to you. A Picasso and a hundred thousand euros." Caramarin replied in the same language.

"My uncle!" the young man tittered. A shrill noise that grated on Caramarin's nerves. "That's what he's calling himself now?"

"Whatever. I'm not interested. All I want is the man's picture and the money."

"They're not on me, of course. But don't worry, they're in a safe place though aren't they, Mihai?" Hasanov's voice was soft and high pitched for a man.

Caramarin turned to the other man, as he nodded. He raised an eyebrow. Hasanov introduced the other man as Mihai Pojer.

Hasanov's associate was older, maybe Caramarin's age or thereabouts. He was of Turkic appearance, bigger, heavier built, but looked like he could handle himself in a tough situation. His

hair was short, like a military cut grown out a month and greying at the temples. Like Hasanov, he wore a black leather jacket – in Pojer's case buttoned up to the throat. Maybe he felt the cold as unusually the man had not taken off his leather gloves. His grey eyes glared.

"Let's go back and pick them up, then," suggested Caramarin.

Hasanov looked at his companion and shook his head.

"Uncle Timur's welcome to the painting. It's been no use to me, lovey. But I need the money. After all, he owes me that much at least doesn't he, Mihai? Maybe more. Anyway, I've spent some of it."

"How much is left?" asked Caramarin. He didn't fancy going back to Odessa with too little. Timur Ozgan would come to the conclusion he'd skimmed off a little extra for himself.

"Oh, I don't know, lovey. I have to take my socks off to count past ten, don't I?"

"I'm not interested," Caramarin said. "Finish your coffees and we'll go get the money and painting, okay comrades?"

The young man once again looked to his larger companion for support.

"No, and you can't make me leave. If you try anything, I'll scream and scream and Mihai here will fight you. And he's very good at fighting, aren't you?" Hasanov patted his friend on the arm. The other man nodded. "And then the police will come and arrest you and you'll get nothing back, nothing at all, will you?"

Hasanov thought for a moment. "In fact, Mihai here's fighting tonight. Why don't you come and watch him in action? I'll bring the Picasso so you can tell Uncle Timur it's safe and sound and maybe some of the money and we can talk about things then. Have a nice little chin wag."

Hasanov finished his coffee and the two men stood.

"Don't try to follow us," growled Mihai Pojer, placing a heavy hand on Caramarin's shoulder.

Realising he'd been had over but nothing much he could do about it now, Caramarin asked where and when he should meet them.

"Give us your number," said Hasanov. He did so. A moment later, Caramarin's phone beeped. He looked at the text giving details.

"You'd better be there," Caramarin said, "Or our next meeting will be more painful. Understood?"

"Ooh, promises, promises. You're so butch," said Hasanov. "See you later, big boy."

The two men left, Caramarin dashed to the café's door and saw them stepping into a white BMW three series. He caught the registration before it turned out of sight and quickly made a note on his phone. Back in the Kugulu Parki, Caramarin looked up Hasanov's proposed meeting place in his A to Z guidebook. It was well out of the centre of Manchester; it looked like it was out in the country near a place called Oldham. He shrugged. It didn't matter where it was so long as Hasanov showed with Timur Ozgan's property.

Get the painting and money, and then go home to Odessa, Caramarin told himself. It couldn't come too soon.

CHAPTER 5. THURSDAY NOVEMBER 26, 21:00.

Caramarin didn't know what to expect as he walked up the lane. Looming up against the skyline, next to a stand of windswept trees, was a barn. Parked on poorly laid tarmac in front of the barn were a number of vehicles. Most looked old, run down and beat up.

However, a few high value cars stood out from the crowd. Like race horses in a field of donkeys. A few BMWs, a Mercedes. There was even a Bugatti bike. Caramarin checked the plates. Yes, there stood Hasanov's BMW next to a Transit that looked like it was held together with string and gum.

A few men stood about smoking and talking. They watched Caramarin approach. Inset in the main vehicle gate of the corrugated metal barn was a small open door. Bright light poured from the opening, darkly reflected in the oily puddles on the tarmac. One of the men stretched out his arm in front of Caramarin, blocking access. The man, a big bloke in a sweater made entirely of holes said something. No idea what – could have been a demand for payment to a comment about the weather.

Caramarin used up almost his entire English vocabulary. "Fuck you. Hasanov." The bouncer stepped aside. His phrase had worked.

Inside, the barn was brightly lit from fluorescents strung up from the ceiling rafters. Half hidden amidst the crowd of men was a raised area with ropes around it, like a crude boxing ring. A couple of industrial space heaters threw out enough heat to take the chill off the cavernous interior. Caramarin walked around the barn, looking for Engin Hasanov and his companion. At the far end stood some rusting tractors and vehicles.

The crowd of men was as varied as their vehicles outside. Most were scruffy, many were smoking furiously, blue smoke drifting upwards in the draughts. Some had enough gold jewellery to act as the bullion reserve for a small country. It had to be plated, he thought. To one side, tattooed thugs held attack dogs on short leashes.

However, there were some smartly dressed men also in the crowd. And Caramarin knew they were the most dangerous in the barn. The men to be feared.

Standing together in a tight knit group seemingly uniformed in black leather jackets and slacks were some darker skinned Europeans with black gelled hair. All were muscular and looked like they took no shit from anyone. He knew they had to be Albanians or Kosovans. One of the group looked at him and spat.

Caramarin walked around the crowd, avoiding eye contact. In a corner, away from the others, he saw Hasanov and Mihai Pojer talking together. Pojer had his shirt off and was wearing Disruptive Pattern Material camouflage pants. They looked up as Caramarin approached.

"You got the painting and money for me?"

"Later," said Mihai Pojer. "You've got to prove yourself first before we hand them over."

"What do you mean?" Caramarin said, though he had a damn good idea from the set-up what the man wanted.

"Fight for them," giggled Hasanov. "Why should we give up all that money just because 'Uncle' Timur wants it back? Prove you can take them from us."

Caramarin looked around. The men filling the barn looked tough and capable. No way could he make a scene here and expect to walk away in one piece from an illegal fight meeting. Caramarin never thought he was the hardest man in the world but he knew how to look after himself. He'd learned enough from knocking about the underworld and jails of eastern Europe over the last twenty years. There weren't too many people he was scared of meeting one on one.

"All right," he found himself saying. "But if.. when, I win, no fuckin' about. Just give me the Picasso and money. Deal?"

"For sure," said Hasanov, raising an eyebrow. "Thought that was understood."

"Better stick to it," Caramarin said.

Hasanov left to speak to the organisers and to place some bets.

Caramarin sat next to Pojer on a bale of straw. The man looked up.

"So, what's the score?" Caramarin asked in Russian.

"You fight one of them." he jerked his head dismissively towards a group of men covered in bling jewellery. "Show me your moves, what you can do. You win that, you get to fight me. Beat me, and Engin'll turn over that painting and money."

Caramarin looked hard at Mihai Pojer. The man wasn't doped up on steroid muscles but, like Caramarin, he had an athletic build and gave off an air of quiet confidence. Caramarin thought the man had seen military service in his past but he couldn't place him. Pojer spoke Russian with some sort of Middle Eastern or Caucasian accent.

"And if you win...what then?"

"Your ass is ours," the man said. "Don't worry – you'll probably be unconscious."

Engin Hasanov returned. "I spoke to the organisers," he said. "You're on first, Caramarin. Which gives you time to recover for later." His high pitched laugh really got on Caramarin's nerves. "If you want to place a bet, the odds are about fifty-fifty at the moment. You're an unknown quantity, you see."

Caramarin nodded and handed Hasanov most of his money. Why not? "Put that on for me, will you?"

"On yourself?"

"Of course. If I lose I guess I'll be in hospital for a long time."

Pojer led Caramarin to the ring. They ducked under the ropes. He felt very exposed standing in the ring with everyone staring at him.

"I'll act as your second, if you want. Take your shirt and shoes off," Mihai Pojer told him. "Apart from that, there are no rules. Okay?" As he did so, the cool air pimpled his bare skin. Caramarin flexed his muscles and stretched doing some rapid warm-up exercises.

A bell rang. Instantly, the crowd fell silent and gathered round the ring. A man, a tall gaunt man in black jeans and a t-shirt with a skull printed on it, and several metres of gold jewellery stepped into the centre. He started talking in English, his voice distorted through the mike. Caramarin had no idea what he was saying but caught his name and the word 'Romania'. There were a few cheers but mostly boos and hisses.

His first opponent climbed up. The crowd cheered and whistled. No prizes for guessing who had home support. The man clasped his hands above his head in a crude victory salute. Only then did he throw his smoke away, the sparks making a little firework.

The man was maybe a little older than Caramarin but was much heavier built with a pot belly. Crude tattoos ran over his torso under a mat of dark rank hair. But his arms were covered in slabs of muscle. A man used to hard manual work. Under the harsh glare, the man's heavy face showed the signs of rough living and too much alcohol. He grinned, showing a mouth full of rotten stumps of teeth.

The referee spoke into his mike. The bell rang. Caramarin was now totally focussed on his opponent. No, his sworn enemy for the duration. Caramarin raised his fists and bounced on the balls of his feet, weaving and swaying, waiting to test the other man.

The man lumbered towards him, swinging a clumsy hay-maker at him. If it had connected, Caramarin would have been knocked into the middle of next week. Caramarin sidestepped it easily enough. The man faced him and swung again. Caramarin let it fly past, feeling only the movement

of air on his face. He bounced away, forcing the man to follow. Heard jeers and boos from the crowd but didn't care. Was only here to win, couldn't care less about their entertainment.

The man followed, swearing. Caramarin let him approach close enough to swing another ham-fisted hay-maker at him, and then planted his left into the man's belly. The man grunted and sour air whooshed out. The man caught Caramarin on the ribs with his left, but there was no real force behind the punch. Caramarin backed away again, bobbing and weaving. He'd learned the man was only dangerous with his right.

Caramarin had been in enough trouble in his time to know he had to be careful in a bare knuckle fight. Didn't want to break his own hand bones by hitting the man too hard on the head. He much preferred to go for softer areas, such as the stomach. But that didn't seem to worry his enemy, though. The man was definitely physically stronger but was no real fighter. He was a man who absorbed blows and almost certainly relied on a quick slugging knock-out to win his fights.

Caramarin dodged around the ring, covering as much ground as possible, trying to tire out the other man. He threw a couple of light punches with his left, just to keep the man on guard. The roar of the crowd was angrier. They'd come to see blood and they were disappointed. Well, tough shit on them. He jabbed at the man's face, making him recoil back. The man was definitely a slugger, not a trained fighter. His eyes signalled every move in advance.

With a roar, the man charged him, fists swinging wildly. Caramarin sidestepped and gave him two hard punches to the kidneys as he passed, then instantly stepped to the middle of the ring. The man roared with anger and pain, then wheeled about to face Caramarin.

A beer can sailed out of the crowd, narrowly missing Caramarin. Lager spilled out into the centre of the ring. The referee said something angry into his mike and kicked the can out the ring. However, his enemy took advantage of Caramarin's momentary distraction.

He slammed his iron hard fist deep into Caramarin's guts, knocking him backwards towards the ropes. Caramarin gasped with pain, staggering, needing to stay upright. If he went down he knew he'd be stomped half to death. The crowd roared and cheered, scenting victory for their man.

The man followed it up with a rocket launched at his face. Purely by instinct, Caramarin dodged out the way, but it felt like the blow had ripped off his ear. The pain was intense. Caramarin bounced back off the ropes and took another glancing blow to the side of his head. He stumbled on his feet. The noise from the crowd was deafening, echoing off the corrugated sides of the barn.

Caramarin shook his head. The man raised his arm, acknowledging their support. Caramarin came in hard and low; the man turned a split second too late and Caramarin slammed his fists; one, two into his stomach. The man doubled over, gasping. Pojer had said there were no rules. Caramarin slammed his knee into the man's groin. The crowd bellowed their anger.

The man sucked air in and tried to stand. Caramarin swung his fist up and connected with his jaw. The man reeled back and spat out a mouthful of blood and shards of teeth. Fuck, the man was tough. Caramarin didn't give him any time to recover. It would only take one lucky hay-maker to finish off the bout.

Recalling a trick from his Paratrooper days, Caramarin swung his right leg out, hooked it behind the man's left and brought him crashing to the wooden floor. The man's head bounced on the hard surface and his eyes glazed. He started to get up; Caramarin stooped and grabbed the man's head. He smashed it several more times onto the wooden floor of the arena. The man slumped back; his head hit the floor one last time.

The big man twitched, his body made little uncoordinated movements.

Caramarin planted his foot on the man's chest. He'd won. The crowd booed, jeered and shouted rage. Probably most had lost a lot of money just now as the bookies looked pleased. Pojer helped Caramarin down and took him away to the safety of the farm vehicles at the back of the barn away from the crowd.

"You did well there," Pojer said. "Fought dirty but won. But you won't find me so easy."

CHAPTER 6. THURSDAY NOVEMBER 26, 23:45.

"No, I suppose not," Caramarin leaned forward and panted. Pojer passed him a two litre bottle of water. Caramarin drank thirstily, water sloshing down his front.

"Your ear's bleeding," Pojer told him. Caramarin poured water over his head. It came away pink with blood so the man passed him a rag. Now the adrenaline was wearing off, the pain from his ear drilled deep into his head. Caramarin shivered, so he slipped on his shirt and warm jacket.

Pojer snapped a couple of aspirins from out of their pack and handed them to Caramarin.

"What the fuck are you doing with someone like Engin Hasanov?" Caramarin asked.

"I love him," Pojer said simply.

Hasanov returned shortly after.

"Good fight," Hasanov said as he passed Caramarin his winnings. "You could make a living out of this."

"No thanks, comrade. There's easier ways to make money."

The next fight had started but Caramarin didn't bother watching, just lay back on the straw and recovered his strength for his next bout. He covertly watched Pojer with Hasanov trying to get a feel for the man; how he moved, which side he favoured. Caramarin figured he'd be a much tougher fighter than the labourer he'd beaten. He wasn't looking forward to the bout.

The noise level ramped up. Another fight over. Too soon, it was his turn again. Caramarin stripped off his shirt and jacket and walked through the crowd. They hadn't forgotten his earlier win and there were cat calls and a few digs as he passed. One man spat on his back and he felt the spittle

hit his shoulder blade. Caramarin turned and lunged at the man and was pleased to see fright in the little runt's eyes.

Caramarin stepped into the ring and flexed his muscles while the ref gobbled off into his mike. Eventually, the ref stepped out the ring. His fight with Mihai Pojer was on.

The two men crabbed round each other warily. Each able to easily block the other's jabs and punches. Caramarin was positive the man had been in the military at some point in his life. Pojer was slightly larger and heavier than Caramarin but moved easily on his feet. Obviously the man kept himself in shape. After a minute or so, the crowd's boos and jeers became louder. Neither man took any notice, just concentrated on the other's face and reactions. Both impressed with what they saw.

Mihai Pojer feinted, drawing Caramarin's attention. He slammed his fist into Caramarin's face, blooding his nose. Caramarin cursed, managed to get one into the other fighter's ribs before they resumed circling. The crowd cheered the blood.

There were no rounds, just one long drawn out fight. As the match carried on; both men jabbing, punching, rarely kicking as they didn't want to lose balance, Caramarin realised the other man was gradually winning. His build and greater experience in bare-knuckle fighting was starting to tell. The two men continued feinting, testing each other.

Caramarin was glad he'd put in time at the gym but his arms were tiring and his breath getting ragged and uneven. He saw the knowledge of victory start to appear in Pojer's eyes. The crowd was a little quieter now, unable to keep up that roar forever. And more were watching this contest, appreciating the fighters' skills rather than just wanting their blood lust satisfying.

As the two fighters circled, Caramarin noticed the Albanians. They were gathered around one heavy set man in a suit who was collecting side bets. The man looked up and his mouth twitched as he said something. That smile chilled Caramarin. There was as much humanity in it as a shark's grin.

All the same, although the two men were evenly matched, Mihai Pojer was getting the advantage. Another fist slammed into Caramarin's ribs. The crowd cheered and shouted comments. Caramarin knew if he couldn't win fair, he'd have to win dirty. After all, as Pojer said, there were no rules.

Suddenly, with no warning, he flung himself on Pojer, knocking the man back. Hating to do it but risking it anyway, he butted Pojer right between the eyes. Blood streamed down the other man's face. His nose looked out of line now. The crowd went wild with excitement. Sounded like lunatics on day release from the asylum. But his head-butt also stunned Caramarin for an instant and he took a couple of hard blows to the chest before recovering.

Mihai Pojer shook the blood out of his face in a crimson spray. Caramarin followed up his head-butt with a couple of punches to the face, one smashed full-bodied onto Pojer's nose, splattering it further. More blood rivered down now, making a gory red mask, covering the other's chest. But it had little effect at the moment. Pojer kept weaving, throwing punches; more hitting Caramarin now that he, too, was tiring.

Suddenly, a fist lashed out, catching Caramarin's right eye. Caramarin saw red stars in the blackness as his vision swam. He lost his footing, almost fell on the wet canvas covered wood flooring, his feet back pedalling and more by luck than skill, he kept upright. Caramarin shook his head but realised his vision was failing as that eye swelled up.

Things were getting a bit hairy now.

Throwing some desperate hooks and jabs. Caramarin tried to keep Pojer in one spot at the centre of the ring. Blood puddled at his feet. The man shook his head and carried on. Caramarin knew he'd have to take some more pain now. He dropped his guard slightly, trying to look exhausted. Didn't have to act that much either.

Pojer took the bait. He lunged forward, hoping to finish it quickly before he lost too much claret. Caramarin seized his chance. He kicked out at Pojer's legs using that old Paratrooper trick.

The man tried to regain balance but slipped in the blood. Caramarin scythed the other fighter's leg out from underneath. Pojer fell to the unyielding floor.

Immediately, Pojer rolled away, putting out his arm to lever himself back on his feet. Caramarin stamped down, aiming to snap the elbow. But Pojer twisted away at the last micro second, Caramarin's foot hitting the shoulder instead. Feeling the other's arm dislocate out of its socket. The man screamed in pure pain, the noise carrying above the crowd's howls of rage, and the fight was over.

Mihai Pojer's arm hung uselessly by his side. Caramarin wasn't sure if he'd leave the ring alive but the referee climbed into the ring and gobbed off into the mike, quietening the onlookers. He then hauled Caramarin's arm in the air as a token of victory. That brought on another jolt of pain from his battered torso.

This triumph wasn't as unpopular as the last. More men must have bet on him to win. Engin Hasanov pushed his way through the crowd and up to the ringside.

"Why did you do that?" he cried through his tears.

"What did I do?" exclaimed Caramarin, confused. "It was you who wanted me to fight him, comrade."

"You didn't have to break his arm, did you?"

"I don't fuckin' need this. You were the ones wanted this fuckin' punch-up." Caramarin swung down and grabbed Hasanov's lapels. "Now, where's the picture and money? And don't even think of fuckin' me about."

Fear in Hasanov's eyes. Without his friend he was less than nothing. "In the boot of the Beemer. Help yourself, you bastard." Hasanov threw a set of car keys at Caramarin. They hit his chest but Caramarin snatched them before they fell to the litter-strewn floor.

Caramarin shrugged, pushed the young man away and Hasanov climbed up into the ring and knelt by Mihai Pojer. The losing fighter was struggling to sit up. Through his one good eye,

Caramarin saw the man's face was a total mess. Christ, the man was tough. He touched his fingers to his forehead in a rough salute, then pocketed the BMW's keys and shoved his way to the back of the barn to pick up his boots and jacket.

Caramarin joined the crowd already emptying out the barn and he heard the noises of motors making their way down the farm track to the road. The damp fresh air restored him a little after the stink of smoke and cheap deodorant in the barn. He took a few deep breaths as he walked over to the BMW. He popped the trunk. Inside was a small black nylon holdall.

Unzipping it, he saw a load of s of various values. Next to it was a thick cardboard tube. Peering down it with his good eye, he could see a piece of paper or cloth. Reckoning that must be the Picasso, Caramarin slammed the trunk, fired up the BMW and switched on the wipers.

Fuck it. It wasn't like he owed Hasanov or Pojer anything. He didn't. But he respected Pojer as a true fighting man. He switched off the BMW and returned to the barn. The next fight was on – a lumbering giant of a man against a wiry man covered with prison tattoos who was using Thai kick-boxing moves on the giant.

Caramarin made his way to the back of the building. Pojer's arm had been crudely strapped up, his jacket flung loose over his shoulders.

"C'mon," said Caramarin. "Let's get you seen to." He helped Pojer to his feet, then with Hasanov's help led the man out to the Beemer. Pojer nodded his thanks. Caramarin tossed the keys to Hasanov.

"You'd better drive," he told the young man. "I can't see straight." The two fighters sat in the back.

Hasanov drove back into town following signs towards Manchester Royal Infirmary, the city's main hospital. This late at night or early in the morning the roads were empty. With his bad head, Caramarin was having big trouble even just sitting in the back.

He felt sick, asked Hasanov to pull over and threw the door open just in time, his vomit splashing over the road in a stinking stream. He mopped his face and sucked in clean, wet night air. He felt better after that but only for a while before the nausea built up again. They reached Manchester Royal Infirmary and stopped again in the parking lot to allow Caramarin to throw up strings of bile.

Hasanov parked round the back. Caramarin fetched the Picasso and holdall out of the trunk, and then Hasanov and Pojer walked into the painfully brightly lit Accident and Emergency, the harsh light spilling out onto the wet tarmac, spearing lances of hurt into Caramarin's brain. Standing outside the A & E were two cops talking to a security guard in a hi-viz coat. No way did he want to walk past them clutching a holdall stuffed with cash and a dodgy oil painting.

"Aren't you coming in," asked Pojer, a note of concern in his voice. "It's free in this country, you know?" Caramarin shook his head and wished he hadn't.

"I'll be all right," he said, walking to the taxi rank. "See you around." Hoping he wouldn't.

CHAPTER 7. FRIDAY NOVEMBER 27, 02:15.

Caramarin knew he couldn't go back to his bed and breakfast. No way would his miserable old landlady let him in. Not this late at night and not in the state he was in. And he didn't think any other hotel or guest house would accept a strange beaten up man this time of night either.

Fuck it, she could only say no. Caramarin could barely see straight as he gave the driver the address of Narcisa's place in Crumpsall. He slumped on the back seat and held his head in his hands. The street was double parked all the way along so the cabbie pulled up down the road and Caramarin fetched out the nylon holdall and cardboard tube.

Even the short walk from the end of the street to Narcisa's took it out of him. He leaned on walls and railings for support. His right eye had completely closed over now. He still felt nauseous and unwell, only the rain helping to clear his head. Even a little girl could take him now in a one-on-one.

Eventually, his head pounding in agony, he climbed up the short flight of stairs to the girls' front door and pressed the bell. As if from a long way away, he could just hear the bell jangling in the hall. Caramarin pressed it again, longer this time.

A light appeared upstairs. A minute later the door opened on its chain. A puffy faced girl, freshly woken, peered through the crack. Her hair stuck up in corkscrews and spirals all over her head.

Caramarin felt close to collapse now. "Narcisa? Narcisa?" he croaked. The young woman turned away from the door and shouted up the stairs. He leaned against the jamb, head down, gasping for breath, absolutely beaten. The young woman shut the door on him, shutting him off from sanctuary inside.

Then the front door opened again and Narcisa stood in the light, clutching a leopard print gown to her throat. She also had a bed head. She recoiled in horror when she saw the state of his face. After his experiences back in Odessa, Caramarin was getting used to that reaction from women.

Narcisa looked at the other girls, spoke in English, asking permission of them, and then took Caramarin by the hand and led him inside to their lounge. The other girls followed, faces waking up with the excitement. Caramarin heard them speaking rapidly with excitement until Narcisa laid him down on an overstuffed brown couch.

One girl, a pretty young woman in a white towelling robe, whisked away bras and knickers that were drying over the radiators. Caramarin studiously took no notice of her actions. But even in his misery Caramarin noticed she had a heart shaped face framed by short golden-brown hair. Under the scent of perfume and air freshener, he caught a whiff of the heavy smell of marijuana.

Narcisa said something to the other girls in English. Then she knelt by Caramarin.

"What happened?" she asked. Anxiety making her voice shriller than normal.

"I got in a fight," he said. That bit was true anyway. "There was several of them." That bit was also sort of true.

"You should go to the hospital. Call the police," Narcisa said.

"No," said Caramarin. He didn't want the authorities sticking their noses in. "No, I don't want to do that."

Like a lot of Romanians, Narcisa also distrusted the authorities. She understood his position. "I think you should but I understand," she agreed.

"Ewelina, Ewelina," Narcisa called out, her shouts making Caramarin's head ache even more. He groaned and forced down his nausea.

The pretty woman with the heart shaped face stepped into the room, closely followed by two more girls. Spiral head was running a brush through her hair in a vain attempt to make herself more presentable.

Narcisa and Ewelina spoke for a while in English. The other two girls nodding, making occasional comments, looking down on Caramarin slumped on their couch. Caramarin felt lousy. Especially as he couldn't understand a single word. He lay back and felt the room spin around. Ewelina said something and one of the girls hurried to the kitchen before returning with a bowl and leaving it on the floor by his head.

"Ewelina works as a health care assistant at the Manchester Royal Infirmary. But she used to be a full nurse back home in Warsaw. She's got some codeine tablets you can take for the pain." Narcisa handed two small white tablets over with a small glass of water.

"Don't say anything – she's not supposed to take them from the Hospital, okay? She could lose her job." Narcisa said. Caramarin nodded, slowly.

"She'll take a look at you if you want," Narcisa added.

Caramarin nodded again and lay back. Narcisa pushed the other two girls out the room for a little privacy and shut the door on them. She then helped Ewelina take off Caramarin's jacket, shirt and jeans. The two women winced when they saw his battered body. Then Ewelina ran her hands over him, feeling his bones, flexing his limbs. After that she shone a little torch in his eyes, making him follow her finger with his eyes; had Narcisa ask him questions.

"Ewelina says you'll live. Nothing broken and she doesn't think you're concussed but you need to take it easy for a few days," Narcisa told him at last. That was good to know.

Caramarin thought. "Please can I stay here for the night? There's nowhere I can go," hating the needy sound in his voice.

Narcisa glanced at Ewelina, who nodded assent. The best gesture Caramarin had seen for a long time. "Of course. As long as you're quiet in the morning as Marta's on nights all this week."

"Thanks." Caramarin smiled through the pain.

The girls tiptoed out of the lounge leaving him under a blanket marked with the logo of the Manchester Royal Infirmary. Caramarin doubted that the hospital's laundry department knew it was missing. A few minutes later, Caramarin was asleep.

* * *

The light filtering through the curtains woke him. The house was silent; the clock's ticking the only sound. Eleven thirty. He stretched, winced with pain as his body recalled last night's beating. Narcisa or Ewelina had left him another couple of Tramadol tablets. He dry swallowed them, and then dragged himself upright. He shuffled upstairs. Gentle snores were coming from one of the bedrooms. Must be Marta, he thought. On nights.

He could tell the bathroom was used by girls. All the shelves were filled with toiletries and the toilet was spotless with no suspicious stains down the pan. It didn't even smell like an open sewer and the water was a deep chemical blue. Lifting the seat, he pissed like a horse.

Suddenly, Caramarin remembered the holdall and tube. Forgetting to lower the seat again, he hurried downstairs, clutching onto the handrail. A glance inside the lounge showed the holdall was untouched. He next slid the canvas from out of its tube and unrolled it. The blue Picasso, the *'Vielle Triste Pute Avec Vase'* looked back at him.

Even unfinished, it was beautiful. The photo Ozgan had given him didn't do the oil justice. He stared at it for a minute, captivated by the expression on the world-weary old whore's face. Caramarin had no idea what the Picasso was worth but it must be by far the most valuable object he'd ever held in his hands.

The painting held his eye – looking not at the beauty of it, not at the artistry – but what it represented. A way out of all this. An easy fortune lying there before him. After all, what did he owe this Timur Ozgan? Nothing. Less than nothing in fact. It wasn't like Ozgan was his gang boss or anything. The *capo* had only sent Caramarin to Britain because he had a reputation amongst the

Odessa underworld as being a man who could get the job done. And, like Ozgan said, he was expendable if it had all gone belly-up.

Caramarin cursed to himself as he looked at the oil. On the one hand Timur Ozgan was one of the most feared gang bosses back in Odessa. By reputation a man even worse than Caramarin's old boss, Eugen Maiorescu. Caramarin shuddered as he remembered the butchered body of a woman in a warehouse. That had been Ozgan's handiwork.

About to roll the canvas back up, Caramarin took another look. There was a signature on the bottom. Picasso's signature from 1901. Even Caramarin knew Picasso oils sell for millions of euros. Tens of millions in some cases. Okay, he reasoned to himself, he wouldn't be able to sell it for millions. No way. But even one million, maybe? Or at least several hundred thousand? That should be possible. That would be enough to set himself up for the time being. Buy something remote in an out of the way corner of Romania or Ukraine, somewhere even Ozgan wouldn't find him? That should be possible. He could send for Valeriya and her son, get them out of Odessa to safety and there would be no way Ozgan's mob could track them down.

And then they could all have a good life together. Hell, he wasn't that old – maybe even start a family of his own with his little fire-brand. A smile came to his lips.

He sat on the couch still holding the painting. Timur Ozgan was no man to mess with. You don't rise to the top of Odessa's underworld by playing Mr. Nice-Guy. Ozgan's fury would be terrible and Caramarin would have to make sure Valeriya was safely out of the way. But an opportunity like this only comes along a few times in any one life.

And what had he got to show for his life so far? Not a lot. That was the answer. Not a lot. No big villa overlooking the Black Sea, no luxury condo in an upmarket part of town. No flash car parked by a marina while he relaxed on a motor-yacht, a magnum of champagne cooling in an ice-bucket next to him; no Rolex, no designer clothes, no VIP entry to the nightclubs hanging out with

the celebs eager for a bit of 'gangster-chic' in their lives. It had been too many years since he'd had any of that.

But what he was holding could change all that. Transform his – and Valeriya's, he added – lives. Turn them into what they should be, like changing from lead to gold. Once, too many years ago, he'd had that lifestyle. Back when he was running that knock-off booze scam from out of Constanta. Before his life had crashed and burned around him. Caramarin licked his lips. Yeah, they'd been the good times and anything was better than struggling along hand-to-mouth like he'd done for months now.

Caramarin made his decision. He may be looking for trouble, but fuck it, you only live once. The least he could do was get the painting valued. See if the *'Vielle Triste Pute Avec Vase'* would bring him enough to change his fortune. Rolling it back into its tube he shoved the painting far back underneath the couch, out of sight. But not out of mind.

Standing up, Caramarin found his washed clothes hanging in the kitchen. They were still damp from the machine but he pulled them on anyway, wincing with pain as he did so. In this climate, damp clothes seemed to be the norm. Caramarin helped himself to toast and drank milk straight from the bottle, then he was ready to roll.

Of course, the girl's front door was locked and he had no front door key. However, searching the kitchen, he spotted the back door key hanging up on its hook. Letting himself out into the mossy back yard Caramarin then pushed their bin over to the back wall. Quietly, as he didn't want to wake snoring Marta or any neighbours.

Caramarin threw the holdall over, and then scrambled up over the brick wall and dropped into the alley between the two rows of terraced houses. He grunted with pain. His body felt like he'd been trampled by a herd of elephants or rhinos. No, make that both elephants and rhinos at the same time. With a few hippos thrown in for good measure.

Turning out of the alley and onto the street, he set off in as brisk a walk as he could manage. The few passers-by glanced at his face then looked away. No-one in their right mind would want to get involved with someone looking like he did.

Caramarin broke into a slow jog as he saw a bus approach a stop. He recognised the word 'Manchester' on the front so he jumped on board. It must be going in the right direction, he thought. The journey took half an hour. Thirty minutes of jerking, jolting misery. When he reached Manchester city centre, he searched for another Western Union office as he didn't want to use Narcisa's pawn brokers. There were way too many questions he didn't want her asking at this time.

In the Western Union office, he dug about five thousand euros out of the holdall. No way would Timur Ozgan know how much Hasanov had spent before Caramarin had recovered his money. At worst it would be Hasanov's word against his.

Caramarin paid the handling fee and had them wire the money to Valeriya, his sort of girlfriend, back home in Odessa. With a young son, she could do with the money. She'd make far better use of it than Timur Ozgan anyway. Caramarin texted Valeriya the transaction number so she could collect at her end.

Leaving the office, Caramarin bought a change of clothes and a few bottles of Finlandia vodka. As his old gang boss in Odessa, a man called Eugen Maiorescu, used to say Finlandia's the best vodka in the world. It's made from pure glacier water. For a moment, Caramarin wondered what had happened to Maiorescu since that final shoot-out on the Potemkin Steps. Once the two men had been friends but had finished as bitter enemies, both determined to kill the other. As he thought, Caramarin walked round the city centre getting his bearings before getting tired and catching the bus back to Crumpsall.

Looking around like any tourist, Caramarin felt a moment's dislocation as he walked past an impressive Gothic style building that looked just like the British Houses of Parliament in London. It even had a clock tower like Big Ben. However, it turned out the building was Manchester's Town

Hall. Caramarin figured Manchester must've been an important city once to have deserved a building like this but now the city looked run-down and crumbling away in this never ending rain.

CHAPTER 8. FRIDAY NOVEMBER 27, 14:15.

On the way back he picked up some take away menus, and a couple of bouquets of flowers from a nearby service station before scrambling over the yard wall and letting himself back into the girls' house. He felt exhausted by now, bone-achingly weary; so he threw himself onto the couch, shoved the holdall back underneath then scrolled through the TV channels trying to find anything to watch.

When the girls came home from work, they found him asleep, mouth open, the remote dropped to the floor. "Sleeping like a baby," Ewelina commented.

Narcisa shook him awake and handed him a coffee.

"Thank you," said Caramarin. "Thanks for letting me stay. Hope I didn't frighten you too much." He caught sight of himself in the mirror. Not good. His swellings and bruises were getting worse.

"That's all right," said Narcisa. She kissed just about the only unmarked place on his face.

"Listen, to say thanks for lookin' after me, let me get the food in tonight? Let me pay for whatever you girls want." He handed over the takeaway menus. "These came through the door earlier. Choose the best on the menu. And wine, whatever..."

The women looked through the menus and squabbled over their choices. A tall, blond young man in a denim jacket walked in. He turned out to be Marta's boyfriend and spoke a little Russian.

"You too," said Caramarin to the man. "But you'll have to order for me. My English isn't up to that."

"You're going to have to learn some English if you're going to get anywhere looking for your friend here," Narcisa told him. Caramarin said nothing. The girls finally settled on what they

wanted. He reckoned he'd given them too much choice the way they went through every menu at least three times. As he waited for the girls to decide he sent Artur, out to the neighbourhood liquor store for booze.

"And don't get that British lager," Caramarin told him slowly in basic Russian.

When the food arrived it filled the kitchen table, foil cartons overflowing onto the work surfaces. There was enough to feed a whole village back home. The girls had chosen Indian and the hot, spicy food went well with cold Polish lager.

Caramarin relaxed. He hadn't felt so happy for ages. Not since he'd arrived in Britain anyway. Another couple of Ewelina's stolen codeines washed down with lager and his aches dulled away. He laughed. The girls and Artur chatted away. He couldn't follow their conversations but didn't need to. They were happy; he was happy.

Finished, the friends moved into the lounge. Caramarin poured the vodkas while Narcisa set up the music. She sat next to him on the couch and snuggled up against him. Artur and Marta moved to the centre of the lounge and started dancing. Hips swaying, bodies gyrating together, not quite in time to the R'n'B.

Caramarin dimmed the light until only a soft glow lit the room. He took a long pull of the Finlandia, then pulled Narcisa to her feet. With a little squeal of protest they danced together. He felt her body heat as he held her close.

Artur sat and rolled a joint. Sparked it up and passed it around. Marijuana wasn't Caramarin's first choice, he was more into cocaine, but tonight the mellow weed hit the spot like nothing else. Held the smoke in before blowing it up to the ceiling, taking any last problems up with it. Felt chilled, felt good.

They carried on dancing and drinking long into the night. As she got stoned, Narcisa's dancing slowed; became sexier, more primal. Caramarin barely noticed when Marta took Artur by the hand and led him upstairs.

"Thank you for a wonderful evening," Narcisa said through the heavy marijuana haze.

"No, thanks for letting me stay. I enjoyed the evening," he said. "The best I've had since I don't know when."

Caramarin shrugged on his camouflage jacket and opened the front door. The cold rain was slashing down, bouncing off the car roofs and sidewalks forming a wet haze. Water poured from a nearby blocked gutter.

"You can't go out in that," Narcisa told him. "Least I... we can do is let you stay over tonight."

"Are you sure?" he said, gratefully. Caramarin slipped off his jacket and walked back to the couch.

"Where's that hospital blanket gone?" he asked.

Narcisa took his arm and pressed herself against him. She looked up at him with her dark, smouldering eyes.

"You don't have to sleep on the couch. Unless you really want to..."

Caramarin shook his head and allowed her to lead him upstairs. A girl's bedroom always reveals her soul. While Narcisa used the bathroom to freshen up, he sat on an easy chair and looked around. Covering the wood-chip walls were posters of Sixties icons. One of Marilyn Monroe over the boarded up fireplace. Another of The Beatles next to one of Che Guevara. Over her bed, one of JFK.

"Nice choice, comrade," he said nodding to Che's image.

"Yes, I love that one," she said. "Didn't he play for The Doors? Or was it The Stones?"

He sighed. "Think it might have been Jefferson Airplane."

She picked up a shabby old rag doll from the bed and kissed it, before carrying the doll over to the dressing table and setting it down. She looked at the doll, and then turned it around to face the wall.

"Don't want you seeing anything," Narcisa said to her doll, kissing it again. She sat on the cream bed cover; not a double but a little larger than a single. Caramarin handed over the last of the Finlandia and sat next to her.

Narcisa drained the bottle, threw her arms around Caramarin's neck and kissed him full on the lips. Her fingers traced his bruised, swollen eye soothing it. His tongue probed her mouth. Her breath tasted of toothpaste, alcohol and just a trace of Indian curry. He drew her closer towards him, feeling the warmth of her body.

Her hands worked their way down his back, feeling the ridge of his spine; they slipped beneath his belt and tugged his shirt free. He helped shrug it off. Her hands moved around his sides, to his chest, feeling his ribs, feeling his abs. She drew in her breath as she saw again the bruises and damage to his torso.

"That must have been a hell of a fight," she whispered.

"It was."

She lowered her head and kissed his body. Her tongue licked his nipples, her teeth nibbled gently on them, tingling him. He gasped with pleasure at the sensations. Narcisa pressed her hands to his chest and pushed him onto the bed.

Her gentle hands explored his abdomen and unbuckled his belt. Caramarin arched his hips so she could unzip his jeans and tug them down his legs. His boxers slid down with them.

Caramarin growled and sat up. "Not yet," he said.

He caught hold of her sweater by the hem and lifted it over her head. While she was trapped under its folds, struggling to remove it, he caressed her breasts through her black bra. Narcisa

squirmed and dropped the sweater to the floor onto his shirt and jeans. She shook her head, her long dark hair coming free from its pony tail.

Narcisa lifted her arms to her head; he caught the floral aroma of her perfume. She unhooked her bra and dropped it. Caramarin caught it and threw it onto the dressing table snagging her rag doll. Caramarin cupped her loose breasts, his fingers working, teasing, arousing her dark nipples, bringing them up to stiff points. Narcisa moaned with pleasure.

A glint of gold shone from her pierced belly button. His hands still playing with her nipples, pleasuring her with exquisite feelings. He could carry on for a while yet but Narcisa wanted more. She pushed his hands away, her breasts free now, before lying down on top of him, their bodies pressed together.

She guided his hands to her leggings, her hips moving against his groin, keeping him interested. In turn, he slid her leggings down her thighs until he could reach no further. With a little murmur of apology, she wriggled over and slid her leggings off over her feet.

"Nearly," she whispered. She was now only wearing black briefs. She looked into his eyes and thrust her hips towards him. He needed no second invite. With one smooth pull, he slid the panties down her thighs. His strong arms drew her closer towards him, and then slipped them off. Caramarin balled the damp briefs and tossed them over to her dresser. Let's see what her rag doll makes of that.

Narcisa pushed him down onto the bed and lifted his hands back onto her free breasts. "Please," she said. His fingers worked her nipples again, until they were hard as little rocks. Narcisa knelt and shuffled up the bed. She reached over, took a rubber from the bedside table, unwrapped it, and then unrolled it over him. Only a supreme effort of will stopped her gentle touch from making him explode.

Narcisa rested her hands on his chest, stroking his nipples as he felt hers. Her hips moved up and down, the friction building even through the rubber, taking him to ecstasy. Caramarin felt the

familiar pressure build up until, he could last no longer. He exploded inside her, the release draining him. He managed several more thrusts, enough to make her groan and squeal with her own pleasure.

She dropped onto his chest and kept him close for as long as possible. Caramarin held her tight, holding her in his strong arms. He yawned, closed his eyes, exhausted now. Before sleep claimed him, he checked if he could still stay over, sleep on the couch again.

"No, of course not. You're sleeping here with me tonight," whispered Narcisa. In the small bed, it was a tight fit. They lay together like spoons, his arm lying on her side, their bodies warming and pleasing the other's. All the same, if he wasn't so tired he would have difficulty sleeping like that.

Within minutes, their sleeping breaths became one.

CHAPTER 9. SATURDAY NOVEMBER 28, 12:30.

He awoke to a cold bed and the rattle of rain hitting and trickling down the window. His head felt thick and sluggish. Not surprising with the amount of booze and weed he'd taken on board last night. He groaned and sat up, holding his banging head in his hands. Never again, he thought. Never again until the next time. The cold air did little to wake him. Caramarin couldn't face the thought of getting up now, so snuggled down under the duvet again.

Narcisa pushed the door open and brought in a tray with toast and coffee. She placed it by him. "I've got no sympathy," she smiled, gathering together some clothes before leaving. A moment later he heard the bathroom door open and close.

He sat and ate his breakfast. How much could he trust her? After last night he thought he could but all the same he didn't know her that well. On the other hand, he had no choice. Especially as he didn't speak English which cut his options down like a drunk working through his last two bottles. Trust her or not. They were his only options. And the banging in his head didn't help with rational thinking.

He'd finished breakfast by the time Narcisa returned. She'd dressed in a warm, purple sweater and black jeans, her dark hair tied back with a red ribbon. He stood to use the bathroom himself. Narcisa pushed him back onto the bed.

"Stay with me a few minutes," she said. He nodded. Was funny how women didn't like men to know that they needed to use the bathroom too. He crossed his legs and grimaced. Draining the last of the cold coffee, his bladder told him he couldn't last out any longer.

Their girls' bathroom was at the other end of the upstairs landing; it looked at least a kilometre away as he shuffled down the corridor. Too late, Ewelina in her white robe opened her

bedroom door and darted into the bathroom. He heard the bolt slide shut behind her and then the shower starting.

Fuck-shit. Nothing for it. He ran downstairs, nearly falling at the bottom, flung open the back door to the yard and pissed down the drain in an unending stream, his hot urine mixing with the steaming shower water. Artur looked out of the door and grinned.

"Can't beat the first piss of the morning, can you," Artur said in bad Russian. "And I bet you satisfied Narcisa last night as much as you're enjoying that."

Caramarin nodded, unwilling to speak. Eventually, his flow stopped. He looked around. Rain falling from a low hanging leaden sky onto a bare backed hung over man pissing his life away in a litter strewn back yard in a city that doubled as God's own flushed toilet. Slate grey roofs over closed back windows. Aches and pains all over his beaten and battered body. Was this as good as it got? He shuddered, cold rain slashing against his nearly naked body.

No. But only he could improve matters.

Back inside, he fetched the cardboard tube from its hiding place under the couch. He took it upstairs. Narcisa was tidying her room. Her rag doll was back on the bed, its button eyes seeming to mock him.

"What's that?" Narcisa asked, spotting the tube. He was too tired to think of some *double entendre*. He took a deep breath, made his decision and then took the woman into his confidence.

"You work in that pawn brokers. Do you ever get people trying to sell you gear that's a little... hot?"

She looked at him, her dark eyes creasing with worry, frown lines appearing on her forehead. She fiddled with one of her hoop earrings. "What are you saying, Nicu?"

"Well, you must get the local gang bangers trying to offload gear that doesn't... technically... belong to them."

"It does happen. But not a lot as we always ask for I.D. And they know that. Most of the stuff we sell is from people who've fallen on hard times, or just need a bit of extra cash to take them to their next welfare cheque or pay-day. Or stuff the boss has bought cheap at auctions or wholesale."

"All right, then. But you must know where they're not as strict with the... formalities as your place."

"Maybe I do, Nicu. But what's going on? What are you into?" She looked at the cardboard tube with suspicion. "What's in there?"

Caramarin popped the end cap off and slid out the Picasso. He spread the painting out over her quilt.

Like himself back in Odessa, she didn't recognise the artist and he didn't tell her. No reason why she should recognise it.

"I know it's unfinished, but it's still worth a bit," he said.

"Is this the reason you got beaten up? Were they after it?"

He nodded, not seeing any point in telling Narcisa that it was him who had taken it. "Sort of. Just wondered what I could get for it. But I don't think I could take it to a proper art gallery for a valuation. If you know what I mean."

This time she nodded. "You couldn't prove its provenance is what you're saying."

"What's that mean?" Caramarin asked.

"No receipts, no bills of sale from an art dealer, nothing about who painted it or how you came to er... acquire it?"

"No, nothing like that," admitted Caramarin. "This painting's all I've got."

"In that case, the man you want is Mike Bronstein. I can give you his address."

"Bronstein? Any relation to Trotsky?"

"Who's Trotsky?" asked Narcisa.

"Think he played with Che Guevara in Jefferson Airplane," sighed Caramarin.

"Well, he's never open on a Saturday anyway," said Narcisa.

There seemed nothing more so Caramarin said he wanted to go back to his lodgings for a while. Gathering together his holdall and cardboard tube he left, but not before giving Narcisa a kiss on the doorstep. He turned up his collar, adjusted his keffiyeh and walked back to his bed and breakfast. The rain was still falling.

His landlady was vacuuming the lounge. She started having a go at him, forgetting he didn't speak English. Probably wondering where he had been for the last couple of nights. Caramarin just said 'yes' or 'no' to the angry woman, whatever seemed most appropriate to how she sounded. She shut up when he passed her another handful of notes from his pocket for another few nights' stay.

He threw himself onto his lumpy bed and switched on his cell. It kept beeping and flashing, telling him he had messages. One from his sort of girlfriend, Valeriya, back in Odessa; thanking him for the money and hoping he was okay.

Then there were several from Timur Ozgan wondering with increasing annoyance how he was getting on. More from a number he didn't recognise asking him to call back urgently.

No way did he want to speak to Ozgan at this point. Not until he'd decided what to do with the Picasso, anyway. He looked at the messages from the unknown number. Taking a chance and pressed the call button.

A man's voice answered in Romanian with a guarded 'Hello?' Caramarin identified himself and asked what the other man wanted.

"You won't know me," the man said. He had a strong Bucharest accent. "My name is Pompiliu Stanga. I heard about your fight the other night and I was impressed. Very impressed. Mihai Pojor is one tough man. Wondered if you'd like to go to another meet tonight."

"First," said Caramarin, "how did you get my number? And second I'm not fighting anyone tonight. Not for any money."

"Didn't think you could," Stanga laughed. "I saw the state you were in. I got your number off of Pojer after he went with gay boy to the hospital. So, you interested or what?"

Caramarin thought. Knowing this was probably a bad idea but tempted anyway. What else had he got to do in this horrible country? "Yes, all right," he said. "Where?"

"Can't say just yet. We're only told at the last minute, anyway. Where shall my car pick you up?"

This was getting worse. If this Stanga knew about and wanted the Picasso, this could be a bear trap. But if anything went down, it was Caramarin who still had hold of the painting.

"No," said Caramarin. "When you find out when and where the meet's taking place, call me back. Okay?"

"Don't blame you for being cautious – I like that. I'll call you about six," said Stanga.

Caramarin closed the call. This sounded like a bad idea. But what was the alternative? A night in on his own watching TV programmes in a language he couldn't understand or maybe going back to Narcisa's? No thanks. He showered, changed, watched some loud bizarre game show where he had no idea what was going on and dozed.

The phone's shrill ring jerked him out of sleep. The dream, something about a ruined shop, faded from memory. He sat up. His tongue felt like sandpaper. "Caramarin," he said thickly.

"The meet's at the old Horse and Groom pub on Rochdale Road," his new friend told him. "Eight pm Okay? You sure you don't want me to pick you up?"

"No, I'll see you there."

He dressed, gulped down a litre of water, and then checked out Rochdale Road on his street map. It was kilometres away. He'd call a cab.

Caramarin was at the old Horse and Grooms almost an hour early. He stood almost invisible in the deep shadows of a shop doorway over the road. The pub was a large three storied building, once grand, with sandstone windows and door frames. But now it was an abandoned wreck.

The pub's windows were all tinned over and graffiti marked its walls. Weeds were growing out of the guttering and water cascaded out of broken down-spouts. A faded "BUSINESS TO LET" board hung from an upper window. It didn't look to Caramarin like there would be many takers any time soon.

However, he saw a number of cars in the parking lot. An obvious heavy sat in one, guarding them from the local kids. More cars arrived every few minutes with a variety of men, and even some women. The visitors disappeared round the back of the pub.

The men were of all types, mostly British he thought but some darker Romanians or East Europeans. There were some Asians; they seemed to have invested their money in the best cars of the lot. All the men seemed tough and capable whoever they were and whatever they were wearing.

Caramarin felt much happier. There were too many people for it to be a set up to take the Picasso and cash off him. And there was no way that all these different races were all in the same gang. If it had just been a few, then he would have walked away. However, his sixth sense was quiet tonight.

He dodged a shower of rain and hurried across the road and then through the parking lot to the back of the pub. Two giants were standing guard over a metal back door. One put out his arm and said something. Caramarin gave the giant the name of Pompiliu Stanga and they stepped aside. One looked at his battered face and nodded with respect.

Inside a short, dark corridor led to what was probably the snooker or pool room when the pub was open. He smelt damp plaster and neglect. The corridor looked hacked about, saw grooves in the woodwork where the copper wiring had been ripped out.

Inside the old snooker room, another boxing ring had been set up under temporary spotlights. He heard the thud of a generator coming from a side room. The reek of petrol fumes from the corridor masked the smell of decay and rot. The people were mostly grouped around the ring, except for some standing by the re-opened bar. Caramarin saw few ethnic divisions here, all the men united in tense expectation.

A man hurried over to Caramarin with his hand outstretched. They shook.

"Pompiliu Stanga," he said. "After your bout the other night I thought you'd enjoy this. I'd be interested to know what you think of the fights." Stanga introduced Caramarin to his driver, a tall thin man with bad acne scars called Tibor Budescu, and then led Caramarin over to the bar. Stacked up on the bar and piled behind it, were crates of lager but there were also bottles of vodka, bourbon, and rum. Stanga bought Caramarin a drink before leading him back ringside.

Caramarin glanced at his new friend. The man was older than him, maybe in his early fifties now. He was several centimetres shorter than Caramarin, maybe one metre seventy five but Stanga was much broader, even barrel chested. A heavy set face with full lips. An old scar ran across his left cheek.

But the man's grey eyes were flat and dead with all the compassion of a statue's. Stanga kept his gaze fixed to the front. The man was wearing a dark green polo neck sweater underneath a tan leather jacket. Glancing down, Caramarin saw expensive looking loafers on Stanga's feet.

"Hope you like the fights," Stanga said. "Probably nothing special but what do you expect? This is a run-down pub outside of Manchester, not Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas."

Caramarin nodded. He'd never been to Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas anyway. First up were two teens from the local estate. The warm up act. They stripped off their trackies to reveal spotty, undernourished bodies. The taller had a badly drawn Manchester United tattoo on his shoulder.

The two set at each other furiously for a few minutes but neither had the wind or the stamina for a long bout. They were soon leaning on each other, gasping with exhaustion. The ref broke them

apart and they took a few weak swings at each other. The audience booed and catcalled or made ironic cheers. If this was the standard of fighting Caramarin could expect tonight, he thought he might as well have stayed at home.

They were let go after a points decision, then the two lads hung about the bar helping themselves to the lager. Not a bad reward for their night's work. Next up, a couple of burly labourers; they looked to Caramarin's eyes like roofers or tarmac layers. These two hammered each other with iron hard fists, the blows falling fast and heavy on each other's work hardened bodies as the crowd cheered. Caramarin bet on the red haired one. He lost. But he still had plenty of Ozgan's money left.

Caramarin was wondering whether to stay or go when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He startled and wheeled around, fist half raised reflexively. Behind him stood Engin Hasanov with Mihai Pojer. Pojer's face looked almost as bad as Caramarin's. He had a huge bruise and two black eyes. Caramarin vaguely remembered butting the man hard on the nose. Pojer's left arm was bound up in a sling.

"You haven't told my... uncle... about recovering his Picasso yet, have you?" said Hasanov over the roar of the crowd.

Caramarin didn't know what to say. He hadn't expected to run into these two jokers tonight.

"Haven't quite got around to it yet," he shrugged.

"If you're looking to rip him off and sell it on, cut us in, lovey." said Hasanov. "You've got my number."

Caramarin nodded. "No, I'm calling Ozgan tomorrow. I've been laid up the last couple of days. Your mate rather battered me about." He nodded acknowledgement to Pojer. "I've only just got back on my feet again."

"You're lying to us, lovey. But I don't care. Ozgan's nothing to me now I've got Pojer. But you've got to cut us both in."

Caramarin nodded again. "Like I say, I'll be callin' Ozgan in the morning. Nothin' to cut in."

Mihai Pojer stepped forward. His eyes were not smiling now. His white sling stood out against his black leather jacket. "Listen to my friend. Cut us in."

Caramarin had a lot of respect for Pojer as a fighting man. Far more than he had for Hasanov, anyway. He tapped the man on the shoulder. "Don't worry," he told them.

This was an unexpected development. He needed time to think. Casually, Caramarin walked over to the bar and ordered vodka. He watched the next couple of fights but any fun had poured out the evening like dishwater down the drain. He hadn't given any thought to Hasanov and Pojer; hadn't included them in his plans but now he'd have to reconsider.

Caramarin dropped his plastic beaker to the floor and ground it into fragments. All of a sudden, he'd had enough. While the crowd was baying for blood, he let himself out of the derelict pub and stood breathing in the fresh cold air out in the car park under the watchful stare of the doormen.

Shoving his hands in his pocket, he walked down the road and caught a cab back to his bed and breakfast. His brain was hurting almost as much as his body. Swallowing the last couple of codeines he threw himself onto his bed. Sleep wouldn't come.

CHAPTER 10. MONDAY NOVEMBER 30, 08:30.

Caramarin rolled over and cursed. He swept his hand over the bedside table, knocking his cell phone onto the floor. It carried on ringing, that annoying ringtone drilling into his ears. Unwilling to expose his body to the chill early morning air Caramarin stuck his arm out from under the covers and fumbled his hand over the carpet. His fingers caught the edge of the phone, knocking it further away. With another curse, he sat up, swung his legs out of the bed and sat up. Sighting the Nokia, he leaned forward looking momentarily like a man like a man sick to the depths of his soul. He picked it up and pressed the green button.

Caramarin thought he'd been too slow, that he'd missed the call even as he said 'hello' but he recognised the voice on the other end. It was his new friend from last night. Pompiliu Stanga.

"You weren't impressed with the quality on offer last night?" asked Stanga.

Caramarin wasn't sure what to say. But he didn't owe this Stanga character anything. "Seen better."

"No, I admit they weren't top class. I wish I'd seen your fight against my man, Mihai Pojer. That's all the talk amongst the cognoscenti at the moment."

That took Caramarin aback. "Your man? Pojer? I didn't know he worked for you. I suppose I thought he worked for...," Caramarin fell silent. He didn't want to show his hand to Stanga. However, Stanga didn't pick up on his slip.

"Yeah. Pojer worked for me. I never thought he'd get beaten at one of these shows – I lost a load of money that night." Stanga chuckled, a surprisingly warm, rich laugh. "Never mind. I'll make it up. However, I'm in a little difficulty now."

"Oh, yeah," said Caramarin warily. He wondered where this was leading.

"Yeah," Stanga said a little more forcefully. "Among his other duties, Mihai Pojer worked as a debt collector for me. His temporary absence leaves me with a bit of a problem."

"Oh, yeah?" said Caramarin even more warily.

"I need a new collector. But I don't want just anyone. I need someone who has something about them. Someone who can command respect amongst the low-life I deal with."

"What sort of debts?" asked Caramarin despite himself.

"Nothing major," said Stanga airily. "I own a large number of properties I rent out. I need a man to collect the rents from my tenants. And some have loaned money off me. Some of them can be... reluctant... to pay up. They think I'm some sort of charity and can live rent free."

Caramarin thought for a second. "I think I know what you're saying. But I'm not the man you're looking for. I can't speak any English for a start."

Stanga chuckled again. "Neither do most of my tenants..."

"Romanians?"

"A few. Some Roma gypsies. No, most of them are asylum seekers or others that Manchester Council is forced to re-home. The homeless, junkies. Those types. The council farms 'em out to any landlord who will take 'em. A man who can persuade these people to pay up on time is more useful to me than a man who can speak English."

"That's me?"

"When word gets out, as it will, that you beat Pojer I don't think you'll have much trouble."

Caramarin thought. Maybe having a job – even one working for someone like Pompiliu Stanga – might make a good impression with Narcisa. And he didn't want to skim too much off Timur Ozgan's stash.

"Okay. I'll do it," Caramarin found himself saying.

Stanga told him where to meet before closing the connection. As Caramarin replaced the phone on the table. Why did he agree to this? It wasn't like he needed the money as he had a holdall stuffed with euros under the girls' couch. But no, best not to take too much from out that holdall. That little powder-puff Hasanov would be sure to tell Uncle Timur how much he'd handed over to Caramarin. No prizes for working out which of the two men Ozgan would believe if it came down to a question of denials. Blood is always thicker than water.

And, on the other hand some sort of job would give Caramarin some reason for his income – something that might make Narcisa and the other girls less suspicious.

Caramarin wrapped his arms around his body and shivered. He looked longingly at his bed. The old mattress still held the impression of his body. No. He shook his head and stood before he could have second thoughts. A quick shower, and a hurried breakfast later saw Caramarin queuing with others for the bus into town. Like the others, his head was hunched into his shoulders and he scowled down at the sidewalk to keep the rain out of his face. A tinny treble leaked from the earphones of the young man standing next to him. He wondered if you could get a small electric shock from listening to music in the rain. He hoped so. Nothing lethal – just enough to stop that annoying hiss.

Caramarin stepped off the bus, checked his street atlas, and walked through a number of run down streets. Many of the houses had posters in the windows, most of them for nightclubs, and he thought they might be occupied by students.

Turning the corner he saw over the road a small café. Checking the road several times as he'd still not got used to the way traffic drove on the left instead of on the right, he crossed and a moment later was inside the greasy spoon.

It was almost as wet inside as out. Water had been tracked in from the sidewalk covering the worn linoleum. From behind the serving counter, food steamed on trays, the vapour reaching to the ceiling while condensation trickled down the windows. The café was busy and everyone seemed to

have a steaming mug of tea next them. Caramarin loosened his jacket and shook droplets from it, adding to the general dampness.

Sitting near the counter, Caramarin spotted Stanga talking to a couple of men dressed in workman's coveralls. Cement and plaster dust covered their arms. As he approached, Stanga pushed out a chair with his foot inviting Caramarin to sit. The two builders stood, nodded to Caramarin and left the café.

"They're doing up a house for me. The last tenant left it in a bit of a state. Bloody foreigners." Stanga stuck his finger in the air and the waitress brought over a mug of tea that looked like tar.

Caramarin sipped the tea and tasted the harsh tannins. "What do you want me to do?"

Stanga reached into his breast pocket and brought out a notebook. Flicking through the pages, the man explained. "These are the addresses and these are the sums owed. Nearly all only owe the last week's and that's how I like it. These..." he pointed to some entries in green ink "... owe two weeks and these in red owe three. I want you to see them first and don't take no for an answer."

Caramarin noticed none owed more than three weeks money. He had a feeling that after three weeks, stronged measures were called for than a quiet visit. He glanced at his watch. "Do you want me to start now? Will they all be in?"

"Sure. They're mostly on welfare. This country gives away money like water. The government here pays their rent so they can afford to sit about watching TV all day. Unbelievable. You wouldn't get that back home."

"I suppose not. But what if the tenants haven't got the money?"

"You simple or something? Haven't you been listening to what I've been saying? Of course they've got it – they get money thrown at them by the government and council. Just get what they owe me off them."

The two men discussed Caramarin's wages. It wasn't enough but he had plenty hidden under the couch. No way would Timur Ozgan know how much Caramarin had skimmed off. Stanga stood and Caramarin knew his job interview was over. They shook hands and Stanga led him over to a beat-up Vauxhall Combo van. It looked like someone had rammed its side at some point in the distant past and a rusting dent took up most of its right hand side.

Stanga took out a set of keys and unlocked the back. Inside was a toolbox, lengths of pipe and wiring, a set of socket wrenches with only a few missing, timber, tubs of emulsion paint with a set of brushes on top and a new set of coveralls. Caramarin raised an eyebrow and stepped back. "You want me to torture them?"

Stanga laughed. "Of course not. Not unless they get too far behind." He saw Caramarin's face. "Only joking. No, some of my tenants might need some small repairs making. While you're collecting the rents you could also try and fix them up."

Caramarin didn't know what to say. "I'm not a plumber... I know nothing at all about house repairs, comrade..."

"Well do what you can. You look like a handy man but if you can't fix things, give me a call and I'll send out my team later."

Caramarin nodded as Stanga handed over the Combo's keys. He watched as Stanga walked to a Range Rover 4x4 and drove away. Clearing away the clutter that covered it, he spread out Stanga's notebook and his street atlas on the passenger seat. Do the red numbers first. That's what Stanga had told him. He engaged first gear and drove away.

The first house was only a few streets away. On the outside it looked well presented with a fresh coat of paint and double-glazed windows. A tabby cat lay out of the rain under a child's trampoline in the front garden. Caramarin pushed open the gate, and rang the door bell.

He wasn't surprised when nobody answered. He rang the bell a second time. Still nothing. Caramarin smiled to himself. He wasn't making much of a success on his first job. But these people

owed three weeks, according to Stanga, so it was time to pay up. Shading his eyes with his hand, he peered through the window into the front lounge. Through the net curtains, he saw what looked like a wide-screen TV but could see no sign of any movement. To the side of the house, Caramarin noticed a wooden gate. Turning to the gate, he saw that like the house it had a fresh coat of paint but underneath the wood was rotten.

Glancing up and down the street, he saw nobody nearby. Only an old lady wheeling a shopping trolley and she was several houses away. Putting his shoulder to the gate, he forced it open with a crack. Once again, Caramarin looked around. Nobody seemed to have noticed. The padlock hung from the wood by a couple of screws. The gate led onto a narrow passageway between the side of the house and the next.

Trotting down the passage, Caramarin came to a paved yard. More children's toys littered the yard. There was also a back door. Caramarin turned the handle. It was unlocked. He opened it and entered the kitchen.

"*Salut*," he called out. Shit, that was Romanian. What was the English word? That was it. He was about to say, "hello," when a man holding a baseball bat stepped into the kitchen. Caramarin had an impression of size and a face filled with fury. The man jabbed the club straight at Caramarin's face. Taken unawares, he recoiled backwards. His hand knocked a set of saucepans onto the floor. The clattering sounded loud in the small kitchen. The man, maybe Turkish or Kurdish or something swore in his own language and took a fresh grip on the haft.

Caramarin's hand connected with the handle of a frying pan. He snatched it up and fended off the man's next swing with the pan. The shock vibrated up his arm. The kitchen was small and the man had little space to swing his bat. He raised it to his shoulder. The man was strong but was no trained fighter.

Realising this, Caramarin swapped the frying pan to his left hand just as the man launched his next swipe. Caramarin fended it off and then kicked out, connecting with the man's kneecap.

The man cried out with rage and pain his swing going nowhere. Caramarin dropped the frying pan onto the counter and snatched the baseball bat from out of the man's hands.

The man backed away, fear taking the place of his anger. Caramarin dropped the bat to the floor. Slowly, he took Stanga's notebook from his pocket and showed the right page to the man. The man said something in a language Caramarin recognised as Turkish from his time spent in that country years ago. He still sounded angry but more resigned. A woman's head covered by a headscarf peeped around the door jamb followed by a couple of smaller heads. The man waved them away and the upturned faces vanished.

The man spoke again. Caramarin shook his head, still not understanding, and pointed to the red entry in the notebook. Shrugging, the man opened a drawer. Caramarin tensed, half expecting a knife but instead the man took out an envelope. He held it out to Caramarin who took it. Opening it he saw a sheaf of twenties and tens. Counting it, there was enough to take this family back into the black. The man held out a receipt book and Caramarin filled it in. Correctly he hoped, as he couldn't understand all the English writing.

Despite the aggro, Caramarin was glad. Pompiliu Stanga was not a man to get on the wrong side of. Taking the envelope, Caramarin backed out of the kitchen and yard and to his Combo. Making an entry in the notebook, he switched on the wipers and drove to the next address. He grinned to himself. That visit had been a baptism of fire but nothing he couldn't handle. All the same there had to be easier ways of earning a living.

CHAPTER 11. MONDAY NOVEMBER 30, 11:45.

The next couple of visits went smoothly. No problems. Money in the bank – or in Stanga's pocket. He pulled up outside a small terraced house with a satellite dish almost as large as the roof. Knocking on the door, Caramarin was surprised when it opened immediately. A large woman with huge breasts flopping onto her larger stomach stood in the hallway. She wore an outsize t-shirt over green leggings. There was a hole over one thigh showing an expanse of pallid flesh. She was holding a chocolate bar.

Everyone else so far had been hostile but this woman pulled him inside. Caramarin was startled. A horrible idea that this woman wanted to pay him off 'in kind' filled his mind. No! No way! The woman dragged him into the lounge. It was filled with children of all ages from a cute eight year old down to a baby with a chocolate covered face. They couldn't all be hers? Surely? A nightmare image of this woman getting down and dirty entered his mind. He thrust the picture away and turned to her with a smile.

The woman pointed to the radiator which took up much of one wall. From what he could see under the clothes draped over it, the thing looked old and rusty. She said something but Caramarin shrugged. The woman grabbed his hand and placed it on the heater. He snatched his hand away, expecting to be burned, but the radiator was stone cold. He touched it again. Yeah still cold.

Caramarin's heart sank as he understood what this woman wanted. He was no plumber. Ransacking his memories of how to bleed a radiator he fetched his tool box from out the van. He was going to have to speak to Stanga about this side of things. For a moment he was tempted to just abandon the van, leave Stanga's money in the glove locker and walk away.

No. He could at least have a go and, like Stanga said, if he couldn't fix it then Stanga would send out his workmen. No dramas. Caramarin was a man, after all. He had to walk tall and he couldn't let the whole male sex down by running away from a radiator. Completing small tasks was part of his male heritage. Showing more confidence than he felt, Caramarin re-entered the house.

Setting the tool box down in front of the radiator, Caramarin found what he was looking for. A brass radiator key. He wasn't sure how to mime 'bowl' without it looking suggestive so he walked into the woman's kitchen and found one under the sink. The whole tribe followed him into and out of the kitchen. The younger members with wide, staring eyes wondering what was going to happen.

Caramarin set the bowl beneath the radiator and turned the key. Nothing happened. Used a bit more force but still nothing happened. He peered at the valve. It was rusted shut. Thinking back to some of the old cars he used to drive, Caramarin smiled up at the eyes surrounding him and sprayed oil at the valve. He hoped that would work.

Unable to take any more of the tribe's stares or nudges – or the sound of the woman chomping chocolate – Caramarin tried the key again. The key turned. Just a little but that was enough. A rusty brown drop of water leaked from the valve. Feeling like he was on top of things, Caramarin gave it another squirt of oil and then turned the key a little more. More dirty water dribbled down the side of the radiator joining older streaks. The oldest child moved the bowl to catch the water. Caramarin smiled and nodded at her.

With a smile, Caramarin turned the key all the way. He rocked backwards with the shock, losing his balance as a jet of ice-cold, filthy water sprayed out of the valve, catching him full in the face. The brass key fell to the floor and disappeared beneath a mound of toys. The room erupted with children's laughter. The woman swore – he needed no translation for that – snatched the bowl from her daughter and lifted it up to the torrent. Water bounced into and out of the basin, spraying over the laminate floor and all over the woodchip. More cascaded over her breasts making her look as if she'd decided to enter a 'Miss Wet T-shirt contest' for ugly people.

The children howled with mirth. This was much better than the cartoons on the wide screen. Even the baby had joined in and was waving its chocolate bar around and kicking its legs in the air. The woman turned to Caramarin and said something. Her tone was angry.

Despite himself, he started to smile. This was the most fun he'd had since coming to this rain-soaked country. And now it seemed to be raining on the inside of this house. More water cascaded out of the open valve spraying all over the place. A tan puddle formed beneath the heater, spreading out. Instinctively, the children backed away from the foul liquid. Still clutching her bowl, the woman screamed abuse at him. Caramarin suppressed his own laughter.

Only the cute eight year old seemed to retain her presence of mind. She ran to the kitchen and found some towels which she laid out. The woman dropped her useless bowl and grabbed Caramarin's arm, pointing at the Niagara cascading everywhere.

Rubbing rust smelling water out of his face, Caramarin turned to the valve. Where was the key? Where was the fuckin' key? It wasn't sticking out of the valve any more. He recalled a brass shape tumbling to the floor. Crouching, he knocked the water soaked toys to one side. One of the little boys howled – with tears now – not laughter and dived on a wet looking stuffed panda. The boy slipped on the wet towel and crashed into Caramarin who in turn caught another jet of water straight in the face and then it poured down his front, soaking him. Some trickled into his mouth leaving a foul, stale taste.

Under his breath as there were children present, Caramarin swore. The woman screamed down his ear and a blast of her chocolatey breath filled his nostrils. He gagged with the taste and smell filling his senses. He turned to face her when she pushed at him. The woman probably weighed more than him and his foot skidded out from under slipping on the wet laminate. Unbalanced now, Caramarin snatched at the radiator for support. He crashed to the floor, his feet splayed out and his bottom ended up in the dirty wet puddle. A sudden jolt of pain shot up his arm from his wrist. This was getting out of control now. He'd been in fire fights that were better

organised than this clusterfuck. He was only here to collect money and bleed an old radiator. How hard could that be? Too much for him apparently.

Time to take a firm grip on this clusterfuck. Caramarin struggled to his feet, gently shaking his wrist and bent over, searching for the missing key. There were more howls of laughter from the assembled youngsters as they caught sight of the wet seat of his jeans. Some of them pointed at his bottom and he heard the word 'poo' used several times. Craning his neck, trying to see Caramarin spotted the edge of a brown stain soaked into the seat of his jeans. He looked like a man with bad diarrhoea who didn't make it fast enough to the rest rooms. His lips curled upwards.

The only one not seeing the funny side was the woman herself. She gripped his wrist and another flare of pain sped up his arm. Caramarin stopped laughing and turned to face her. More water jetted out of the valve, some splattering up the wall, more joining the rapidly expanding puddle. The cute girl scooped up the towels, ran into the kitchen and wrung them out. She trotted back in and relaid the damp towels over the small pool. But by now the towels didn't even cover all the spilled water.

The woman shrieked with anger and Caramarin watched her breasts wobble with her fury. He blinked water out of his eyes. The soaked t-shirt made it clear that, no, she wasn't even wearing a bra. She should. Dropping his eyes, he scanned the floor desperate for a hint, a gleam of brass among the toys and clutter. Anything to stop the torrent. There was no sign. It was as if the key had vanished. Still more water poured out of the valve, flooding out onto the waterlogged toys and spreading over the laminate towards the overstuffed couch and easy chairs. This was a disaster.

The little ones, sensing that this was no longer funny, stopped laughing and edged away wanting to put some distance between themselves and this chaos. The little boy clutched the damp panda to his chest while another pulled the baby away.

It was the cute, bright-eyed little girl who saved them all. She looked through the tool box and pressed a spare key into Caramarin's hand. A moment later, the flood turned to a stream, then a

trickle and then nothing. At least he had successfully bled that radiator but he didn't think he'd be asked to check the others in the house any time soon. Packing his toolbox, collecting the rent book, Caramarin let himself out. Through the open window he heard more shouting.

Two young women both pushing prams took one look at the state of his jeans and laughed.

"I should be on danger money for this," Caramarin muttered to himself as he unlocked the van.

* * *

Glancing at his watch, Caramarin scratched off the next two addresses. He could always say they were out. Instead he drove the van up Cheetham Hill Road and parked outside his bed and breakfast. On an impulse, he dialled Narcisa. She answered on the third ring.

"Can you slip away this lunchtime? I'm missing you," he said simply. After this morning's work he felt in need of some rest and relaxation. There was a pause at the other end. Caramarin held his breath, willing Narcisa to say yes.

It sounded like her hand was covering her mouthpiece as he heard a brief muffled conversation with another girl in the background.

"Yes. Where are you?"

Caramarin gave the address and then grabbed a quick shower and change of clothes before running around to a nearby fast food takeaway. He pointed to the picture of a bucket of chicken and chips, threw money on the counter and then raced back to the guest house before the food cooled. He paused for a moment on the doorstep and quietly turned the key. From the pamphlet his landlady had given him he vaguely remembered some regulation about no food in the rooms and no guests.

Easing the door open, he stepped into the hallway. The chemical sweetness of air freshener hit him first. He took another step towards the stairs. From the dining room, he heard his landlady moving about with a vacuum cleaner. Excellent. She wouldn't hear anything. Caramarin trotted upstairs, laid out the food and then crept down to the hall.

Trying to look as if he belonged there, Caramarin stood by the rack of tourist leaflets in sight of both the front door and dining room. The landlady was still vacuuming up any stray crumbs that might have escaped her earlier attempts to round them all up. The sound of the cleaner going up and down, up and down felt soothing and Caramarin relaxed knowing that while the woman was doing that, she wasn't about to go hunting for illegal guests.

A moment later, Caramarin saw a shape through the stained glass in the front door's panel. Dropping the leaflet, immediately, he sprang into action. He turned the latch and opened the door as quietly as possible, at the same time pressing his fingertip to his mouth for silence. He jerked his head in the direction of the dining room.

Then horror. The rhythmic sound of the vacuum stopped. Caramarin looked wide eyed and Narcisa was about to start giggling. Caramarin clutched her hand. "Ssh," he whispered as he led her to the stairs. Fortunately the deep red carpet muffled their footsteps and they were half way up before the landlady came out of the dining room.

Caramarin froze. He hoped the old woman wouldn't look up as she crossed to another socket and plugged in her cleaner. An instant later, the sounds started up and the woman bent to her work. Even over the noise of the cleaner, Caramarin heard her cluck with annoyance as she picked up the dropped leaflet and replace it in the rack.

Not wanting to push his luck any further by lingering on the stairs Caramarin dragged Narcisa up and into his room. With a sigh of relief, Caramarin closed the door behind them.

"Dinner is served," he said, pointing to the breaded chicken nuggets and fries and cans of cola covering the bedside table.

"Five star, Nicu. Some men take their girls to a posh hotel – like the Lombardia. Treat them to a meal in a restaurant." But Narcisa was smiling as she said this, taking the sting out of her words. She took off her coat and Caramarin shook it and hung it over the back of the door

"Hope you're hungry – there seems a lot," he said.

"Starving. I could eat for two," she said. Narcisa saw Caramarin's expression of alarm.

"Only joking – I hope!"

Caramarin offered Narcisa the only chair and sat on the lumpy bed. They ate the food and wiped the grease onto the little paper tissues which came with the meal. Caramarin sat back.

"What about dessert?" Narcisa asked. Caramarin thought for a moment. There had been pictures of gateaux at the chicken 'n' chips takeaway but he hadn't thought to order any.

"I'm sorry – I guess I..."

"That's all right, Nicu. I know what you want for dessert." Narcisa stood and sat on his lap. She lifted Caramarin's hand to her breast. Beneath, he felt her heart beating strong and firm. Narcisa looked up, her chocolate eyes meeting his deep brown ones. Her mouth drew closer, he smelled the food on her breath and then they kissed. Caramarin pulled her closer and then, before either knew it, they were lying on the bed together.

Later, quite a bit later, they both lay snug under the covers listening to the wind and rain gusting against the window panes.

"Haven't you got to back to work sometime?" Caramarin asked, his voice a low murmur.

Narcisa raised herself onto one elbow. "No it's okay. I told my manager that I had really bad cramps – the time of the month. He went bright red and let me take the afternoon off."

"You haven't – I mean..." said Caramarin.

Narcisa laughed. "Don't be silly. Men! You're all pushovers. I'd never get away with that with a woman in charge."

As if summoned by her laughter, there was a knock on the door. Caramarin sat up. The knock came again, louder and heavier. Wondering if it was Pompiliu Stanga who had tracked him down and was looking for today's rent money, Caramarin stood and pulled on his jeans before opening the door.

It was worse. Far worse than an angry Stanga. His landlady barged past him into the room. She took in the scene at a glance.

The older woman turned to Caramarin and launched into a tirade he had no hope of understanding. He only caught one English word which she repeated several times as she shook her head with anger.

Waiting for his landlady to draw breath, he said, "no, no *prostituata*." That was the limit of his English. He shrugged and glanced at the woman next to him. But that wasn't enough for Narcisa. She sat up in the bed, drawing the covers up over her breasts. If the landlady's speech had been fierce, that was nothing compared with what Narcisa said in return. Caramarin understood none of it but was impressed with her command of the English language. Caramarin watched the older woman wilt like a week old flower, her aggression melting out of her under the force of Narcisa's red hot fury.

Her face downcast, baulked of an easy victory the landlady slammed the door behind her. Caramarin leaped up and turned the key in the lock and shot the bolt. "I'm in trouble now," he said with a grin.

His laughter died as he turned around to face Narcisa. Now her rage had left her, tears were streaming down her cheekbones. He turned to cuddle her, to console her but Narcisa pushed him away.

"She thought I was some cheap whore you'd brought back for an hour. It's no good, Nicu. I can't take this. You and your dodgy painting; now you're telling me you're working as some kind of debt collector and then your landlady mistakes me for some whore you've picked up. I'm leaving..."

Caramarin took Narcisa in his arms. She struggled against his greater strength for a moment before burying her face in his neck. He leaned forward slightly and buried his face in her dark chocolate brown hair. He breathed in deeply, inhaling her heat as well as the scent of her shampoo. As he did so, he felt her tears leak out and wet his collar-bone.

"It's all right," Caramarin murmured. "Things will pick up, just you see..." Gently he calmed Narcisa but the mood was broken and soon after the woman dressed and hurried out. She did not meet his eye.

Soon after, Caramarin threw on his clothes and let himself out. He heard his landlady rattling pans in the kitchen. From the clatter, she still sounded angry. Picking up one of the guest house's leaflets in the hall he scanned its text. There was something there about guests but, well, that was written in bad Russian so he could always pretend he didn't understand. He dropped the leaflet back in the rack.

CHAPTER 12. SUNDAY DECEMBER 6, 10:30.

A week of debt collecting and manual work took it out of him more than he expected. Although he stayed away from anything complicated, he fixed three gates and refitted a kitchen unit back onto the wall. His old Dad would have been proud of him, Caramarin thought. However, there was nothing he could do about number twelve's fuse box. Using mime, Caramarin explained he didn't touch electrics.

Rather than hang about his increasingly annoyed landlady's guest house, Caramarin spent his evenings at the bookies on Cheetham Hill Road playing the Fixed Odds Betting Terminal. He found the flashing lights and electronic music to be more addictive than cocaine and, despite some wins, his money vanished into the machine's maw.

* * *

Sunday morning, he was up later than he wanted. He listened to the rain pattering against the window before calling Narcisa. His battered face was getting better now, although the bruises still looked like a horror mask, and fortunately it didn't hurt as much. Or maybe he was just getting used to the pain. Even his battered right eye was beginning to open.

"You sure you want to do this?" Narcisa asked when he showed up at the girls' house in Crumpsall.

"No, I'm not, not really. But what's this Bronstein like? Can I trust him?"

"He deals with crooks," Narcisa gave him a hard look. "What do you think?"

"Probably not then. But let's see what he offers. C'mon, comrade," he said.

Narcisa stopped him by the front door. She was smartly dressed, in dark trousers and a fitted jacket. She had a sparkling blue scarf wrapped around her neck. She'd also taken time with her

make-up. Her sultry, dark brown eyes were set off to perfection and her shiny lips were made for kissing. So he kissed them. She pushed him off.

"Men," she said. "It took me ages to look like this." She made a kiss for the mirror and reapplied her lip gloss.

"You didn't have to. You always look gorgeous to me," said Caramarin.

"Charmer! But it's not for you, Nicu. It's for someone far more important than you."

A tenseness gripped Caramarin's heart. Relieved only when she told him she'd already been to an Orthodox church that morning. He glanced at his watch and picked up the tube.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's do it." He took her arm in his, and then they walked through the still falling light rain to Middleton Road where he flagged down a passing black cab. He settled back on the back seat as Narcisa spoke to the driver.

Still clutching his tube, Caramarin stepped out at journey's end. Immediately, their cab pulled away, splashing through an oily puddle as it did so.

"This the right place?" asked Caramarin with a frown. They were the only people standing in the street. It looked like some post apocalyptic film set in a long abandoned industrial wasteland. A place where everyone had died of some hideous, futuristic plague. He half expected to see a horde of crazed, flesh-eating zombies lurching down the road towards them, desperate to suck out their brains.

Opposite them was a faded, rain streaked sign over a lock-up brick warehouse in what looked like a totally abandoned and shuttered up street. "*ROWLIN_ON ND SONS*" the sign read.

"Bronstein bought out the business years ago. Before I came to Manchester," said Narcisa. "Way I heard it, he never changed the ownership. Officially at any rate – it's probably some tax dodge."

"Sounds like a smart man."

"He is. Be very careful in there, Nicu."

They rang the bell. A tinny voice out of an answer-phone told them to look up into the camera. After a moment for verification, the door buzzed open and Caramarin led the way up several flights of narrow concrete stairs. At the top a door stood ajar. It had a glass panel on which was painted a now faded sign labelled 'Rowlinson and Sons'. Caramarin rapped on the glass and pushed it open. He was met by a tsunami of heat.

Surrounding a battered wooden desk were several electric heaters all on and all pumping out heat. On the desk was the largest, most old fashioned computer monitor he'd seen for ages. Not a modern flat screen. It looked like something Noah would've used to keep a tally of the animals when they entered the Ark. The monitor took up at least half the desk.

The other half was buried under a mountain of paperwork and an overflowing ashtray. On the wall behind the desk were posters of Tel Aviv's beaches. Together with a red 'No Smoking' sign with the 'No' scribbled out.

Mike Bronstein stubbed out his smoke, stood and greeted them. He was tall, thin with curly brown hair that no amount of combing would ever tame. His eyes were framed by round John Lennon style glasses and he wore a pale blue Oxford shirt teamed with khaki chinos. A gold chain peeked out from under his collar.

Bronstein was maybe a year or two older than Caramarin. Despite the overpowering heat, his hand was dry. Rougher than Caramarin expected; the man had obviously worked with his hands in his time.

"The lovely Narcisa Ganea. I never expected to see you here." He leaned over the untidy desk and kissed Narcisa's cheek. Caramarin felt a stab of jealousy.

"Didn't think I'd ever need to," she replied. Her voice tightly controlled. Caramarin realised this visit was a high price for Narcisa to pay.

Caramarin dragged two chairs over to the desk, dumped some boxes off one then took off his jacket.

"Sorry about that," said Bronstein. "I lived in Israel for a long time. I still haven't got used to the cold and damp here."

"Then why'd you leave?" asked Caramarin through Narcisa. He heard Narcisa soften the tone as he hadn't intended to sound so rude.

Bronstein looked sad. "Some of my friends were blown up by a suicide bomber during the second Intifada. All they were doing to harm the Arabs was by having coffee one evening. Just like anyone in the world should be able to do after a hard day's work. Go out with friends and chill.

"Although I still have family and friends there, I couldn't live there any more, not surrounded by a hundred million nutters all of them with only one aim in life – to strap on a martyr's belt then meet and greet their seventy virgins in some fucking gardens of paradise."

"Sorry to hear that," he said through Narcisa. Caramarin knew there was far more to the situation over there than Bronstein's summary but now was not the time and place.

"I might go back one day," said Bronstein. "But not yet. Only when it all calms down. Which won't be any time soon. Anyway, what have you brought that might interest me?"

After Narcisa translated, Caramarin opened the tube and slid out the canvas. He unrolled it and held it up.

"What do you think about this?" he asked, handing the painting over. He didn't need Narcisa to translate that. Even though Bronstein couldn't speak Romanian, the intention was obvious.

Bronstein carefully held the oil by the edges. He walked over to the window and inspected it, turning it in the grey light.

"Wherever did you get this? No, don't answer that. I probably don't want to know. I take it no receipts or paperwork comes with it?"

After Narcisa explained, Caramarin shook his head.

"Look," said Bronstein, "I'm no art expert. I'll never get picked to present 'Antiques Roadshow'..."

Caramarin turned to Narcisa, a question in his eyes as she translated. "A television programme they have here. Old people bring in valuables for art experts to value," she explained.

"As I said, I'm no expert. If it's what I think it might possibly be, it's a bit out of my league. May I keep it for a couple of days to get a second opinion?"

After Narcisa told Caramarin what Bronstein had said, Caramarin used up most of his English vocabulary. This time he didn't need Narcisa to translate his reply. "Fuck off, no." He dug out Ozgan's original computer print of the painting. "You can keep that," he told the man. Bronstein nodded and placed the image on top of the mountain of paperwork. It nearly slid off onto the floor before Bronstein pushed it back.

"Then I'll give you a call in the next couple of days. See what I can work out and I'll let you know. Unless there's anything else?"

Caramarin and Narcisa glanced at each other after she told Caramarin what had been said, then both stood. Bronstein shook hands with Caramarin and kissed Narcisa on the cheek again. Bronstein showed them out of his cluttered office and as their footsteps receded down the concrete steps, he made a few quick calls on his cell.

Neither of them noticed a small, pale man in a dark jacket leave the back of the warehouse then follow them home.

"No. No way," said Caramarin. "I don't do repairs." Memories of that nightmare involving a radiator flashed through his mind.

Stanga turned to his driver, Tibor Budescu and both laughed. "We heard about that. The woman was on the phone for ages to my office – wanted us to replace her flooring and pay her compensation and everything. Just stick to the debt collecting."

There was a knock on the door. A moment later Mihai Pojer stood in the room. His arm was free of its sling and his face didn't look too bad considering the head butt he'd taken. Caramarin jumped to his feet. Alarmed.

"Mihai's back on the books now. But if you want you can carry on." Stanga grinned like a wolf. "Maybe you'll learn how to fix a radiator."

The men laughed. After a moment, Caramarin joined in.

* * *

With the two men working together, they had no trouble collecting rents or loan repayments. No-one was willing to tackle the two big men. After an initial wariness, Caramarin and Pojer got on well together. It was like their bare knuckle fight had formed a foundation of mutual respect. Not like they were friends but over the next few weeks they became sort of allies.

Most afternoons they spent time in one or other betting offices. Pojer liked to bet on the horses or greyhounds. Caramarin told the other man that most of these races were fixed and unless you had a contact on the inside who could pass on any tips, you were wasting your money. Pojer took no notice. He studied the racing form and reckoned he could pick a winner more often than not. Judging from the amount of screwed up slips he threw to the floor, Caramarin wouldn't ask Pojer for any predictions.

Initially bored, Caramarin found himself leaning against one of the Fixed Odds Betting Terminals. Horse racing was not for him but he could play an electronic form of roulette on the Terminal. That was a game he understood. He'd met his sort of girlfriend, Valeriya, when she worked as a croupier in Odessa's casino. For a moment, he wished he was back in the opulence of

the casino rather than standing next to a down and out in a scruffy betting office in a boarded up precinct.

The electronic machine beeped and the lights flashed. It was the only source of glamour in the entire betting shop. The down and out took out a pouch of tobacco and some papers and shuffled to the door. The man's head never looked up from the floor.

Caramarin took out a note and fed it into the Terminal. It vanished. The lights flashed and whirled hypnotically and electronic music came from its speakers. The machine waited. Caramarin thought for a moment. With roulette, he preferred to play the outside bets – odds and evens, high or low, black or red. He always felt he had a better chance of winning that way.

He touched the screen. Red. Shit, no he should've played black. It was gonna be black. He knew it. Too late now. The wheel spun on the screen, slowing now. Slowing still more. The image on screen was realistic and Caramarin stared at it, willing the ball to stop on red. Even though he knew it was going to be black. Fifteen seconds later the ball stopped on red 32.

Caramarin punched the air. The screen flashed up his winnings. He glanced around and saw Pojer staring up at a screen as the horses hurdled a fence. He bet again. If it was red this time, it would... probably... be red again. For sure. He made his bet, adding his winnings to the stake. He pressed the screen and watched as the wheel spun and the ball became a flash.

Yes, yes, yes. Red twenty-one. Perfect. The amount of his winnings racked up.

Third time lucky? For sure. Caramarin put the whole lot on red. The machine took the wager and the wheel spun again. Yes. Other side of the wheel this time. First number, red number one. More winnings racked up.

Caught up in the excitement, Caramarin was about to play again when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He spun round, his concentration broken now. Pojer stood there tossing the van keys from hand to hand. "It's stopped raining. Shall we make a move?"

Caramarin nodded, collected his money from the girl behind the counter and the two men walked out into the damp. Water dripped down from the walkway's covers onto the cracked concrete flags.

They finished early that afternoon but the sky was already darkening. The moon slid out from behind a rain cloud casting a cold light over the shopping precinct before slipping behind the next. Pojer dropped Caramarin near Crumpsall, blipped the horn and drove off.

Caramarin stood deep in thought. He handled his winnings and then, on an impulse walked into a florists over the road. The woman smiled and said something to him. Caramarin nodded politely, and chose half a dozen bouquets almost at random. If they were large and showy, then that was what he wanted. He carried them over to the counter and handed over the cash. The woman smiled even wider – an unexpected large sale near the end of the day. That would do wonders for the week's takings.

She said something else. Caramarin shook his head so the woman took his sleeve and guided him over to a rack of cards. Caramarin got the idea straight away. Something to explain the flowers. The trouble was all the cards were in English. Okay, some were obviously no good. There were some picturing a man and a bride standing in front of a country church. Well, that meant a wedding. He grinned as he spun the rack. He didn't want to give Narcisa ideas or anything! Those with numbers on were for birthdays so he was safe to ignore them.

Oh, that would do. A white one with a simple design showing a bunch of lilies. There was some writing in ornate silver script over the lilies but it could mean anything as far as he knew. Narcisa was right. Maybe he should make an attempt to learn this language but hopefully he'd be back in Odessa soon. He shook his head.

For some reason the florist had stopped smiling and a sympathetic look crossed her face. She patted his shoulder. Caramarin paid for the card and took a cab back to the girls' house. On the way back, he picked up a bottle of champagne. He arranged the bouquets around their living room,

standing back from time to time to judge the effect. Satisfied, he ripped the cellophane off the card and wrote his message. Then all he could do was wait standing from time to time to make minor adjustments.

The front door opened. Caramarin leapt off the couch as if a high voltage electric shock had been passed through him. Hurrying into the hall, he was pleased; pleased and relieved that it was Narcisa and not one of the other girls. Caramarin helped her off with her coat, shook off the raindrops and led her into the lounge.

"What's all this, Nicu? What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing. Just to say thanks for seeing Bronstein with me the other day. I know you weren't happy about it."

Narcisa walked around the room, looking at the flowers. While she did that Caramarin fetched in the champagne and two glasses. He popped the cork, attracting her attention but thought it best not to spray it around the room like a winning Formula 1 driver.

"So what are you into now, Nicu? Have you sold that painting?" Narcisa was frowning and she looked tense and wary as she accepted a glass. They touched glasses but the frown never left her face.

"No, of course not. I'm waiting to hear from Bronstein. Now I've got a job I thought I'd celebrate..."

"Working for that Stanga character? I've heard of him," Narcisa said with contempt. "I've heard he hurts people badly."

"... Oh, he's all right. And it's a start, isn't it? You wanted me to find some work, didn't you? And then I touched lucky in the betting shop so I thought I'd treat you. I only want to make you happy. I thought you'd be pleased," Caramarin finished. He smiled and handed out a glass of bubbly. Narcisa took it and they drank.

She picked up the card from the mantelpiece, and slit it open with her fingertip. Caramarin didn't expect Narcisa's reaction. She burst into laughter. Great gales of laughter. Narcisa took another look at Caramarin's face and started laughing again.

Despite himself, Caramarin smiled and started laughing.

Eventually, when Narcisa calmed down, Caramarin held her in his arms. Narcisa's sides still quivered as she tried to control her mirth.

"Go on – what have I done now?" Caramarin asked, genuinely confused.

"It's the card, Nicu. Don't you know anything – it's a card people send when someone's died. A card expressing sympathy. You don't know anything, do you?"

"A funeral card?" Caramarin couldn't see the humour in that but laughed along with Narcisa.

CHAPTER 13. SUNDAY DECEMBER 6, 20:00.

Caramarin sprawled out on the couch at Narcisa's. The girls were all getting ready for work the next day. Ewelina was ironing an endless supply of her uniform tops and Artur's shirts; Marta was in the kitchen and Caramarin had one eye on a nature documentary. He didn't need to speak any English to understand what was happening.

A rat was hiding in terror from a stoat or something that had entered its nest. He knew what must be going through both the stoat's and the rat's minds. But he didn't know whether he was more the stoat or the rat.

Even a few beers and a couple of spliffs did little to calm his mood. He felt tense and on edge with a feeling things were spiralling out of control; that he'd started in motion something that he couldn't stop. Caramarin didn't know why he felt that way, but he did. And he couldn't stop his thoughts racing through his brain. He drained the last of his pilsner.

Caramarin grabbed another bottle and some of Marta's sandwiches before heading upstairs. He knocked on Narcisa's door. No reply. He knocked again, a little louder this time before pushing the door open. Narcisa sat on her bed. She looked up with red rimmed teary eyes. Her mascara had run in black streaks down her cheeks.

"Go away, Nicu," she said.

He crossed the room and threw his arm around her shoulders.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"What do you think? You are. I was making a life for myself here in this country. Got a job, friends, a home and then you come along. You with your fights, your stolen pictures, your... your..."

whole bad attitude. Whoever you're looking for must be some sort of crook. You've not come to England for work or a better life. It's people like you that give Romania a bad name."

Caramarin was taken aback by her fury. "Listen. I'm no saint. I know that. But I'm just trying to get by..."

"Without working for a living! Oh, sorry. You've picked up some part time work as a mobster's debt collector – I've heard all about your new friend Pompiliu Stanga."

He thought of all the early mornings and late nights he'd put in for his previous gang boss, Maiorescu, back in Odessa.

"I do work when I have to. But I prefer to make my own way in life."

Narcisa tried to push him away but he held her tight, trying to comfort her. "Listen, Narcisa. If this works out, I'll see you right. Give you much better money than you are on at the pawnbrokers."

Totally the wrong thing to say. "I'm not your whore! I don't need your money. Got that?" Her dark eyes not smouldering now. They were flashing fire.

"I didn't mean it that way! And you know that. I mean, thanks for your help over the last few days. I couldn't have done it without you. No, I just want to thank you for your help."

He kissed her, she turned her mouth away and his lips met her cheek.

"C'mon, Narcisa. I think you're great. I like being with you. You're the only good thing I've found in this bloody horrible country."

She smiled through her tears. "I'm sorry, Nicu. It's just I was sort of happy with my life here and I'm worried what you'll drag me into."

"Nothing I can't handle. Anyway, if this comes off, we're gonna be all right. And you've done nothing wrong, nothing at all to be ashamed of. Any heat'll come down on me, not you. Okay, comrade?"

She smiled again. "Just remember it's not just you and please don't get me into trouble. I can't afford to lose what I've got here."

Narcisa returned his caress and turned up her mouth to be kissed. They broke apart and he dried away her tears with his finger tip.

"I must look a fright," she said.

"No, you still look gorgeous to me." He placed his hand on her breast and stroked her. She pushed his hand away.

He kissed her again, kissed her again and again. He felt Narcisa's resistance crumble; felt her heartbeat thumping against his chest. As they kissed, once again Caramarin's hand found her breast. The fight had burned out of Narcisa leaving her ready.

Narcisa threw her arms around his neck then returned his kisses with passion. Caramarin slipped his hand over the curve of her breast, caressing and fondling the swell. Using his strength, Caramarin pushed the young woman back onto her bed.

With his other hand, he dropped Narcisa's rag doll onto the floor. Well, if she didn't want her doll to see what was going to happen next...

They lay together relaxing in the warm bed, totally worn out. It was so peaceful and calm lying there and Caramarin let his mind drift along just enjoying the time spent with Narcisa. He held Narcisa close. She snuggled against him, moulding her body to his.

His cell rang, breaking the moment. An Odessa code, + 380 48, showed on the screen.

"Excuse me," Caramarin said. He stood, the cool air dragging him back to full alertness. He opened the door, letting himself out of Narcisa's bedroom. He closed the door behind him before taking the call.

"Caramarin," he announced.

"Forgive me if I'm wrong, but I thought that you would have called me by now," the voice was gentle, cultured but he knew there were rods of iron beneath the velvet. Timur Ozgan.

"I was just about to," Caramarin lied.

"My nephew, Engin, tells me you have recovered my painting. He also tells me you also have my money. When will you be bringing them home?"

"Soon, very soon," said Caramarin. "I don't know if Engin also told you I took a severe beating for you off of his friend, Mihai Pojer? I've been in hospital and only just got back on my feet." Anything to buy a little time.

"If you're up and about now, then you could make your way to the airport and catch a flight back to Kiev. I don't want to have to go to the trouble of coming to Britain looking for you."

"That won't be necessary. I'll book the return journey as soon as I can."

"Good. I'd be very disappointed if I found you were trying to go behind my back. You won't find me as easy a pushover as your old boss Maiorescu was."

"No, I'll be back in Odessa with your gear very soon. Promise."

Timur Ozgan continued. "I saw your woman, Valeriya, yesterday. Coming out of the casino after her evening shift. She's an attractive young woman, isn't she?"

"Leave her alone! She's nothing to do with me now," he shouted. Apart from the five thousand euros he'd sent her. He needed to throw Ozgan off from Valeriya.

"If you come back with my painting and money then I'm sure she'll carry on with her life with no harm at all coming her way."

"Hurt her and I'll kill you!" Caramarin paused. He needed to calm this down as he didn't want a man as dangerous as Timur Ozgan going after Valeriya or her family. Or even himself for that matter.

"I'm sorry. Please forget that. I spoke out of turn," he could grovel if he needed. Anything to buy some time and stay alive and ahead. "I'll be back in Odessa soon. I'll call you when I've got the flight times."

"I'll look forward to that." Ozgan said before killing the call.

Caramarin wiped his brow. Fuck-shit, he muttered. He'd have to call Valeriya and suggest she take a holiday out of Odessa until he'd got this sorted.

Narcisa opened her bedroom door.

"Is everything all right, Nicu? I heard shouting," she asked, concern in her dark eyes. Half way up the stairs, Ewelina and Artur looked up at him.

"Everything's fine," he said, trying to look calmer than he felt. Ewelina waited for Narcisa's nod before she pushed Artur back down the stairs to the lounge.

"Sorry," Caramarin called after them. Narcisa was right. Those girls kept an eye out for each other.

"Who was that?" queried Narcisa.

"Someone from back home. In Odessa."

"And who had he to leave alone?" Shit, he thought. She'd heard that part.

"An ex-girlfriend, Valeriya. She's hooked up with a fool of a man who knocks her about sometimes. He thinks I'm still sniffing about so I was telling him to lay off."

Narcisa looked at him. She shook her head. "Then why'd he call you?"

"Who'd you used to work for? Ceausescu's Securitate Secret Police? The man's in debt again and wanted to borrow money off of me. I'll have to send some tomorrow or he might take it out on her. I didn't tell you before because, well, you know..." he tailed off. Hoped she believed him. Maybe his battered face helped obscure his lies. Narcisa flung her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"And you're still keeping an eye out for this Valeriya even though she's an ex. She's a lucky girl," she kissed him again. "I was beginning to think you were a bad man. But you're not; not deep down."

Caramarin shrugged. But deep down, he didn't like deceiving Narcisa. She deserved much better than that. He kissed her again and again, and then told her he would return to his bed and breakfast for the night. This time she didn't stop him. He picked up his tube and holdall and left the house. He felt tired and, away from Narcisa, the anxiety built up in his mind.

He looked up. High above the sodium orange glare, the winter moon scudded out from behind the clouds. Its dead white face reminded him of a skull.

Not good.

CHAPTER 14. MONDAY DECEMBER 7, 19:20.

Caramarin crouched underneath a broken factory window. Outside a fire fight was blazing. The sound of gunfire was loud in his ears. Strange shadows fell across the floor around him. Turning and looking behind, Caramarin saw the huge, rusting remains of industrial machinery. Countless hiding places for the enemy to lurk then shoot him in the back.

Slowly, he moved across the floor, gun held out in front of him, swinging the powerful Desert Eagle semi-automatic pistol to and fro, covering all approaches. Running low on ammunition now but he knew where he could resupply. He crept up to an open warehouse door, let into the side of the factory. Paused for a brief moment to gain control of himself. The fire fight in the yard was still raging.

Bright sun spilled into the factory through the open gateway. Caramarin hurled himself forward in a combat roll; bullets sprayed into the factory at him, missing his vulnerable rolling body by a miracle. He was lucky, thought the enemy had access to an assault rifle, maybe an American M16. And all he had was this pistol. It wasn't fair.

He fetched up in temporary protection on the far side of the open gate. Picked himself up and ran in a fast crouch under another window, its glass in shards on the floor beneath his feet. He stood and raced round the corner of an internal wall.

Not a moment too soon. Sounded like a grenade bouncing in through the open gate behind him. It exploded where he had been standing an instant before. But thanks to his reflexes he was protected by that solid wall. The enemy had massive fire power against a man with only a pistol. But the enemy didn't know what he had. That was the only thing he had going for him.

Caramarin moved as quickly as he dared to the rest rooms at the back of the factory. He kept his pistol in front of him, leading his way. Away from the windows, the factory grew gradually darker, more shade now than light, making it easier for someone to hide and blow him away.

He froze. Ahead of him stood a man in what looked like a black coverall. The enemy. The bad man. Caramarin took a split second to aim, and then snapped off a shot. Fired a second time as the man went down in a crumpled heap; the sounds of his gunshots mixing with the bedlam outside the factory. Very low on ammo now. He sprinted away from the corpse, weaved round another hulk of rusting machinery looking like some avant garde sculpture in the half light.

Caramarin fetched up against the rest rooms. As always with his Desert Eagle in sight before him, he moved in a low crouch into the rest rooms. Swung his body both ways. No one in sight in either direction.

The rest rooms were totally trashed, whether by vandals or a previous battle he didn't know. The wash basins were smashed onto the floor and graffiti covered the tiled walls. Glad he didn't need to use them. Caramarin made his way over to the last cubicle where he knew he'd find a cache of ammunition for his Desert Eagle. No, he wasn't disappointed. He instantly reloaded his pistol then carefully made his way back out into the main body of the ruined factory.

A ramp led up to the next floor of the factory. He hadn't been up here, so crouched and followed his pistol pointing up to the top of the slope, covering all the angles. As he ascended, the sounds of the shooting outside declined. This level contained just as much abandoned rusting machinery as the ground floor. Again, far too many places to search for a hiding enemy. And he didn't have the time to complete a thorough recce, neither.

Another opening in the wall nearby led onto a rusting metal spiral staircase leading down. Cautiously, Caramarin approached the fire escape. The sounds of fighting outside grew louder again as he approached the opening. Bright sunshine poured into this level of the factory from large, but broken windows. His heightened senses even noticed a cloud drifting past.

Desert Eagle held at the ready, Caramarin peered out of the opening at the top of the exterior staircase. Despite the gunfire, he couldn't see anyone outside. He stepped out onto the little platform at the top. Took a combat stance. A shot cracked out. He toppled back.

Bloody red death filled his sight, and then his vision went dark. All he saw was the pure blackness of death. Again.

Caramarin flung his joy-pad down onto the couch.

"Fuckin' head shot. That's the fourth fuckin' time that sniper's got me," he swore and glanced at Artur. "How do you get out that fuckin' factory?"

"Language. There's ladies present," said Ewelina looking up from the other couch.

"Sorry," he said, standing up. "Anyone fancy a brew?" He turned to Artur. "I'll play again later, that's okay with you?" He collected the used mugs then walked out into the kitchen.

Meanwhile, as the boys played their noisy war games on Artur's X-Box, Narcisa and Ewelina sat together on the smaller two-seater couch like bookends. A chilled bottle of supermarket Chardonnay and two glasses sat on a little table in front of them. Anyone looking at the two young women would see the closeness between them.

Both women were sitting with their legs folded underneath them. Ewelina wore her white towelling robe, her light golden-brown hair drying loose around her shoulders, her fair skin clean of make-up. Her cool, blue-grey eyes slightly crinkled with concentration as she tapped away on her laptop.

Sitting on the other end, Narcisa had on her leopard print robe, her dark brown hair wrapped up in a green towel. A celeb magazine lay open on her lap, but she had stopped looking through it, the glossy life styles on show ignored. Her deep brown eyes were lost in thought.

Narcisa touched her friend on the arm. Immediately, Ewelina stopped typing and faced her friend.

"Have you got a few minutes, Auntie 'Lina?" asked Narcisa. She looked like she had reached some sort of decision, but her eyes still held her worry.

"Of course. All the time in the world. You know that, Narcisa."

"Thanks. Look, don't say his name, okay? He can't speak any English but talk quietly 'cause Artur can," said Narcisa.

Ewelina nodded. She'd sort of expected this conversation. "Shall we go upstairs?" she asked. "If it's personal?"

"No. I just don't want him to know I'm talking about him. Anyway, it's cold up there."

Ewelina let her friend take a moment to think before she started talking.

"What do you think of Ni... him 'Lina, as I just don't know? I mean I like him a lot, he's sort of got under my skin, somehow."

"Well, it's not really for me to say, is it? I can see why you're attracted, like, he's got that 'Bad Boy' image all over him but I thought you were sort of over that type now."

"Yes, but what do you think of him?"

Ewelina saw her friend couldn't be put off. She sighed quietly. "All right. I think he's dangerous. Oh, I don't mean that he'd deliberately hurt your feelings or beat you or anything, I'd trust him that far, but he could get you into all sort of trouble without his thinking about it."

Narcisa opened her mouth. But there was no way she could tell her friend about their recent visit with that painting to Bronstein's office. Narcisa figured Caramarin was already taking her down that road.

"The thing is," said Narcisa, "is that he makes me feel more, I dunno; my English isn't good enough to describe how I feel; more 'alive' somehow." She blushed slightly, "More... sexy... I mean I know I'm not going to make my fortune here in England. But I like my job and I love living here with you and the girls but I mean it's not going to last forever..."

Ewelina gripped Narcisa's arm. "Oh, be careful, babe. You've got a good life here now. Lots of girls back home would envy you now. You told me you went a bit wild when you first came over. I know you lost a baby..."

"Please don't talk about that now," said Narcisa, her eyes filling up. She curled up a little tighter, shrinking herself down as if to hide from remembered pain.

"No. But is Ni.. good for you? He's not come over to look for a job. That's obvious. Acts like some hard man but he gets beaten up, seems to have money to spend but he's not working. He's not into drugs is he?" A big question.

"Definitely not," said Narcisa. That came as a relief to Ewelina.

"Well, he's definitely into something then. But do you want to be into his life? I hope you don't mind," continued Ewelina, "but I messaged my female Facebook friends about you." She stopped when she saw the look of horror on Narcisa's face.

"Don't be silly. I didn't give out your name or anything, said it was someone at the hospital with boyfriend trouble."

"Well, what did they say?" Despite herself, Narcisa was curious to find out now.

"Are you sure you really want to know?" asked Ewelina looking direct into Narcisa's brown eyes. Narcisa nodded. Just a slight dip of her head.

Quietly Ewelina said, "Nearly all of them said you should dump him. Get him out of your life."

More tears leaked out of Narcisa's eyes. "I don't know that I want to do that," she whispered.

"Do you love him?" asked Ewelina.

"No, no, not yet."

"Well, here's a piece of advice from your Auntie 'Lina. Don't get too involved. Keep a piece of your heart back from him. Don't let him hurt your feelings too much." She paused, thought, and then quietly carried on. "You are using protection aren't you?"

"Of course!" gasped Narcisa. But had Caramarin used a rubber when he'd comforted her the other night? She'd meant to check but forgot after he took that call on his cell.

"Good. Well, remember that you can rely on us girls. Even if it all goes wrong. Which I hope it doesn't. Me and Katja and Marta have got your back, you know that.

"We girls have to stick together. Men don't think about what they do to us. Just take what they want from us."

Narcisa nodded at that. Very true.

"Thanks for that," said Narcisa. "You and the girls are great friends to me." Narcisa leaned forward, threw her arm around Ewelina's neck, drew her friend towards her and kissed her.

Just as Artur glanced up from the mayhem on screen.

"Hey, look Nicu! Girl on girl action. Nice," the young man laughed.

"Shut up," said Ewelina. She threw a cushion at him. "And you can turn that X-Box off in a minute. Us girls want to watch 'Embarrassing Fat Bodies', okay."

CHAPTER 15. TUESDAY DECEMBER 8, 11:00.

Now Narcisa knew about Valeriya, Caramarin thought he had nothing to hide. And maybe a few points to gain. Late morning, he walked past the Kugulu Parki coffee shop and, through the steamed up windows, saw the same old men sitting playing backgammon at their table.

He pushed open the door to Narcisa's pawn brokers. She was showing a young couple with a baby a Playstation 3. Caramarin had learned a few English numbers by now and thought Narcisa was probably explaining the easy finance options available. The lad looked an easy sale, but the girl looked more doubtful. No prize for guessing whose Playstation it would be and who would be playing with it later.

After the lad dug out some crumpled notes for the deposit from his trackie pocket and carried his toy out, Narcisa came over. She looked around; the shop was empty for the moment. She steered him over to one corner then stretched up on tiptoes to kiss him full on the mouth.

"Why over here? This your lucky corner?" he asked.

"The CCTV camera's on the blink over here. I don't want the boss perving over me."

It looked like he was back in her good books again. He nodded. "I'm sorry if I upset you last night. Could you wire some money for me?"

"To this Valeriya?"

"Yes. To Valeriya. Back in Odessa"

Narcisa helped him fill in the forms. Counted out the cash and raised her eyebrows at the amount. "You must think a lot of her," she commented.

"I do, er, did. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be here now." That was true enough. Narcisa passed him the money transaction number and he stuffed it into his front jeans pocket.

His cell rang. A local Manchester number showed. "Caramarin," he said.

"Mike Bronstein," said the voice. Caramarin passed his cell over to Narcisa.

She spoke into it, shaking her head at times. She closed the call and passed the cell back.

"You're going to have to learn some English, Nicu. There are classes, you know."

"I know, I know," he sighed. "What did he say?"

"Bronstein'll meet us after work this evening. He'll discuss what he can offer for that painting of yours."

"Did he give any idea how much he might pay?"

"No," said Narcisa, "He'll tell us when we meet up." Caramarin was glad she said 'us' and not 'you'.

"Thanks. I really appreciate all your help," said Caramarin. The shop was filling up by now so Caramarin let himself out without a second kiss.

* * *

That evening Caramarin and Narcisa sat in Bronstein's overheated office. Rain slashed against the windows, running in torrents down the panes. The posters of the Tel Aviv beaches looked out of place next to the black, rain streaked windows. Bronstein finished his call and turned to them.

"Do you know what that picture is?" Bronstein asked, running his hand through his frizzy hair.

"Yes," said Caramarin. "It's by Picasso. The *'Vielle Triste Pute Avec Vase'*, I think." He stumbled over the French words. Narcisa frowned at him as she translated. Caramarin had not told her the painting was by Picasso.

"And hotter than the Negev Desert in July. During a heat wave. I could fry eggs on it."

Narcisa looked even less happy as she told Caramarin this.

"I get the message," said Caramarin.

"It was stolen from a famous surgeon, Mixalis Karamanlis's private art gallery in Thessaloniki back in 2004. It's been missing ever since, despite Dr. Karamanlis putting out a reward for its return. And now it turns up here. Thing is, no way can it be sold on the open market; only to a private collector. And not too many of those, either." Narcisa looked extremely unhappy now as she told Caramarin what Bronstein had just said.

"And that affects the price," sighed Caramarin. Knowing where this conversation was heading. No surprises there.

"You're way ahead of me there," grinned Bronstein. "As I said last time, fine art is a little outside my line of business. Unless you are prepared to wait while I put out some discreet feelers, I can only offer you thirty thousand." Narcisa carried on translating even though she looked like she wanted to get up and leave.

Bronstein shrugged and spread his hands in what he thought was a disarming gesture.

Caramarin glanced at Narcisa.

"Don't look at me," she said. "Nothing to do with me."

"C'mon," said Caramarin. "It's a Picasso. Even I've heard of him. His paintings sell for millions."

"Yes, legitimate ones do when they sell on the open market, that is. And I don't think you'll be taking this to Sotheby's or Christies, will you? Also, it's unfinished and it's not one of his better paintings. And that affects its value, of course."

"But even so, thirty thousand is nothing. I'm not taking that." Narcisa translated but Bronstein could see the refusal in Caramarin's face.

"Take it or leave it," said Bronstein.

Caramarin stood. A second later, Narcisa also stood.

"I might be able to up it a little," said Bronstein. "Say thirty-five?"

"I'm not wasting my time here. No thanks," snapped Caramarin. He caught Narcisa's hand and led her down stairs.

"You won't get a better offer anywhere else," called Bronstein after them.

Narcisa said nothing.

As soon as Bronstein saw the couple walk away down the rain swept road, the fence called up some people on his cell.

"Well, what are you going to do now?" questioned Narcisa.

"I don't know," admitted Caramarin. "Thirty-five thousand is a lot less than I'd hoped for. But I dunno what to do with the bloody thing now."

For that money, he thought he might as well take it back to Timur Ozgan in Odessa. Get out of trouble with one man at least.

"Are you coming back home with me tonight?" asked Narcisa. "You'd be very welcome and your Auntie 'Lina's cooking. She always does far too much."

Much better than hanging about his lodging and eating at a grim fast food takeaway. He nodded. "Thanks. That'd be great."

Narcisa was right. Ewelina obviously thought she worked in Manchester Royal Infirmary's catering department. Piles of Polish sausages, green beans with mashed potato and sauerkraut were heaped up before the friends. Much better than eating a burger or pizza on his own. Afterwards, they all sprawled in the overheated lounge watching adverts broken up by some talentless talent show.

The TV was only bearable after Artur passed around a spliff, the weed mellowing the braying studio audience and crying contestants. Caramarin had no idea why the people were crying or what was going on and didn't care either, although the girls seemed to enjoy the show. Narcisa rested her head on his shoulder. Caramarin took the joint from her lips and inhaled deeply, the tip glowing red hot. Enjoying feeling her warmth and softness against him.

Later, Narcisa whispered in his ear to follow her up in ten minutes. That woke Caramarin out of his torpor. He yawned and stretched. Ewelina threw herself to the couch next to him. Her pretty heart-shaped face looked up into his battered features.

"Please don't hurt her," Ewelina said in her best but still broken Russian. "She's been badly hurt before, and we don't want to see her hurt again. She was with a fella who treated her like dirt. I don't know if you're a good man or not, but remember, we all look out for each other in this house."

"I'm not going to do her any harm," Caramarin said to Ewelina's warning. He sincerely hoped that would be true.

He levered himself up from the couch and left the screaming wide-screen. Ewelina watched him leave and shook her head.

Caramarin hurried upstairs and pushed open her door. Narcisa had freshened up her make-up. She sat up in bed, her bare breasts beautiful, and her dark nipples proud. She arched her back and flung back her hair from her shoulders.

As quickly as he could, Caramarin dropped his clothes to the floor and dived onto her lush body. They fell into each other's arms and she eagerly released his frustrations and tensions in the way only a woman can. Much later, they fell asleep in each other's arms, all his problems for the time being vanishing into the cold dark night.

CHAPTER 16. WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 9, 08:00.

Next morning, before Narcisa woke, Caramarin padded downstairs. Ewelina was standing in her white robe, brewing coffee and listening to the radio. Her eyes were bleary, hair was a mess, every which way, but Caramarin wasn't about to tell her that.

Ewelina smiled and handed him a mug. "Enjoyed yourself last night?" she smiled up at him.

"Yes, that TV talent show was all right," he grinned back, pretending to misunderstand.

"How's your face now?" Ewelina asked.

"Much better, thanks. Looks a mess but doesn't hurt as much as it did," he replied, rubbing his stubble. Not quite true but it sounded good.

Ewelina opened the back door to the yard. It was still orange-dark, lit only by a street light at the end of the alley.

"Still raining," she commented.

But Caramarin was looking at fresh scars on the wood around the lock. He was sure they weren't there the last time he'd been out in the yard.

"Did you lock the door last night?" he asked.

"Of course, I always lock it. You have to, especially round here," Ewelina replied.

"But you didn't unlock it just now?"

Ewelina looked confused. She thought. Hard to remember what you've done when you're on automatic pilot. "No, no I guess I didn't," she said, covering her mouth with her hand.

Shit.

Caramarin ran back to the lounge and threw himself to the floor. He looked in his hiding place under the couch. The tube and his holdall had vanished. Fuck-shit. His face went white and he felt a loose griping in his bowels. He looked under the second couch just in case. Nothing. Just the usual dusty clutter.

Fuck-shit. He stood and dusted his jeans. Nothing else seemed to be missing. The wide-screen and stereo were still on their stand. Even Ewelina's iPod, lying on her chair was there, all charged up now.

He sat and buried his face in his hands. Ewelina followed him into the lounge and looked around.

"Nothing seems to be missing," she said. "Something must've disturbed them last night." She picked up her iPod and disconnected it before she noticed Caramarin's distress.

"Are you all right?" she asked with concern.

Caramarin shook his head.

"I'm fucked," he muttered.

He ran up the stairs, pushed open Narcisa's bedroom door. She looked up from under the covers, sleep still on her face. She yawned.

"It's gone. The bloody picture's gone," he told Narcisa what had happened. Her sleepiness vanished. She sat up, her breasts trembling. She threw her arm over them, but Caramarin took no notice. Far too much on his mind now to think about her charms.

"What are we going to do?" she asked. Even in his distress, he noticed she said 'we'. That pleased him.

"I dunno. It must've been that bastard Bronstein. No-one else knew I had the bloody thing."

"What about the man you took it off? What's his name...?"

"Hasanov. Yeah, could be – I mean I guess he'd want it back too, But I've got to get it back or I'm fucked."

"Well, if I can help, let me know," said Narcisa. He appreciated that and smiled. As someone once said, he wasn't dead yet.

He let Narcisa dress and grabbed a bite to eat. His cell rang. The number began + 380 48. That Odessa number. It wasn't Valeriya so it had to be Timur Ozgan. Not a man he wanted to speak to but didn't want to make the man suspicious.

"Caramarin,"

No small talk. Straight into what he wanted.

"Have you made arrangements yet? When will you be back with my gear?"

"Very soon; it's just that the flights to Kiev have all been fully booked. Run up to Christmas or something, the travel agent told me. In the west, they have Christmas earlier than we do." It sounded believable – unless Ozgan checked.

"I'm not interested in your pathetic excuses or when they celebrate Christmas in the west. I'm running out of patience. Or are you holding out on me? Are you trying to work an angle on me? That would be a bad mistake, my friend. Just get yourself and my property back here yesterday. Understood?"

"Yes, I understand," said Caramarin. "I'll be back soon. I'll call you when I've got a flight."

"Do. I saw your woman, Valeriya collecting her son from kindergarten yesterday. They said 'hello'. They look well. But I wouldn't like them to catch a cold, you understand?"

Caramarin gripped his cell until his hand hurt. Over here in Britain, there was nothing he could do if Timur Ozgan wanted to hurt them.

"They're nothing to do with me now. They're completely innocent; leave them alone," he shouted.

"Valeriya doesn't think she's nothing to you. She spoke very warmly, in fact. But they're safe... especially if that painting comes home. Look forward to seeing you, or them, again."

Ozgan killed the connection. Caramarin stood in the kitchen, white and trembling with fear and rage. He should never have messed about with a man like Timur Ozgan.

Narcisa looked at him, her dark eyes troubled and upset, her mouth trembling.

"If I can help, let me know," she reminded him. She kissed him. "I'll be in the shop later if you need me." She kissed him again, more tenderly.

* * *

Caramarin sat and dry swallowed a couple more of Ewelina's hospital stock of codeine tablets. Figured he had a lot to do with not much time to do it in. His hurts ebbed away, dulled away by the chemical tide. He sat with his head in his hands. All he could see were problems.

Firstly, the Picasso had vanished, no questions there. He really didn't think any of the girls or Artur had swiped it. None of them had shown any interest in that tube. It was just part of the debris under that couch, mixed together with forgotten plastic bags, clothes, shoes and papers.

He knew Ewelina would do nothing to disrupt the harmony of her home or friends – the woman had made that clear to him. Narcisa, too, he could rely on. Okay, not one hundred per cent. Only a fool would trust another human being to that extent, but certainly ninety odd per cent. And that was good enough for him.

So. Who had got that fuckin' Picasso? As he said earlier, it had to be Bronstein. Just didn't seem like Hasanov's play. Too much hassle for that powder puff. But he supposed it could have been Pojer. There was a man who was too much like himself for comfort. But except through Hasanov, he had no way of getting in touch with Pojer. And if he admitted he'd lost the Picasso, Hasanov would be straight in touch with Uncle Timur. Not good.

And Caramarin knew he could only do one thing at a time anyway. So, deal with Bronstein first. If necessary, look out Hasanov and Pojer later. But one problem only led to more problems.

First, and most importantly, he couldn't speak this ugly, unintelligible language. Second, he didn't want to involve Narcisa any further. He didn't want to drag that good young woman down. She deserved better than that.

Third, what if Bronstein had already moved the Picasso on? The fence wouldn't want that picture hanging around any longer than he needed. He would only have robbed it if he knew he had a ready sale for it. And the man wouldn't be selling it on for thirty-five grand. No way.

The man knew he would be earning big money from it, and it wasn't like Caramarin would be complaining to the law.

CHAPTER 17. THURSDAY DECEMBER 10, 09:05.

Caramarin fetched a kitchen knife from out of its drawer, shrugged on his green jacket, wrapped his keffiyeh around his neck against the rain still falling from the leaden sky then let himself out.

The bus was slow, stopping at every single stop. A nice scenic tour. If there was anything worth looking at through the steamed up windows. At one stop, the driver jumped off, popped into a mini-mart and bought himself a newspaper and pack of smokes. At the next, he lit up and enjoyed his read and a smoke like a man without a care in the world.

Unlike Caramarin who was sitting at the back smelling the ganja fumes from the previous passengers.

Later than he expected, he jumped off, checked his street atlas and found Bronstein's office. The street looked no better by day light. It still looked like a post apocalyptic film set, only a bit more run down, gloomy and dilapidated than anything that had ever come out of a Hollywood set director's imagination. Give him beautiful Odessa any day. A few cars and vans were parked along the kerb side, the only sign of anything happening.

Looking up, Caramarin saw a light from Bronstein's office window. Good. That meant the man was probably in. Making his dodgy deals. No point ringing the door bell as he doubted if the man would answer and it would only warn him.

Only problem was, there was no-one about so he couldn't lose himself in a crowd here. However, there was a deeply recessed brick doorway just over the road from Bronstein's office. A boarded up iron door behind him must lead into the abandoned warehouse.

Caramarin shrugged into the doorway, out of the still falling rain. He could just see Bronstein's window but it would be hard for anyone looking out to spot him in the semi darkness. He tuned his little radio into a chart hits station, stuffed his cold hands into his pockets and prepared to wait. Hopefully, Bronstein would come out for lunch.

Bronstein didn't come out for lunch; Caramarin went from peckish to slightly hungry to famished to starving. His stomach an empty black hole. Caramarin couldn't take the risk of nipping off to grab sandwiches or a burger. Knowing his luck, that would be the time Bronstein left his office. Had no choice but to tough it out, like in sniper training all those years ago. Not like it was the first time but the waiting never got any easier.

One good thing about this road being so quiet though. He glanced out along the street. Both ways. No sign of anyone. Great. He turned to face the back of the doorway, unzipped his fly and pissed against the rusting, gang tagged door. His steaming flow trickled past his boots and lost itself into the still falling rain. Blessed relief.

He had just time to zip up before his cell rang, the only sound in this dead street.

"Hello, Narcisa. Thanks for calling," he chatted to her for a few minutes. Sometimes it's hard to tell over a cell connection but the woman sounded like she was trying to put a brave face over her concern. Reassuring her, he told her he wasn't sure when he would be back at the house.

Thought through his options for a moment, silence over the airwaves. "Listen, I know you're not happy. If you want me to go; want me out of your life then I understand. I won't blame you. You don't need to worry about me..."

"No," Narcisa's voice firmer. "Take care, Nicu. I... I... care about you a lot, you know. If I can help you in any way, please let me know."

He thanked her. Narcisa was a good woman. One of the very best and she deserved better than this.

The day darkened. Lead sky turning to graphite, the heavier clouds darker edged, finally becoming a bruised orange-black. Still the rain fell, lighter at times but never entirely stopping. He watched the water flowing along the gutters, breaking around the cars' tires, carrying on pouring down the over used drains.

Caramarin shivered. It was colder, too. His breath condensing. He wrapped his keffiyeh around his lower face to prevent the vapour clouds giving away his position. Another basic tip from sniper training.

It was late when Bronstein left his office. Sometime after eight. No prizes for guessing which the fence's vehicle was. Only one car, a white Volvo V70 estate with one hub-cap missing, remained in the street. It stood out in the dark. The man turned up his collar then ran across the street, his keys already in his hand.

Caramarin stepped out of his doorway hide out and ran up to the Volvo. Bronstein looked round a moment too late as Caramarin shoulder charged him. Bronstein lost his balance on the wet road and fell. The keys clattered into the gutter. The man looked up, saw Caramarin's bulk above him and tried a smile.

Now Caramarin's problems started. Wishing he had Narcisa standing next to him to translate but no way could he involve her in what he wanted to do. One word only, one word needed to explain what he wanted. "Picasso," said Caramarin.

Bronstein struggled up to his feet, clutching his keys, his beige jacket muddied and soaked from the gutter. His curly hair still springy, upright, surprisingly jaunty. Caramarin grabbed the fence's jacket then hauled him upright. He shoved Bronstein back over to his office block. The man nearly fell again, his loafers not designed for the wet road.

Not giving the man any chance to recover his balance, Caramarin jostled Bronstein back inside. The rain quietened as they stepped inside. Caramarin showed Bronstein the kitchen knife

blade. Just so the man got the idea. He forced the fence up the narrow stairs, keeping the knife only a few centimetres away from the man's neck.

Caramarin had to give the man credit. Bronstein didn't mess about. He understood what was needed, kept a steady pace and held his hands in sight as the two men climbed the narrow concrete stairs. Slowly, with his left hand, Bronstein fumbled in his jacket pocket, fumbled for his office keys then let them in.

The office was still warm from all the heaters. The same posters of Tel Aviv's beaches covered the walls. But Caramarin and Narcisa must have come on a good day before. A day after the cleaners had been in. Now the place was a tip with clutter and cardboard boxes everywhere. Bronstein seemed to have acquired a load of antique silverware since he and Narcisa had been.

Candlesticks, salvers, knives and forks, even a huge tarnished picture frame propped against one wall. An Art Deco trophy with a golfer swinging a club. A plaque dated 1941 on the trophy dedicated to a long dead club captain. And more paperwork. And old, leather bound books, one stamped 1898. And even more paperwork. How did the fence ever remember what he had bought and sold?

Caramarin threw Bronstein against the wall. "Picasso," he said a second time. He held the knife millimetres from Bronstein's throat now, just so the message came across loud and clear. Didn't want any possible misunderstandings. Although he didn't think an intelligent man like Bronstein would get the wrong impression anyway.

Bronstein shrugged and started talking English. He stopped after a sentence, remembering that Caramarin hadn't a clue what he was saying. Bronstein pointed to his computer screen. New paperwork teetered on top of the ancient beige monitor.

Caramarin nodded, figuring the man needed to show him something. He didn't think the man would be interested in watching a porn film at a time like this. Caramarin stepped back, away from the wall, allowing Bronstein to boot up his computer.

The ancient computer was slow. The two men kept an eye on each other as they watched the little hourglass symbol turn around and around. Caramarin made sure Bronstein was very aware of his blade. Eventually the program loaded up. Bronstein stooped over his desk while tapping away on the keyboard. He stood up.

"Look," he said. On the screen, side by side with the English, in fairly accurate Romanian was a message:

I have not got your Picasso. You can search my office and store rooms but I do not have it. I have not seen your Picasso since you came here.

Caramarin looked around the office. His heart sank. He could search this junk pile from now until Doomsday and still not stumble across the painting. And the man had store rooms, too. And that's if it was still here. A cent to a five hundred euro note it had already been moved on.

But he still felt sure Bronstein was lying. After all, apart from, Engin Hasanov and his friend Pojer, who else knew that Caramarin had the Picasso? No-one. Caramarin brushed Bronstein to one side. With one finger, he typed his message out onto the screen:

Give me my Picasso or I will cut you up.

He let Bronstein himself sort out the translation program. Bronstein paled. The man typed again:

Do what you must. I have not seen your Picasso.

Bronstein squared his shoulders and stood tall. He looked direct into Caramarin's eyes. So there it was. Showdown time. Cards on the table and Bronstein wanted to see his hand. What he was capable of. And what Caramarin was about to turn over.

Caramarin thought quickly. Yeah, he'd done plenty of violence, lived with it for too many years to worry about it now. He'd dished out several worlds of hurt in his time. And he usually slept easy after. But that had mostly been fighting. Fair fights and unfair fights, it didn't matter. Battling other bad men – and not all of them criminals.

Yet in all his time in the underworld life, he'd never tortured anyone. Never deliberately inflicted extreme pain. That was not his line at all, never had been, even when he was working with some of the worst crooks and hard men in Europe. Sure, he'd had to stand on the sidelines of an 'active interrogation' sometimes but actually torturing someone would be several kilometres beyond his personal line.

Sure, so he'd stood by at times but, to his credit; he'd always tried to stop any torture going down. Not always successfully, but sometimes you have to roll with what goes down.

Bronstein had called his bluff. And won. He still felt Bronstein was lying but there was little he could do about it. Caramarin felt like punching him out, but that would achieve nothing either. Wisely, Bronstein kept his face neutral, not wanting to antagonise an angry, dangerous man like Caramarin. A big man with a knife in the same room, only a metre away from him.

Caramarin swept a mountain of books and silverware from the desk to the floor. Anything to relieve some of his anger. They crashed down; one of the ledgers fell open. He kicked it away from him across the room. He slammed the door behind him then ran back down the stairs. Fuck-shit.

The rain outside matched his mood.

CHAPTER 18. FRIDAY DECEMBER 11, 09:15.

Caramarin sat and thought as he crunched toast in the girls' kitchen. He was way out of his depth. What could he do? Either Mike Bronstein had robbed him or Engin Hasanov with Pojer. Reckoned either could have followed him back. But he still thought Bronstein the most likely.

He knew he needed help in a city where he had no friends. He needed some bigger guns on his side. Unless he ran away from the whole fuckin' farrago there was only one possible option left open. But what price would be demanded of him in return?

Reluctantly, Caramarin pulled out his cell and dialled his new friend Pompiliu Stanga. He apologised for leaving the fights early Saturday night. Fortunately, Stanga sounded pleased to hear from him. Arranged to meet at his club in Manchester City Centre. Caramarin thanked him again. Not sure what Stanga could, or would, do to help but had to try anyway.

Checking through the many pockets on his camouflage jacket, he found he was nearly out of funds. Now the holdall with Hasanov's money had vanished he owned little more than the clothes he stood up in. No money for a cab, especially if it went the long way round, so he had to walk. He wrapped his keffiyeh scarf tighter around his neck and turned up the collar of his jacket before heading out into the drizzle.

Catching sight of himself in a shop window, Caramarin was shocked. He looked like a local now; head down, scowling, hurrying along, wrapped up in his own world. He stopped, ignoring the cursing from a young woman who ran her pushchair into him. The baby dropped its Gregg's pasty and bawled. Caramarin took no notice. He stood straight; pulled his shoulders back smiled and ignored the rain wetting his head. That felt better as he stepped forwards again.

With the confusing street layout, Caramarin had to check his street map several times before he found Stanga's nightclub. It was situated near an industrial estate between the railway tracks and a main through way called Oldham Road. A hand painted sign advertised it as a Romanian social club. Knowing the man, Caramarin doubted that was all the place was.

The front was shuttered but a blue painted rear door was propped open by a fire extinguisher. A dark haired young man was wheeling in boxes of colas on a hand truck. He splashed through some puddles.

"Stanga in?" asked Caramarin.

The lad took one look at Caramarin's beat up face and combat jacket and glanced around; looking for help if this stranger started any trouble. There was no-one else in sight.

The lad shrugged. He was used to strange, furtive characters showing up at the back door. "In there."

Caramarin nodded his thanks and walked through a store room smelling of beer and disinfectant, and then along a dimly lit corridor, its walls gouged by trolley scars and into the main room of the nightclub. His breath condensed in the unheated room. It felt even colder in than out.

A few men wearing coats sat in front of a stage looking up. He recognised Stanga's bulk among them. They were all smoking, with a blue haze swirling above them. The room was dimly lit with pools of darkness except for spotlights illuminating the stage.

"Next, I said," called Stanga. A young woman stepped onto the stage. Unnoticed by the group, Caramarin leaned on a scarred table just behind them.

"Next time, hurry up," said Stanga to the girl. The girl was wearing a short, spangly sleeveless dress teamed with glittery heels. Her hair was down to her shoulders. One of the men switched on a CD player. The latest R'n'B tune that was on the radio all the time blared out. The girl paused and looked hesitant.

One of the men switched off the CD. "C'mon, love. Haven't got all day here," shouted Stanga in the silence before switching the CD back on.

This time the girl gyrated to the music, dancing, swaying to the beat, arms up to her hair, letting it fall around her face. She unzipped her dress, dancing all the time, holding it against her body before letting it fall in a quicksilver puddle onto the stage. She danced in her filmy black bra and knickers, the underwear standing out against her pale body. Her toned belly moving sexily. Caramarin noticed a rose tattoo under her belly button.

Then the dancer unclipped her bra, clutching the underwear against her breasts, moving around the stage before dropping it onto the dress. She made good use of her arms, raising them to her hair, lifting her breasts and showing them off to best advantage. No fan of football breasts, Caramarin thought they were natural, which he liked. Her boobs weren't that big but nicely shaped with upturned nipples; very prominent in the freezing cold air of the club.

"And your knickers," Stanga called up as she danced. "We don't like to cheat the punters here." The girl made a small grimace then slid her thong down her thighs and stepped out of the tiny panties. Her hair had been trimmed into a neat landing strip. Nice. She made a few small pelvic thrusts and wriggles before the music stopped.

"Thank you. I'll let you know," called Stanga. The girl gathered up her dropped clothing and ran off stage.

"A possible," said one of the other men. "Seven out of ten?"

"Seven and a half," another said.

"Shall I call the next?" said the third, his voice bored.

Caramarin coughed and stepped forward. Immediately, the three men turned to face him. Caramarin saw one of the men's hands fly inside his sports jacket.

Stanga patted the man's shoulders. "It's all right, Daniel. I asked him to swing by."

Pompiliu Stanga stood and introduced Caramarin to the two men. "Daniel Perianu, the manager of this club and Tibor Budescu, my driver." They shook hands.

While the next dancer took the stage, Stanga led Caramarin away from the others and listened to him. Concern on the nightclub owner's face. But that sympathy never reached his cold, dead eyes.

"So, you need me to have a word with Bronstein, ask him if he's got your missing painting? And recover it for you? Before your friends back home come looking?"

Caramarin nodded. He hated negotiating from a position of weakness but this time he had no choice.

Stanga continued. "I've made a few discrete enquiries. You're not known in this country, which is good. And I know you've killed before. How many?"

Caramarin shrugged. "More than a few. But I'm not proud of it; I'm no psycho nut-job. I just did what I had to at the time." He had a nasty feeling he knew where this was heading.

"Like you did in Odessa?"

Caramarin nodded. "It was either them or me, I had no choice."

"You caused me a bit of trouble, friend," smiled Stanga. "I used your old boss, Maiorescu, a number of times. Now I've got to deal with the Albanians. Fucking animals, they are."

Caramarin shrugged his shoulders. Shit happens.

"Once you get your hands on this painting, I take it you're going back home?"

"Too right. First flight out," said Caramarin.

"Come with me," said Stanga. "I've a little job for you." He called Tibor Budescu, his driver, over. Stanga unlocked a door at the side of the nightclub and led the way up a narrow flight of stairs. At the top, a dimly lit corridor led past a number of doors to a barred window, which let in

the dismal grey light Caramarin was getting used to. On the floor, a threadbare red carpet muffled their steps. Caramarin smelled cheap perfume and disinfectant.

Stanga knocked on one of the doors. A thin woman in her forties opened it. Home dyed blonde hair and bloodshot brown eyes were the first things Caramarin noticed. She had probably once been good looking but decades of booze and hard living had taken its toll on her features. She wore jeans and a red sweater over which a crucifix dangled between her flat breasts. Stanga spoke to her, quickly and too quietly for Caramarin to hear what they said.

The woman unlocked the next room and showed them in. Inside was an unmade bed, faded posters of puppies and kittens on the wall and a sticky blue carpet pocked with cigarette burns. The curtains were drawn and the room was almost dark. The woman switched on the light and an energy saving bulb glowed dimly into life.

But under the smell of perfume and disinfectant was the stench of piss and shit. Caramarin almost gagged. On the other wall to the bed was a large green metal locker. It looked old and solid. Fuck knows how they'd got it up those stairs.

They crossed to the locker and the woman unlocked it. The door creaked open. Cowering inside was a woman, little more than a girl. The stench flooded out with the opening door. Stanga grabbed the girl's hair and pulled her out into a heap on the carpet.

The girl was completely naked, her body covered in bruises and whip marks. She was petite, slender with small girl-like breasts. Caramarin saw dried blood on her inner thighs, her legs sore from kneeling in her own wastes. The girl curled into a foetal ball, protecting herself as much as possible, her head tucked away from the men. She shivered uncontrollably in the cold room.

Caramarin shuddered, hoped the other men didn't see him. He thought about the girls he'd driven from Odessa into Romania earlier this year for his old gang boss, Maiorescu. How many of them had ended up in a living hell like this?

Stanga crouched by the girl. He jerked her head up by her hair and looked into her eyes.

"Last chance, bitch. Will you do as you're told now? I paid good money for you and you need to start earning your keep. So, will you be a good girl now?" he finished more gently than he started.

The girl didn't respond. She just shook with cold and terror.

"Look at you, bitch, you disgust me," he said. Stanga slapped her face, bloodying her lip then dropped her head and kicked her hard in the ribs. The poor girl just lay there, took the blows, only a low moan betraying her pain. Caramarin stepped forward but a hand on his arm from Tibor Budescu stopped him.

"Nothing I can do with her," spat Stanga. He held out a hand. The driver placed a small pistol into his palm, Stanga racked the slide and handed the pistol to Caramarin. He recognised it as a Czech made CZ-75 semi-automatic, one of his favourite hand-guns.

"Doom her," Stanga ordered.

"What!?" said Caramarin, grimacing with shock and disgust.

"You heard. Doom her, cap her, slot her. Whatever the phrase is out east."

Caramarin glanced around. Noticed Budescu with his hand underneath his jacket. The older woman passed Caramarin the pillow from the bed as a makeshift silencer. The girl still lay curled up on the floor. Maybe she understood what was happening as a stream of dark yellow urine wet a circle under her, the carpet turning darker blue.

"Filthy animal," said the woman.

The two men and the older woman stood and watched. What a hell of a price to pay for Stanga's help.

"Hurry up, I've got things to do this morning," said Stanga.

Caramarin crouched by the girl, she curled up even tighter. He folded up the greasy pillow into two, held it to her head then pressed the muzzle of the CZ-75 pistol tight to the pillow. He took a deep breath.

Pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER 19. FRIDAY DECEMBER 11, 10:45.

It clicked on empty.

His world went grey and the room faded out for a moment before he could recover his mind. Stanga and Budescu bellowed with laughter, like it was the funniest thing in the world. Only the older woman looked grim faced.

"Had to make totally sure you weren't a police nark," Stanga said eventually. "No law-man would've done that. You're sound."

"Fucking hell, don't ever do that to me again," swore Caramarin. His breath started to come back to normal.

"Should've seen your face! No, you've proved yourself," Stanga said. "As you said, you're no stone killer, but you'll do." He took the pistol from Caramarin.

Stanga gestured to his driver who pulled the naked girl up to her feet. The man gripped her arm to stop her collapsing.

"You can have her if you want," said Stanga. "See if you can break her in. She's not bad underneath."

"She's covered in piss and shit. That's not my bag," said Caramarin, running his hand through his hair.

"There's a bathroom at the end of the corridor. Clean her up, then she's yours for a couple of hours. Andreea will show you where. Have fun." Stanga and his driver left leaving Caramarin with the girl.

The older woman, Andreea, showed him the way as he helped the girl to the bathroom. The girl allowed herself to be dragged along, unresisting, her bare feet shuffling along. She was only small and slight, maybe only one metre fifty-five and fifty or so kilos. No way could she put up any resistance to big men like Stanga and Tibor Budescu.

"Bring her some clothes," said Caramarin. "Something warm."

The bathroom matched the rest of the building with its cracked tiles and peeling yellow wallpaper. An ancient electric shower stood over a tub, rust marks streaking the bottom and around the plughole. He turned on the shower and waited for the water to heat up. The girl sat hunched up on the toilet seat and stared at him blankly. She shivered like she had a fever.

Caramarin hung his jacket over a hook then helped the girl over to the shower, giving her a smile and spoke softly and gently to her. She stood motionless under the spray, not even covering her body. She was young, no older than eighteen or nineteen with short hair hacked into a rough bob.

Caramarin found a flannel and half full bottle of gel. Carefully, he washed her down. The water sluiced away the filth. Her poor body was covered with bruises. Some old, fading now, others fresher.

She flinched when he washed between her legs, whether from pain of past assaults or thinking he was going to molest her. But he felt no sexual thrill from her naked body. Fuck, she was young enough to be his daughter.

Caramarin switched off the shower and dried her, wrapping the towel around her before leading her back to the bedroom. She sat down on the end of her bed. He extended her arms and saw a few holes and bruises on the insides of her elbows, but nowhere near as many as he expected.

Then he knelt before her and spread her toes. She did nothing to stop him. There he found the track marks he expected. Many clients didn't want to screw an obvious junkie, that's why they'd injected between her toes.

The metal locker still stood open, so he pushed the door closed against the smell. The older woman had left an oversized sweatshirt and pants on the bed. Caramarin dressed her and helped her step into the pants. Andreea came into the room and leaned against the door post before lighting a smoke and offering Caramarin one. He refused.

"You can fuck her now, you want," she said. Caramarin nodded. "If she won't, you can use this." The woman threw a giant black dildo onto the bed. The girl recoiled.

"That won't be necessary," he said. "And I don't need an audience." The woman slammed the door behind her.

Caramarin sat the girl next to him and held her close for warmth.

"I'm gonna try and get you away from this," he whispered. After he'd got the painting back, that is. The girl still didn't respond.

"Do you hear me? Do you understand? Do you speak Romanian?"

"You tried to kill me," she said in a low voice. The girl had a strong Moldovan accent.

"I knew the gun wasn't loaded. It was just to frighten you," he said.

But that wasn't quite true. Thinking about it, the CZ-75 had felt light but if there had been only one or two bullets in the magazine, he couldn't have told the difference in weight. Being honest, he'd been shit scared himself. If the pistol had been loaded, there would have been brains over the carpet. But at least, the girl's sufferings would have been over.

"Listen," he said, "I'm gonna try and help you. As soon as I can think of a way out. Do yourself a favour, try and do what they want for now. I know it's horrible but anything must be better than being caged up in that locker. And I'll do what I can in the meantime, okay?"

The girl didn't respond in any way, just sat curled up next to him. What could he do? He held her close, not speaking, just letting her know there was someone who cared. Eventually, he let himself out and back downstairs.

The auditions had finished. Stanga was talking to Tibor Budescu and Daniel Perianu, jabbing with his cigarette to make a point. Caramarin waited for the boss to finish.

"I've sorted the bitch. No guarantees of course, but I've made a few things clear to her. Treat her with a bit of kindness and she's the sort who'll respond," said Caramarin. "But I'd give her a few days rest first."

He hoped that was true for her sake but somehow he doubted if they would give her a break.

The other two men laughed.

"I know the 'kindness' you mean," said Budescu, the driver, making a circle with his thumb and forefinger and ramming his other forefinger through the hole.

"So far she's been a complete waste of my money," complained Stanga. "She'll have to earn her keep soon."

There was nothing more Caramarin could do to help the girl at the moment.

"You're all right, Caramarin," said Stanga. "You've got balls. Like I said, I've got a job for you. Do that and I'll make sure you get your painting back."

Caramarin nodded, shook hands all round, then let himself out of the nightclub and started walking. Suddenly, he ducked down an alley and was violently sick. Leaning against the wall he supported his heaving body with one arm. Stopped only when there was nothing left to bring up.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Fucking hell, he'd nearly killed an innocent girl. And what was she going through? She seemed traumatised and no surprise there. Maybe he'd bought her a few days to recover or maybe she was already back in that freezing locker crouching in her own piss and shit waiting to be beaten or even killed by someone else.

Too much. Just way too fucking much. Flashbacks filled his mind of that snowy barn back in Bosnia all those years ago. That grinning blond bearded giant. Those terrified girls and women treated as animals in that Hell-hole. Caramarin thought he'd got over all of that. But he hadn't. He'd

done his best for those women in Bosnia and ultimately it hadn't been good enough. Now he had another chance to offset some of the bad in his life.

A couple of elderly women in green sweat pants walked past, tutting loudly as he leaned over his vomit. They must have thought he was one of the local alxies, drunk at this time of the morning. If only they knew. Caramarin was deep in thought as he walked back to Cheetham Hill, the cold, damp air restoring him a little. But no obvious solution came to him. Once again, he would have to see what happened and seize his chance when it came.

He swung by the betting shop and slid a note into the Betting Terminal. He pressed the buttons on screen and watched the wheel spin. For a few seconds, Caramarin forgot the girl, forgot his problems, losing himself in the hypnotic swirl of colours as the wheel spun, willing the ball to land on the high numbers. A few seconds later, Caramarin was back to reality as the wheel stopped. He lost. He pressed the play button and once again he sought and found a temporary release. It didn't really matter whether he won or lost; whether his winnings increased or dropped to almost zero.

Caramarin was almost like an automaton feeding in notes, making a choice of bet, pressing the on-screen buttons, watching the bright lights flicker before him and then feeding in still more money. He was lost in his own world, just glad to escape from the pressures of his life. Eventually, he had no idea when, the betting terminal beeped requesting more money. Caramarin thrust his hand into his pockets. They were empty. Caramarin shook his head and was forced to return to the real world. He walked past the men watching the horse racing on the televisions and out into the dull, grey drizzle. Back to reality.

An overwhelming urge for some human contact came over Caramarin. He wanted, no needed, to see Narcisa. The only person he'd connected with in this hellish city. As soon as he opened the door of the pawnbrokers, he saw a customer arguing with Narcisa. A huge, bald, fat man wearing last season's Manchester United top, beer fumes leaking from his pores, cheap aftershave

stinking out the shop. He was gesturing wildly. Narcisa was shaking her head, trying to be calm and reasonable.

Although he had no idea what the man was saying, Caramarin heard the word 'fuck' one time too many. He stepped up behind the man, twisted his meaty arm up behind his back and forced his body over ninety degrees. Caramarin quickly spun the man around and gave him the bum's rush out of the shop. The angry man looked like he wanted to take it further but one glance at Caramarin's face and fists put him off the idea. He swore and stumbled off.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Narcisa. "If he complains to the manager, I'll get in trouble."

"Why? You've done nothing wrong. Anyway, what manager? He's never here."

"We're supposed to negotiate and keep the customers happy; anyway management always take the customer's side," sighed Narcisa.

"What was he saying? I heard him swearing..."

"Just the usual. Effing foreign bitch, eff off back to your own country. I've heard it all before."

Caramarin felt like running back out and beating the fat man to a pulp. Breaking some bones would work off some tension if nothing else.

"And you like it here in this dump? I dunno," said Caramarin.

"Sometimes I get fed up with it all," admitted Narcisa. "It's not my fault he'd let his pledge run out of time."

The shop was empty at the moment; the few other customers had also vanished after Caramarin threw out the drunk. Narcisa spoke to the other assistant, a young woman who gave Caramarin the eye; and let Caramarin into the back of the brokers, into the staff room. She filled a glass of water and swallowed a couple of aspirins. She absently rubbed her lower belly as she did so.

She kissed him on the lips. "Thanks anyway. I wish you worked here. Then we wouldn't have so much trouble with our clients."

Caramarin hesitated, and then took the plunge. He hated to ask but his pockets were empty. "I don't suppose you could lend me a bit of money, just to tide me over until I get this painting thing sorted?"

"How much do you want?" Narcisa asked, her brow frowning.

"Well, a few hundred. If you can?"

"On my salary? After I've paid my rent?" She opened her handbag and took out two twenties. "I can let you have forty. But that's all I've got."

"That's great," said Caramarin, disappointment leaking into his voice. "I'll pay you back."

The other assistant pushed open the staff room door. They heard voices from the store front.

"It's getting busy again out there. You'd better go. I'll see you tonight?" Narcisa said.

Caramarin nodded. "Thanks again."

That day, he checked out of his bed and breakfast, slung his rucksack over his shoulder and carried it over to Narcisa's. On the way he swung by the local mini-market and picked up a couple of bottles of wine and the makings for a risotto. Knowing he needed to be in the girls' good books if they were going to let him stay on their couch for another few nights.

That evening, he threw the risotto together while Narcisa spoke to the other girls. He kept his ears open and knew he was okay when Ewelina took over the cooking.

"Sure you can stay, Nicu," she said. "But stick to buying take aways." On impulse, Caramarin threw his arms around her and kissed her pretty face.

"Thanks," he said simply.

Fifteen minutes after Narcisa went up, Caramarin followed. He heard Ewelina and Marta barely suppress their giggles as he yawned and climbed the stairs.

Narcisa lay in bed and dropped a magazine to the floor. She watched Caramarin undress and held up the duvet for him. He slipped into the warmth next to her. She kissed him passionately.

"Thanks for earlier. I told the manager about that man when he showed up. He checked the CCTV cameras but he wasn't very happy with me. Shouted at me. I get fed up with that job sometimes."

He was about to say something but forgot as he stiffened to her touch. She slipped a rubber onto him and then guided him deep into herself. He took his weight on his elbows and took her gently. Narcisa lay underneath and kissed his face. His release came then he collapsed onto her. As he lay there, he suddenly thought about the poor girl at Stanga's nightclub. As he did so, he gripped Narcisa tightly, like he could protect her from all harm.

"You're hurting me. What's the matter, Nicu?"

Caramarin relaxed. "Sorry. Just stuff on my mind, you know."

"If it helps, I got some more money for you."

Caramarin leaned back and looked deep into Narcisa's dark brown eyes.

"You did? How much? I mean, thanks, comrade," he was confused.

"I rolled over a customer's loan debt. Made out he's repaying it later. But I'm trusting you to pay it back, Nicu, or I'll be in deep trouble."

He kissed her again. "Thank you. You're too good to me."

CHAPTER 20. MONDAY DECEMBER 14, 12:00.

Caramarin's cell phone rang. Pompiliu Stanga. He took the call.

"You still need my help? Do us a little favour first then. I need some people collecting and bringing back. Mihai Pojer will pick you up if you're interested." Caramarin was surprised. He had no idea Pojer was up and about again.

Caramarin agreed. He had no choice really so he hung about the girls' lounge listening to the radio until Pojer's BMW pulled up outside. Dodging the rain, he let himself into the shotgun seat. The two men shook hands warily.

"All right?" asked Caramarin. He noticed that Pojer's arm seemed to be working fine.

"Fine. We'll have a rematch sometime," said Pojer with a grin.

That was one appointment Caramarin was in no hurry to keep. "Looking forward to it."

"Where we going?" asked Caramarin.

"Liverpool Docks. We're picking up a few girls for Stanga's nightclub."

"Why does he need me, then?"

"You'll find out," grinned Pojer. That didn't sound good.

Pojer drove west out of Manchester along the M62 motorway. Traffic was busy but not too heavy at that time of day. Caramarin was glad he wasn't driving. Like everything in this messed up this country, even the cars were wrong here. The steering wheel was on the right, not the left where it should be; where it was in every other country. The traffic drove on the wrong side of the road and it was hard to keep track of where the other cars were coming from. Even the signs were in

some other measurement than the European standard kilometres. Didn't this country know it was in the European Union? Did it want to be some isolated rain swept island on the edge of the Atlantic?

And it was still raining. The windscreen wipers worked overtime coping with the rain streaming down in oblique lines onto the glass. Spray splashed up from the other traffic.

"It's been on my mind since I saw you the other week. Don't I know you from somewhere?" asked Pojer, glancing over at Caramarin.

"I don't think so," said Caramarin. "I've not been in England that long."

"No, not from here. Didn't you used to run that knock off vodka scam from out of Constanta?"

Caramarin turned in his seat, surprised. "Might have done. But that was years ago. Why?"

"I used to be one of your drivers, boss," said Pojer. "Whatever happened to that scam?"

"It sort of blew up in my face so I had to give it up," Caramarin didn't elaborate further. That had been a good time in his life. Much better than now. Easy money, drugs, beautiful women all for the taking. And loads of sunshine, too.

"I got picked up by the cops," said Pojer. "But I never grassed. If it went tits up it wasn't down to me."

Caramarin thought. He couldn't place Pojer at all. But as he said, it was years ago. A lot of water under lots of bridges since then. And none of it clean water.

"You still know your moves, boss," said Pojer after a period of silence. "I thought I had you beat but you won. Well done." Mihai Pojer still looked battered but unbowed. The man seemed to actually be looking forward to a second bout.

Pojer drove west into the setting sun. As they left Manchester, the rain eased off into a fine drizzle and then a light mist. At the Liverpool end of the motorway Pojer turned north at a complicated junction at the end of the motorway and then along a ring road.

Stopping at a set of lights by a junction, Caramarin saw an older, bearded man delivering leaflets. The man wore a similar combat jacket to his own. A large hi-viz bag slung over his shoulder weighed the man down. Just for a moment, Caramarin envied that man's life.

Simple job, no pressures, no stress, no beaten up face. All he had to do was post his leaflets through the letter boxes then get paid. Didn't have to worry none about recovering stolen Picassos or having Odessa crime lords after him. Then Pojer's BMW pulled away from the lights and Caramarin forgot about that man.

Eventually, the BMW pulled up in a windswept car park near a river mouth. Seagulls wheeled and screamed overhead against the iron grey sky. Caramarin got out and shivered. The wind cut through his jacket like a knife.

"Stay here," said Pojer. "I'll go get the girls."

Caramarin leaned against the BMW and looked around the desolate scenery. It looked like a place which had once been busy with activity and shipping but would never be again. Behind him, a big brick warehouse had been converted into luxury apartments. Expensive cars stood nearby. To his north, a stack of containers stretched away towards another huge unconverted Victorian brick and stone warehouse. A unique octagonal tower with a clock stood sentry over the river.

His focus was drawn back across the car park wasteland to Mihai Pojer returning with three young women. All three looked dead tired. They wore jeans or leggings and thick, shapeless jackets that hid their figures. One was dyed blonde; the other two had dark hair. One had an arm across her belly like she had bad cramps. The girls said a brief hello, but one of the girls looked like she was asleep on her feet.

Caramarin opened the rear doors for them as Pojer threw their passports into the glove locker. He noticed they were burgundian red Romanian passports, but from their accents he guessed one at least was Moldovan.

Mihai Pojer tossed him the keys. "Time you learned." With more confidence than he felt Caramarin snatched them out of the air one handed. Caramarin slid behind the wheel, adjusted the mirrors and radio and then drove back towards the motorway. After he got used to the controls, it felt good to be behind the wheel again. Almost like he was in control of events.

"We'll stop at a pharmacy on the way back," Pojer said. "Keep an eye on the girls while I pick up a couple of things." Caramarin nodded and parked on a small suburban lot. A few minutes later, Pojer returned with a small paper bag.

"Piles playing you up?" joked Caramarin.

"It's not for me – it's for the girls," Mihai Pojer told him.

Caramarin drove back to Manchester under the darkening eastern sky. Driving was easier along the motorway. Too soon, he had to switch on both the headlights and windscreen wipers. On the outskirts of the city; Pojer gave him directions to a terraced house, one in a long road of terraced houses.

In the sodium orange dark the street seemed to stretch out to infinity in both directions. It was as deserted as the dark side of the moon. The only movement was windblown litter scudding along the sidewalk. Caramarin pulled up on the street outside the house, then Pojer opened up and showed the three girls inside.

"What are we doin' here?" said Caramarin, looking around. The house was being redeveloped and was cold as the grave.

"One of Stanga's newest properties. He does them up and either sells 'em on or rents them out. Nice little sideline," explained Pojer. "Good way to wash the money from his other businesses."

Builders' tools were scattered around, ladders and planks blocked up half the stairs. Bags of cement and plaster were stacked in the front lounge next to several orange buckets. A decorator's trestle table was covered in old newspapers, flasks, filthy mugs and polystyrene cartons.

Newspapers covered the bay window, hiding the interior from sight. The house smelt of cold, damp and plaster dust.

The girls looked around as confused as Caramarin.

"We can't stay here," one said, her accent straight from the north Moldovan countryside.

"You're not going to," said Pojer. "But you need to get rid of the drugs you're carrying."

"What here?" one protested.

"Yes. Here and now," said Pojer.

Caramarin clenched his fists. He was annoyed. "You never said they were carrying drugs," he said. "I could get fuckin' years for this."

"Well," said Pojer, ignoring this outburst. "Stanga's bringing them to England for a better life. Least they can do is help pay their way a little." Pojer told Caramarin to rinse out some mugs. Left with no choice, Caramarin walked into what had once been the kitchen. Dust and grit crunched underfoot. All that was left was an old double drainer stainless steel sink hanging off the wall, propped up with a timber baulk. A cold tap hung off the end of an ancient copper pipe. He rinsed and filled the mugs, then brought them back.

Pojer was puzzling over a box, the word *Dulcolax* printed on its side, the pharmacy paper bag discarded on the floor. The three women were holding an orange bucket each. The one with the cramps looked frightened now.

"Hurry up," she said, "Before they burst."

"I can't read English all that well," said Pojer. "I don't know how many suppositories to give them?"

"You mean they're Kinder eggs... the drugs are inside them?" said Caramarin.

"Sure, best way to get them through customs. No-one checks the Ireland to England routes anyway. Safe as houses."

"C'mon, hurry up. I'm desperate," said the girl again.

"Well, don't look at me," said Caramarin. "Just give them two each and see what happens."

"Works for me," said Pojer.

"As long as it works on them," Caramarin said. "You don't want them bursting inside."

Pojer handed out the suppositories. The girls held them in one hand like they were live bullets that might go off at any moment.

"Where's the toilet then?" asked the blonde.

"There isn't one, it's been ripped out. Use the buckets," said Pojer. "I were you, I'd hurry. And don't try stealing none. I know how much you've swallowed."

The women looked at each other then edged upstairs, past the ladders and planks. At the top, they ran into the empty bedrooms.

"You should've told me first," said Caramarin, unclenching his fists. "What're they carrying?"

"Heroin," said Pojer. "Fifty condoms each, except the fat one who swallowed sixty. You can test it if you want."

"Not me, comrade! Coke's my choice not a junkie loser's drug like horse. Anyway it's been up their arses."

"You want something to eat while we wait for nature to take its course? You'll probably want to eat now than later," Pojer said.

Caramarin couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. He nodded, and waited while Pojer went to the takeaway at the end of the street. He looked but couldn't find a radio to mask the grunts and terrible abdominal sounds from upstairs. Nature was now taking its course with a fury.

The two men sat on paint tins and ate chicken fried rice. They talked about the old days, people they both knew back in Romania.

"Go and see how they're getting on," said Pojer. Caramarin made a lot of noise going up the stairs. Half way up he was met with shouts of protest.

"Bit longer yet, comrade," he called down.

Eventually, the girls came down. They all looked pale, exhausted, totally washed out.

"I'm weak as a kitten, me," said the blonde.

"I'm not going to shit for a month now. My ring's agony," said the plumpest of the three. But underneath their hard bravado, Caramarin knew they felt ashamed and humiliated. The third said nothing, just looked down at her feet.

"Right, boss," said Pojer. "I'm taking the girls over to Stanga's now. You go through the buckets and recover the H."

CHAPTER 21. MONDAY DECEMBER 14, 19:20.

"You what!" said Caramarin.

"Why do you think you're here? Remember, should be one hundred and sixty condoms full. You might like to rinse them after you've counted 'em."

"Any gloves for fuck's sake, comrade?"

Pojer pointed to the decorator's table. The two men looked at each other. Then Caramarin burst out laughing. It was either laugh or get angry. The first real laugh he'd had in what felt like ages. Pojer looked at him, his lips wrinkled then he too laughed.

"To think I used to a big wheel with the world at my feet and now I'm searching through buckets of shite for H."

The three women looked at the two big bruised men laughing like lunatics and huddled together. Their eyes were wide and staring. After he'd calmed down, his shoulders still occasionally shaking with spasms of mirth, Pojer led the women outside. Caramarin heard the Beemer fire up then pull away. Then he was left to sort through the mess. He wasn't laughing any more.

Caramarin pulled on the decorator's gloves, and then doubled up to be on the safe side. Very carefully, one at a time, he carried the buckets downstairs, keeping them as far away from his body as possible. The stench was bad. But the thought of what he had to do was worse. It was one of the few times he wished he smoked. Anything to mask the foul stench.

Setting the buckets down in the ripped out kitchen he turned on the cold tap. Icy water splashed into the sink carrying away layers of builders dust. Now it was like looking down into the bowels of Hell. His gorge rising, he lifted up the first bucket onto the draining board. With his fingertips, he removed a layer of toilet paper and dropped the soiled mess onto the floor.

The condoms looked like a nest of drowned brown slugs in the mess. Despite the cold, he took off his jacket and hung it from a nail. He lowered his hand into the bucket. No, he couldn't do it. He paused, his hand half in, half out of the bucket, hovering above the faeces.

He'd heard that breathing through your mouth made things easier. It didn't. But he had to go through with this job. And he'd done far worse things in his life than sift through shite. Hell, sewer workers did this and worse every day. And they didn't complain. But he'd never worked down a sewer. And never wanted to neither.

Right, on with it. He leaned down; his shrinking fingertips touched one of the condoms. He hoped. Quickly, he fished the rubber out and held it under the cold tap for a few seconds. He dropped it onto the stainless steel draining board where it lay, like an obscene brown slug waiting dissection. One down. One hundred and fifty nine to go. Fuck-shit.

Once he'd broken the taboo, the next were easier to deal with. Caramarin lifted the filled condoms out, rinsed them and placed them next to the first. A small mound soon built up. But too soon, he'd run out of the ones on the surface of the mess. Then he had to place his hand deeper into the filthy shite and feel for the rest of the condoms by touch. Despite the cold, the muck was still warm through his glove. He almost threw up his chicken fried rice, only a supreme effort of will keeping it down.

Eventually, he finished. With a heavy heart, he lifted up the second bucket and dropped the toilet paper over the side. This poor girl had the wild shites. Excrement was streaked round the sides of the bucket. Looking down into the diarrhoea saw the woman had sweet corn for lunch, little yellow nuggets embedded in the foul mess. The stench was unbelievably foetid. He gagged, felt his acid gorge rise again before controlling himself. Despite the cold of the unheated room, sweat trickled down his face and dampened his armpits.

Get over it, he thought. It's not going to kill me. Shit, well it's just human waste, nothing more. Wasn't going to kill him. But with increasing horror, he carried on with his disgusting task.

Lift one out, rinse it, and drop it with the others. But the feel of the semi-solid slimy mess, even through his doubled-up gloves was almost more than he could stand.

The mound of rinsed condoms grew bigger. A graveyard of these obscene slugs. Finally, he'd finished. Only one last bucket of waste to go through.

The door bell rang. What? It couldn't be Pojer as he had the key. Caramarin looked behind him. The kitchen door was missing, so light from the bare bulb spilled into the hallway and out the fanlight. They must know someone was at home. Was that the cops out there? Fuck-shit. Was this a set-up? Stanga sacrificing some H to get rid of him? But why? He didn't think he'd done anything to upset Stanga.

If he was caught with this load of H, they'd chuck him inside for years. No way. He looked at the kitchen window. It was locked but he could smash the glass, then out into the back yard, over the wall then run as fast as he could.

The door bell rang again, longer this time. Caramarin glanced round the kitchen; saw a long metal spirit level propped up in the corner on top of a bag of plaster. He hefted it. Yeah, that would do. He crossed to the window, prepared to thrust the spirit level through the glass. He glanced back in time to see a leaflet flutter down through the letter box.

Caramarin tip-toed to the front door and picked up the leaflet. Probably for some religious order as there was a cross on the top above a picture of a church. He dropped the leaflet. Sweat stood out from his body. Caramarin was about to wipe his forehead but then remembered just in time. That wouldn't have been a good idea.

Slowly, he returned to the kitchen. How the fuck had he got involved with this? Fortunately, there was only one last bucket to go through. Caramarin lifted it up onto the drainer and lifted out the condoms then felt through its contents. This must be the plumper girl as there seemed more stuffed condoms than before in the mess.

The Dulcolax must have really ripped through her guts as there was blood mixed with her stools. Unless she was on the rag. Poor girl. His repugnance for the job wasn't so great now. It was true. You can get used to anything. But he didn't want to have to do this again any time soon.

Finished at last, Caramarin set the last bucket down next to the other two. Let the builders deal with the stinking shite inside them when they come back. He counted out the condoms. One hundred and fifty eight. What! Fuck-shit. Should have kept them in separate piles, not just lumped them together in one big shitty mound. Carefully, he counted them out again. One hundred and fifty seven. What!

Caramarin took a deep breath. Big mistake. He felt his stomach heave with the stench. Right. Calm down. He counted the condoms out into groups of ten. Eight left over. Definitely two missing. All repugnance gone, he frantically searched through the buckets again, the contents sloshing about. Found one. He lifted it out. Oh fuck, it was just a stool. He looked at it eyes wide with horror for a second. Dropped it back with a plop. And then he fought a long battle to hold his dinner down.

Almost recovered, Caramarin stood and flexed his back. No, he couldn't say he blamed the girl for helping herself to a bit extra. But Stanga's mob would think he'd nicked it. No, he'd never done horse in his life and wasn't about to start now. Just a loser's drug for people who couldn't cope with life. That's what he thought. But that would cut no ice with Stanga.

Caramarin examined the condoms. As he thought, they'd been double wrapped to last longer inside the girls' stomachs. He glanced at his watch. Of course, he had no idea when Pojer would be returning. He didn't know how far this empty house was from Stanga's place. Caramarin could have all the time in the world or Pojer could burst in at any second. No way of telling.

He quickly unwrapped some of the fatter condoms then separated them. With one of the builders' teaspoons he spooned some of the H out of those condoms then filled up two of the single skins. Still not enough. Nowhere near enough. The new single skins looked really scrawny

compared with the others. He rubbed his forehead with his forearm, his eyes searching the room, jumping from object to object.

The plaster. That would have to do. Caramarin dug a little hole into the sack and bulked out the condoms with grey plaster dust. Then he shook the condoms about a bit before tying the ends. One hundred and sixty. Still a single skin but hopefully whoever opened the packages either wouldn't notice or would think a mistake had been made at the shipping end. Probably wouldn't draw attention to it if they were scared for their life or their job.

If he was lucky.

Caramarin ripped a bin bag from a roll and dropped all the condoms into it then tied the top. He peeled off his sweaty gloves and dropped them into the buckets. Searching amongst the litter and debris in the kitchen, he found the world's oldest block of soap. He was washing his hands for the second time when Pojer came back.

Caramarin's heart raced as the front door opened. Knowing what he'd done he half expected Pojer to come in with a silenced semi-automatic and doom him then and there.

"Thanks for that," said Pojer. "Let's go."

The two men stepped out into the rain. Caramarin slung the bin bag into the trunk and slammed the lid. His heart was still racing as Pojer dropped him off near Narcisa's.

CHAPTER 22. MONDAY DECEMBER 14, 22:15.

Narcisa herself let him into the house. As they passed, Caramarin glanced into the front lounge. Marta and Artur were curled up together on the couch. Ewelina looked up from her laptop and smiled, her pretty face lighting up. She was wearing her white bathrobe. A mule dangled from one foot. Narcisa shut the lounge door.

"Come on up," invited Narcisa. She fetched a bottle of liquor store Riesling and two glasses from the kitchen then led Caramarin up to her room. The room was much cooler than the lounge. Rain pitter-pattered against the window. Narcisa poured them both a glass. They clinked glasses and drank. Caramarin tipped his glass forward for a refill. He needed to blunt the edge of what he'd been through.

"Dirty work," he said with a smile.

"Don't tell me what you've been up to," said Narcisa.

He shook his head. No, he wasn't about to tell anyone what he'd done; that was not an evening for his memoirs.

"Any chance of a bath? While the others are all downstairs?"

Caramarin ran the bath as hot as he could stand. On a shelf, he saw the girls' bath salts. He poured in a double handful then eased his aching body into the hot scented water. He sunk down with only his face above the water and closed his eyes. His muscles loosened, his breath slowed. Deep relaxation.

The bathroom door opened. He clicked to full awareness. Pojer with that semi-automatic? Instead, Narcisa stepped in.

"Move over, Nicu," she said. "A girl needs to get clean, too."

He sat up and slid back to the taps, making a tiny tsunami with the water. Narcisa slid down her robe, stepping into the water like Venus entering the waves. He looked up. She looked down. She lifted up her hair, posing for him, firming her breasts. Her dark nipples aroused. He looked down the swell of her belly, at her strong thighs, at her pubic hair and the cleft between her legs.

He splashed water up at her, the droplets hitting her belly, liquid crystals like diamonds running down. She gripped the sides of the bath and knelt down. Narcisa found a flannel, rubbed gel into it and rubbed it into Caramarin's arms and chest, the friction making him harder.

She leaned forward, her breasts brushing against his chest then washed his face. Caramarin cupped her breasts, teasing her nipples out with his fingertips. She kissed him, kissed him deeply and slowly, drawing the moment out. He threw his arm around her neck, holding her against him. A wave of tenderness washed over him. He looked deeply into her dark brown eyes then he kissed her full on the lips.

Narcisa smiled at him. Caramarin took the flannel from her hand then washed Narcisa. He rubbed the flannel over her body, ran the rough material over her breasts teasing and tormenting her. She gasped with expectation. He re-gelled the flannel, moved it over her belly, down, down over her belly button, a finger flicking into her dimple, even lower, descending to her mound.

His hand went beneath the water. Narcisa closed her eyes, her mouth slightly open, her tongue licking her teeth. He dropped the flannel, his hand slipping between her legs. Narcisa shivered with uncontrollable urges. She threw her head back. Her hips moved. Water splashed out of the bath.

Narcisa pushed his hand away.

"No, not now," she managed to say, "in my room."

Reluctantly, Caramarin stopped, taking his hand away. Narcisa stood up, letting Caramarin view her body again. She stepped out of the bath then wrapped her robe around her, clutching it tightly. She watched Caramarin as he stepped out.

"You're more than ready," she laughed looking down. She skipped out of the bathroom in a billow of steam. Caramarin pulled the plug, grabbed a towel then ran naked across the hall. He kicked her door closed behind him. Her room was much cooler than the bathroom so Narcisa had burrowed beneath her duvet; Caramarin quickly dried off then dived in beside her.

He supported his weight on his elbows. Looked into her brown eyes, gazing into their depths. Gently at first, then faster he took her. She moaned quietly, not wanting her friends downstairs hearing. Caramarin felt his pressure building up then could hold back no longer. He burst inside her, blessed release, oh yeah, baby, then collapsing on her body. He soaked up her body warmth and lay beside her. Maxed the relax.

Caramarin dropped off to sleep almost immediately. Later, Narcisa wriggled out from under his arms and lay next to him. Sleep didn't come easily. Her thoughts nipped her mind like rats. Did she love this man? This man lying by her side? This man breathing deeply and easily? After all, what did she know about him or his past life? Not a lot. Narcisa got the impression that he'd done some bad things in the past and maybe even done time. He'd crashed into her life with all the force of a bull or a stag but had, at times, revealed his softer side and his vulnerabilities.

Narcisa thought back. She'd been with several 'bad-boys' as Ewelina called them. To most people, Caramarin could be taken as a bad boy – especially with his trying to sell that stolen painting – but she knew that he wasn't all bad. He wasn't like some of her ex's who seemed to regard her as little more than an object to satisfy their needs and work while they sat about watching television and drinking beer.

No, Narcisa knew that Caramarin had hidden depths to him. Look at the way he worried about his ex in Odessa? The way he bought the girls all those takeaways, the way he comforted her when she was feeling down or miserable? All he needed to do was give up some of his bad ways, calm down a little and he'd be perfect. Narcisa moulded her body to his and waited for sleepiness to claim her. Soon their breaths became as one.

* * *

His cell rang, jerking him up out of sleep. A dream faded instantly, leaving him foggy for a moment between reality and fantasy. He sat up, the cold air tightening his skin. Grabbing up the phone, he took the call on the second ring. Didn't recognise the number. Beside him, Narcisa rolled over, taking half the quilt with her and mumbled thickly before falling asleep again.

"Stanga. Something's come up. Can you get over here? Right away?"

A grip of terror around his heart. "What's happened?"

"Not over the phone. Pojer's on his way now. Be ready for him."

Stanga rang off. Now what? Caramarin dressed quickly, flung his jacket on then laced up his boots. In the near dark, he looked down at Narcisa's sleeping body watching the quilt gently move up and down. A wave of tenderness swept over him. All he saw was the top of her head so he stooped and kissed it. The woman deserved better than him.

Caramarin tiptoed downstairs and let himself out. One of the street lights had been broken now by stone throwing vandals making the road even darker than normal. Caramarin ran through the driving rain to Pojer's BMW, and threw open the passenger door. A wave of smoky air billowed out. Only then he noticed another man in the back seat; a man wearing sunglasses coupled with a scarf wrapped around his lower face, completely hiding his features.

"In," the man in the back seat said. The gunman sounded like Stanga's driver, Tibor Budescu.

"Sorry about this," said Pojer, his face hang-dog even in the dim roof light. "Not my idea." Caramarin saw the man in the back was holding a small pistol, probably a .22 calibre. An assassin's weapon. He knew there are times when you have a choice and when you don't. And this was one of the latter times. Caramarin slid into the shotgun seat, directly in front of the gunman.

Just to get his point across, the man pressed the barrel of his pistol into the back of Caramarin's neck.

"Easy, comrade," said Caramarin. "I'm not gonna make trouble."

The man leaned forward and pressed duct tape over Caramarin's eyelids. He then slipped a pair of glasses over the tape.

"Let's go," the man told Pojer.

"Just to let you know, this gun's on a hair trigger so don't try your luck." Caramarin got the message loud and clear.

The BMW pulled away from the kerb, turned left at the end of the road and drove along a route Caramarin had no hope of remembering. Nobody spoke. The only sound that of the car's heater. Time stretched to breaking point. He felt sweat in his armpits, on his balls, trickling down his back.

Caramarin tried to tell himself that if they were going to kill him, the gunman wouldn't have bothered hiding his face. Dead men tell no tales. But no, still not a good place to be. Stanga might decide to still rub him out anyway. Take him some deserted place followed by a swift double-tap to the head. With .22 slugs, there would be very little mess.

After what he thought was half an hour, maybe forty minutes, the Beemer pulled up.

"Out," the gunman said.

Slowly, doing nothing to set the gunman off, Caramarin opened the door, swung his legs around and stepped out. He kept his hands well away from his pockets. Somebody, no idea who, went through his pockets and patted him down.

"C'mon," the gunman said. "Just walk, nothing else." He was pushed forward. Hesitantly, not wanting to walk into a wall, he walked before the man across a tarmacked space. Pojer took his shoulder and guided him. Then they went through a door into a large indoor space. Strange echoes came from all around. A door opened in front of him. Then the three men went along a tiled corridor. Another door opened in front of them.

Then Caramarin was shoved forward. He stumbled forward, lost his balance and fell. His right knee smashed to the tiled floor. A jolt of agony shot through his body. Bright light lit up the darkness behind his taped eyelids. Not wanting to cry out, he bit his tongue, his mouth filled with the coppery taste of blood. Before he had any chance to recover, his arms were wrenched up behind his back. Cable ties circled his wrists and were cinched tight. Caramarin took a hard kick to the ribs. Probably from Budescu. He grunted.

"That's enough," Stanga's voice. Harsh. "Stand up."

With difficulty, Caramarin struggled to his knees, his right flared with pain again. He managed to get to his feet, taking his weight on his left leg. He stood, gasping. His heart raced as adrenaline pumped into his blood stream. Fear clouded his brain.

Caramarin heard footsteps coming closer. Felt the cold air push aside as a man stood in front of him.

"Where's my heroin?" Stanga spoke softly, gently now. But Caramarin knew there was still the threat of violence behind the boss's tone.

"What d'you mean?" Might as well play it innocent. See what Stanga knew.

"The bag was light. You some sort of junkie? Thought you'd help yourself, did you? What've you done with my H?" Stanga's voice was harsher now.

"I don't know, do I? I put one hundred and sixty condoms in that bag. Don't know what happened after that." Caramarin tried to speak as calmly as possible. Like an innocent man. He knew he was in a tight spot with his only weapon his voice.

"Funny that," said Stanga. "When my colleague checked it, he found two made up of brick dust."

He paused, spinning his moment of power out.

"So, the only question is what have you done with it?"

"Nothing," said Caramarin. "I don't do horse. It's just for junkie loser scum. And it's not like I can sell it on, can I? I don't speak any English."

"So what happened?" Stanga repeated.

"Don't know. I mean, how much d'you trust the people who packed it in the first place? They could have switched it?"

"I've used them before so I believe in them more than I trust you," said Stanga. "I certainly trust them more than a man I've only just met."

Caramarin shrugged. "It wasn't me, comrade. I don't want your fuckin' H."

Behind him, he heard a click. He felt the gun barrel pressed against the back of his head.

"Shall I?" he heard the Budescu say.

"Your last chance. Where's my heroin?"

Caramarin paused. Didn't want to betray the girls, even if one had pocketed a couple of condoms. But if he said anything now, they'd still probably kill him for trying to rip them off. If he was going to die tonight, then he was going to die on his feet, like a man.

"I've no idea. If any's missing it's fuck all to do with me." He stood tall. Would he hear the bullet, feel any pain before stepping off into the great unknown? The moment stretched out, his nerves keyed up far beyond what he could endure.

"If you're going to do it, then just fuckin' do it," Caramarin cried out.

Abruptly, Stanga laughed.

"You'll do for me," he said eventually. "You've got balls, Caramarin. Pojer was right about you. You've got balls the size of grapefruits. Cut him loose."

Caramarin felt a nick on his wrist as the cable ties were cut. He flexed his fingers and wrists as the blood flowed back, and then ripped off the sunglasses and tape. Even in the half-light he blinked. In front of him stood Pompiliu Stanga.

The gang head took a comb and swept it through his mane. They were standing in Stanga's deserted night club. A row of spotlights over the raised stage gave the only illumination. Light glinted down three brass poles on the stage.

"You did a dirty job for me and you never grassed on the girls. Even though you thought we were going to doom you," Stanga said with admiration.

Caramarin nodded.

"The other two packages come out later," Pojer explained. "They must've got bunged up somewhere inside her guts."

"You're a straight-up guy," continued Stanga. "You've proved that. Someone I can do business with. But never try to trick me again, okay?"

"Sure," said Caramarin, running a hand through his dark hair. When he next checked a mirror, he reckoned he'd see a few more strands of grey after tonight. His legs trembled with relief. "But if you ever pull a gun on me again, make sure you use it, comrade."

The men walked over to the shuttered bar. Pojer opened it and took out a bottle of Finlandia.

"Best vodka in the world. Distilled from glacier water," said Caramarin with relief.

"I know," said Stanga.

The men drank.

CHAPTER 23. TUESDAY DECEMBER 15, 20:30.

The following evening, Ewelina sat on the edge of her bed painting her finger and toenails with coral pink. A radio played chart hits softly in the background. She dried the little brush on the lip of the bottle and applied the polish carefully. A girl has to keep up appearances. Even down to the tip of her toes.

Lina wanted to think and couldn't do that downstairs with the wide-screen blaring away and Artur and Marta laughing away like stoned hyenas. Was she just being jealous of Narcisa for finding a fella? I mean, Marta had Artur, now Narcisa had found this Nicu Caramarin. Yet she was without a man of her own at the moment.

Her Mum back in Warsaw was always Facebooking or texting her to find out if she was with anyone. Probably, no make that certainly, she wanted to become a Grandma. Mum couldn't understand that since she'd split with that loser chef from the hospital's kitchen, Krzysztof, earlier in the autumn, she was having a break from fellas.

Mum was always wondering why, as she worked at Manchester Royal Infirmary, she wasn't going out with a Doctor. Lina knew it was not like she wasn't attractive. With her pretty heart-shaped face and blue eyes she could have almost any man she wanted. But at the moment, she just wanted a rest. Maybe after the New Year she'd have another look.

Actually, there was the New Year's party to look forward to. She'd have to go shopping soon for a new dress. And some shoes and a bag to go with it. Maybe she'd take Narcisa to the Trafford Centre mall with her. Take her out like ladies who lunch.

If there was a good looking single Doctor there at the party, who knows? But she'd never take an attached man. No way. Girls should stick together, that was her motto. Not stab each other

in the back. Men were bad enough at keeping it in their pants without women encouraging them to stray and break another girl's heart.

'Lina's thoughts turned to her friend. But what about Narcisa? To 'Lina, the girl seemed happy at the moment. Should she let the girl have her pleasure or warn her again? 'Lina knew the girl had a few bad relationships behind her. Not recently, to be sure. Before she'd met Narcisa, before Narcisa had moved in with them, 'Lina knew that she'd been with a man who'd treated her like a doormat.

He'd sit about her flat all day while she worked long hours. Man didn't bother looking for a job, just happy to sit back claiming British welfare money. Got by with selling a little dope and a few tabs of E of a weekend. Wouldn't even keep their flat clean, just sat there with his stoner, dosser mates eating pizza, watching TV or playing shooting games on the X-Box.

Then he'd forced himself on her one Friday night. One of his mates had brought back a couple of bottles of cheap bath-tub vodka and they'd had all had a bit too much. Not rape as such, just a bit quick. Took her before she had time to insist he used a rubber.

Poor Narcisa found herself pregnant. She told her Auntie 'Lina she'd thought and thought. But her decision was made for her when her man found out her condition and vanished one day. She come home and found her flat cold and empty. No fella or his no account mates. Small loss in 'Lina's opinion.

But the bastard had even swiped her TV, DVDs and stereo. The man's cell just went to voice-mail and Narcisa never heard from him again. Just left a pile of debts for her to sort out. No, that man was no loss as far as 'Lina could see.

But Narcisa hadn't lost her baby. In the end she'd chosen an abortion. As a good Catholic girl, 'Lina couldn't approve of that but sometimes God gives women choices that are too hard for this world. She hoped and prayed that God would understand the difficulties Narcisa was under at

the time. Narcisa never said what the baby would have been; but once, late one night, she'd tearily called it 'she'.

Afterwards, one drunken evening when all the fellas were out of their house, Narcisa had confessed that after the abortion, she'd let herself go. Nightclubs, one night stands, drinking too much. Waking up next to men who'd abused her body then tossed her aside soon afterwards.

Ewelina knew enough to understand that some of it was a reaction to the stress of the abortion and also feeling isolated and friendless in a foreign country. Narcisa had come to her senses after less than a year of that life. Woke up one sunny day after one too many useless fellas and decided that was that.

She finished with her little flat, looked around some then moved in with the girls here. The room rent was much cheaper and she was able to start paying off her debts again. Although Narcisa was Romanian, she was a country girl and she'd fitted in well with Marta and Katja who were both from small towns back in Poland and they all loved her. But those farm girls still needed a city girl from Warsaw to show them the ropes.

And now Narcisa was with this Caramarin. For a start he was more than ten years older than her. But that didn't matter as much as the fact he was so obviously trouble with a great big capital T.

Now her nails were all painted and dried, Ewelina capped the bottle. She tiptoed along the passage to use the bathroom. On the way she heard the bed bouncing in Narcisa's room. Ewelina hoped Narcisa would be happy. She hoped it would work out but if it didn't, or when it didn't more like, she and the others were here to pick up the pieces.

Girls have to stick together.

CHAPTER 24. WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 16, 10:15.

"I need you to doom a man causing problems for me. Has to be done by someone with no connection to me."

Caramarin thought. "And if I do, you'll get that painting back for me?"

"Sure, no problems," said Stanga.

"But we've been seen together. There'll be a record of our cell calls."

"We've only been seen by people who won't talk. And you've only got one of my cell numbers; prepaid of course, which I'll destroy as soon as you go back to Odessa. Any other objections?"

Caramarin didn't want to upset Stanga. "No. I'll do it."

They shook hands on the deal. Stanga poured them both a hefty dose of vodka. Not Finlandia to Caramarin's disappointment.

"To success," Stanga toasted. Caramarin clinked glasses.

"So, who do you want me to rub out?"

"His name is Gjergji Shkurti. Some fool who wants to muscle in on my business. He won't take a warning so I need to show this city who's boss. And it isn't him."

"You'll provide weapons, whatever I need?"

"Within reason, yes. Unfortunately, not a Kalashnikov. I'll give you a call as soon as I get a call myself. When and where. Probably be short notice, but for a man of your calibre should be no problem."

Caramarin didn't like this set-up but Stanga had him over a barrel. That's if he wanted the Picasso back.

Outside of the nightclub, he walked through a curtain of moisture. He checked his cell. Battery full and a good signal. Excellent. However, he saw several missed calls, all from a Manchester number he didn't recognise. Had anything happened to Narcisa? He pressed redial. A cultured, urbane voice answered. A deadly voice.

Timur Ozgan. Shit. What was that man doing in Manchester?

"Where are you Nicolae? I'm in the Lombardia Hotel. I've someone here who wants to meet you. Wants to meet you very much."

Caramarin stammered. Ozgan. The last man he expected. Or wanted to see.

"I'd like to see you over here now, Nicolae. If you're free that is." Still an order, not a request.

"I'll be there."

Caramarin ran his hand through his hair. It came away wet. Fuck, He must have really pissed off the Abkhazian boss for him to have left his businesses and come all the way to Britain to sort out this problem. At least the man was unlikely to start something in the Lombardia Hotel. After all, this was Britain, not the mountain badlands of Caucasian Abkhazia.

Caramarin glanced at his street atlas. With the clogged traffic it was quicker to walk than to catch a cab or tram. In his hurry, he almost ran to the hotel. Even with urban indifference, several people stopped to watch a man with a bruised face dressed in a combat jacket running down the street. They probably expected to see him later on one of those police CCTV shows.

Panting, he pushed through the revolving doors and into the entrance lobby. It looked like that whichever architect had designed the reception area had shares in a chromium mine. Every surface which wasn't blond wood was covered in the metal. Light from bright retro designed chandeliers bounced off the polished chrome dazzling Caramarin for a moment after the gloom outside.

Caramarin thought Security might give a man dressed like him the bum's rush in the same way he'd thrown out the fat man yesterday. Fortunately, the lobby was packed with a load of Koreans or Japanese and the lobby was noisy with calls in their language.

Reception had their hands full dealing with them. A tiny woman in a black coat mistook him for a porter and tried to make him carry her bags upstairs. Caramarin kept shaking his head and saying "No."

He felt a hand on his shoulder; expecting to be escorted out, he saw Mihai Pojer. Caramarin hadn't expected to see him in the lobby.

The two large men barged past some bewildered Korean or Japanese pensioners and caught the lift to the fourth floor. Pojer knocked twice, paused then twice again before the door opened. Engin Hasanov sat by the desk, smartly dressed. Timur Ozgan himself greeted Caramarin. He was wearing a crisp white shirt, with the top few buttons undone and the sleeves rolled up. A suit jacket was slung over an easy chair.

"I'm disappointed. When I ask someone to do a job for me, I expect them to do it. Or die in the attempt. I don't expect to have to travel thousands of kilometres to do it myself. Especially when I use someone with your reputation."

Caramarin raised his palm. "I think I know where your painting is and I'm taking steps to get it back for you."

"Oh really," said Ozgan. "Where do you think it is then?"

"I'm sure it's at a..." he paused, unable to come up with something even half convincing. "Listen, if you think I've let you down, let me get it back."

He sensed a door opening behind him. Oh, Fuck-shit. Out of the bathroom behind him stepped Mehmet, Timur Ozgan's massive bodyguard. The man who had kicked all this off by inviting him to step into Ozgan's BMW back in Odessa.

The giant stood tall, making the most of his two metres of height. His suit bulged over his gym honed muscles. Mehmet stood against the door to the corridor, his left hand covering his right fist. Caramarin couldn't help but glance at the strange Cyrillic script on the man's hands. Mehmet glared at him.

Caramarin knew he could discount Engin Hasanov as a powder puff. But Mehmet, Pojer and Ozgan together? He'd take less damage jumping out the window and free falling four floors.

"So, where... exactly... do you suppose my painting; my valuable Picasso is? The one you and your lady friend hawked round half the fences in Manchester?" Ozgan gestured to Hasanov who produced a familiar cardboard tube. He opened it, unrolled the blue canvas and spread it out on the bed.

There lay the *'Vielle Triste Pute Avec Vase'*.

Fuck-shit. No point dodging the issue now. He gave a sickly grin. Spread his hands wide in a friendly gesture. The game was up.

"Sorry about that. I was well out of order and I'm sorry..."

"That's all right," Ozgan brushed aside Caramarin's stammered apology. "I've got my Picasso back and my nephew, as well as some of my money." Ozgan looked at Hasanov, patted the young man's hand and smiled. He continued. "As you say, you let me down. Badly. However, there is still something you can do for me."

A sinking feeling. But at least he was still alive. "What's that?"

"As you may know, my business interests stretch as far as this God-forsaken city. I've been sending... merchandise... to an associate here. However, I've found out he's been under pressure from Britain's Serious Organised Crime Agency.

"I can't afford for him to try and cut himself a deal by giving up my name. If you could call round his office one night and pick up any documents linking us then I might be able to overlook your... errors of judgement."

"What sort of documents?"

"I know you can't read English. That's why you're good for this job. You don't know enough to rat me out. Just take everything in his office. USB memory sticks, DVDs, the computer's hard drive. Paperwork. Take everything you see. And this time, bring them straight back to me. No funny ideas."

Knowing he had no choice, Caramarin nodded. "Give me the details," he said. Timur Ozgan sat at the desk next to Hasanov. He slipped on a pair of reading glasses then turned over a piece of paper.

"My business acquaintance is an Indian gentleman called Subrata Mohanraj. On the surface a successful restaurant owner and fine foods importer. His restaurant sometimes even appears in the local paper's gourmet column. But, also a silent partner in a number of brothels and clubs. That's where he makes his real money.

"Pick up all the records linking us and I'll make sure that no harm comes to you. Or your woman and her son back in Odessa."

That was clear as ice pure Finlandia.

CHAPTER 25. WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 16, 15:00.

No it couldn't get much clearer than that. Ozgan told him the address, a road just off King Street in the city centre.

"You might like to try Friday night, that's when he attends the Mosque. The office should be empty then." said Ozgan.

"What about security, alarms?" Caramarin asked.

"How should I know?" Ozgan told him. "Your problem." Timur Ozgan turned away, dismissing him.

Mehmet stood aside and Caramarin walked out, unable to believe he was still in one piece. A bonus. How could he have been so stupid as to have tried to rip off a man like Timur Ozgan? What had he been thinking of? Down in the lobby, most of the Koreans or Japanese had vanished and it was much quieter. Caramarin slumped in an easy chair and thought. First things first. He spoke to Valeriya back in Odessa and it was a weight off his mind when she replied. They chatted for a few minutes before he pretended there was another call waiting.

Next, he called his new friend, Pompiliu Stanga.

"Sorry," he said. "I've got my painting back, so I won't need your help now. Bronstein hasn't got it no more so call off your dogs."

"Well done," said Stanga, a note of sarcasm in his voice. "But we shook on the deal. Don't think I've forgotten that. I still want you to slot that bastard Gjergji Shkurti."

"There's nothing in it for me, now," said Caramarin.

"Stop whining. You made the deal. Well, what else do you want then, if not that Picasso?" asked Stanga.

Caramarin thought. Then, like lightning on a summer's day, an answer. A life for a life.

Trying to sound calm, like it was no big deal. "That girl I pretended to doom? She still with you?"

"Yes, still not earning her keep. At least she doesn't eat much," Stanga laughed. "Unless she sorts out her attitude, I'll doom her for real."

"All right then. I kill this man for you; you give me that girl."

"What the hell do you want with her? She's fucking useless."

"That's for me to decide. But I promise one hundred per cent there'll be no comeback on you," said Caramarin.

"I know there won't. One word from me and her entire family back in Moldova will find themselves in a world of hurt. Mother, father, brothers and sisters all the way down to second cousins twice removed. I have that reach, understood?"

"Loud and clear," said Caramarin. "Give me a call when you're ready for me to roll."

Hotel security was hovering nearby. Caramarin stood, zipped up his jacket and out into the lowering gloom. He glanced at his watch, and then walked through the hurrying crowds to this Subrata Mohanraj's office on King Street.

On the way, he bought a black baseball cap which he pulled down low over his eyes. He wrapped his keffiyeh scarf around his lower face. With the wind borne rain, now turning to sleet, he wasn't the only one huddled up against the weather.

The office was in a re-conditioned stone office block. The building itself was old and heavy, maybe a hundred years old or so. The stonework had been cleaned up, but was now smeared by rain and traffic fumes. Lichen or mosses stained some of the carvings.

Even not speaking English, Caramarin understood the sign outside advertising the centre as being '24 Hours'. That was good. Bright light spilled from the lobby so he walked up a short flight of stairs and pushed his way in.

The floor was marble tiles covered by a large blue rug with a corporate logo woven into it. Behind a large, cherry wood desk which took up all one wall sat two receptionists. One spared him a glance before carrying on with her chat.

Stepping out of one of the two lifts, an overweight bored looking security guard played with his smart phone. The man leaned against the receptionists' desk. The man appeared to be playing pocket billiards now. No obvious threat from any of these people.

Behind the desk, he saw a CCTV camera focused on the entrance. No surprise there – it was what he expected. Also, a notice board giving details of the businesses based in this block. He saw that Subrata Mohanraj's was up on the third floor.

On the desk was a pile of free magazines. He stood for a while leafing through a copy, getting a sense of how busy the centre was. Caramarin hoped the receptionists thought he was just killing time before an appointment. At this time of the afternoon, the lobby was quiet with just a few people, formally dressed, coming and going. He saw a courier enter, sign a register on the reception desk and then take a lift.

One of the receptionists turned and said something to him. From the raise in her voice it sounded like a question. Narcisa was right. He should learn a little English. He used one of his new words and said, "Yes, okay," with a smile. The girl turned away, satisfied. He figured she was probably used to foreigners with limited English in this city.

Behind the desk, he also saw a fire alarm panel and a monitor showing all the views from the CCTV cameras. Caramarin was pleased to see that the public spaces, such as the reception area and the upper floor lift lobbies were covered but not the offices themselves. Not wanting to linger

too long and raise the girls' suspicions, he replaced his magazine and caught the lift up to the third floor.

A glass plate on the door reading '*Subrata Mohanraj Fine Foods*' in a type-face meant to resemble Hindi writing let him glance inside. Beyond, he saw a small waiting area with two trendy Barcelona chairs and a coffee table with glossy magazines neatly fanned out. Behind that, another half open frosted glass door led to a main office. At a glance it looked like any successful, professional business.

From his angle, he saw a couple of smart, young, well dressed Asian women on the phone. One was on her computer. The woman glanced up and saw him hovering in the corridor. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

Caramarin knew he didn't look the sort who would use the services of Subrata Mohanraj. He shrugged, as if he'd taken a wrong turning and walked back to the lifts. He turned into the toilets and washed his hands. Two cubicles and two urinals. If necessary, he could hide here for a while. It all depended on how thorough their security guard was. He'd seen enough for the time being.

Walking back along the corridor, he noticed the fire escape stairs and walked down them, coming out at the far end of the reception lobby. One of the girls had disappeared and the security guard stood near the outside steps, furtively smoking.

He'd seen enough for the time. Caramarin was no expert break and entry merchant or burglar but he thought he'd be able to gain access to Mohanraj's office, no problem. Back outside, the sleet was heavier, trying but failing to become snow, with a thin skim of slush forming on the sidewalk. It was too far to walk in this so he jumped the bus up to Cheetham Hill. Fuck, this city was so expensive after Odessa. How did the locals afford to live here? Back home for that fare, he'd have been half way to Kiev.

CHAPTER 26. WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 16, 18:00.

Stepping down from the bus, Caramarin hurried across Cheetham Hill Road and let himself into the girls' house. Light from the lounge filled the hall. Inside, he saw Ewelina sitting on the two seater couch, her laptop on her knees. She'd obviously only recently come out the shower as she was wearing her white robe with a towel wrapped around her head. She glanced up before carrying on tapping away. One mule dangled from her toes. Caramarin brewed them both a mug of tea and brought it in for her. He sat next to her and waited for her to finish.

Ewelina shifted slightly to face him. Either she didn't notice or didn't care as her bathrobe slipped open to reveal a shapely white thigh.

"If you're on your internet," said Caramarin, "Could you do me a favour?"

She nodded.

"Look up a man. Gjergji Shkurti, please." Caramarin spelled out the name for her. "He's a Manchester businessman now."

"Albanian? You're mixed up with those guys? But they're..."

"Yes, I know."

He spelled out the name for Ewelina and she bent over her laptop. A few seconds later, her hand flew to her mouth.

"Oh," she said. She carried on searching for the next few minutes. There seemed to be quite a lot of entries about this man.

"What are you into, Nicu?" asked Ewelina. Her pretty face frowning with worry, her white teeth biting her lower lip.

"Go on," said Caramarin.

"It says here, he's got away with murder," she said. "Literally."

Ewelina covered her leg then gave him the low-down of some of the known activities of Gjergji Shkurti.

Since arriving in Britain a few years before he'd shown up on the police radar more than once. His first brush with the law came when a warehouse full of illegally distilled potato vodka blew up. A Polish worker was killed and another received severe third degree burns. The warehouse turned out to be run by a company owned by Shkurti. He denied all knowledge – claiming he intended the warehouse was solely for used car parts and the Poles were working on the side without his permission.

A week later, a lorry carrying imported Russian vodka went missing. The driver was found on the M62 motorway. By a miracle, the driver was still alive, if only just. He told Manchester Police he'd been ambushed by Albanian gangsters. A day later, some mix-up with the saline drip at the hospital killed the driver. Later, the vodka turned up in clubs all over the North West and Yorkshire. Again, Shkurti was hauled in for questioning but any charges dropped like a lead balloon.

Worse followed. Gjergji Shkurti's brother, Bekim, was found floating face down in the Rochdale Canal. This provoked what even the police admitted was a gang war. Over the next few months, a few Russians turned up dead. All of them shot through the head.

The Petrograd Boutique Lounge burned to the ground. It was a restaurant with a small nightclub popular with Premier League footballers and girls hoping to bed one. The blackened shell was bought by Shkurti and reopened. Nobody ever saw the chef again.

An Albanian driving along the M62 from the docks at Hull was stopped outside the Petrograd Boutique Lounge. When the car was stripped down, five kilos of pure heroin was

discovered. Once again, Gjergji Shkurti found himself called in for questioning. But, through his translator, he claimed to know nothing about anything.

Shortly after the courier was sprung from the prison van ferrying him from Strangeways prison to the courts. Two escorting security guards were badly beaten. All the other prisoners were soon recaptured but the Albanian courier was never found. Maybe he ended up in the same place as the Petrograd's chef.

"I remember that," murmured Ewelina. "The papers said one of those poor guards will never walk again." She crossed her legs, once again her thigh showed.

The gang war died down for a while but then it looked like Shkurti might have over reached himself when he was arrested in a dawn raid and tried for the murder of a Russian gangster, Yevgeny 'T-72' Malyarov. Shkurti's DNA was found at the scene. To the Crown Prosecution Service it had all the hallmarks of an open and shut case. But the only witness developed amnesia and the jury returned a 'Not Guilty' verdict. Definitely leaned on, Caramarin thought.

He'd done his share of intimidation himself in the past. Once you reminded witnesses that police protection usually lasted only until the verdict and after that the law wasn't interested, they saw matters any which way you wanted them.

Ewelina next showed him the Youtube video of the police's response to the verdict. Standing on the court's steps, Caramarin didn't need to understand English to see the anger and disappointment on the Inspector's face.

Ewelina also showed him a video of Gjergji Shkurti leaving court. The clip must have been filmed only minutes after the Inspector's. Shkurti stood behind a tall, patrician, well dressed solicitor reading a prepared statement.

Studying the video, Shkurti was dark skinned with black hair. He stood impassive, glaring at the cameras. He wore a sober navy blue suit with a well matched painted silk tie. Caramarin wasn't sure now but thought he might have seen him at the illegal bare-knuckle fight at the barn.

"While you're on your internet, see if you can find the address of a woman's refuge centre? Y'know for battered women."

She gave him a look. "I don't think I want to know what you're into, Nicu."

"It's okay. I'm not into battering women," he grinned, trying to make a joke of it.

"I know that. But there's more than one way of hurting someone, and I don't want you hurting our Narcisa," she said. Caramarin said nothing, just shook his head.

She typed and searched some more and wrote down an address for Caramarin. On an impulse Caramarin gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thank you," he said.

Neither heard the front door open. Narcisa stood in the lounge door, melting snow on her shoulders, speckling her dark hair. The look on her face, she'd seen their kiss and Ewelina's thigh. She stamped her feet and shook out her coat. Ewelina jerked away from Caramarin and closed her bathrobe. The two women spoke rapidly in English.

"Ewelina was just looking up something for me on her internet," said Caramarin with what he hoped was a winning smile.

"It's the internet, not her internet," snapped Narcisa. She stormed upstairs.

Caramarin raced after her. Her bedroom door was shut tight. He knocked twice and stepped inside. Narcisa was sitting on the end of her bed, crying. He sat next to her, draped his arm around her shoulders and drew her to him. He kissed her head. She tried to push him off but he held her close.

"It's not good enough," she wept. "I let you stay and as soon as my back's turned you're all over Ewelina and she's practically throwing herself at you."

"Come on, it wasn't like that at all. You know you can rely on your Auntie 'Lina, even if you don't trust me. She was just looking up some information for me on her computer."

"While you were looking up her legs is more like it," Narcisa cried.

"No. Anyway, you've got much better legs than her." Not strictly true, but honesty is not always the best policy.

"How would you know I've got better legs?" Narcisa sniffed.

"Let's see them and I'll prove it to you," smiled Caramarin. His hand slipped down to her thigh.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Nicu. A bad day at work and the manager had another go at me. I've been in a funny mood all day. I'm sorry." She shook off his hand. "I'm starving. Let's grab something to eat."

Caramarin handed her an Indian takeaway leaflet and some money. "Yeah, something hot and spicy. Warm us up."

Narcisa sighed and made the call. She ordered enough to feed an army. However, Caramarin noticed his money was getting low again as he paid the delivery man. A few minutes later, Caramarin noticed Narcisa and Ewelina talking more rapid English in the kitchen as they unpacked the foil containers. They looked at him several times and both looked worried.

Full, the crew sprawled out before the television. Artur rolled a couple of joints and passed them round. The tense, edgy atmosphere of earlier faded away on the heavy smoke. Caramarin inhaled deeply. He hadn't felt this relaxed for ages. Stoned, even the programme started to make some kind of sense. Narcisa took the blunt then dragged on it just as deeply. She giggled and curled up next to him.

Caramarin bumped along to the kitchen for more potato chips. The passage was at a strange, unearthly angle now. He giggled. Out of the window he saw snow falling. Fumbling with the key, he unlocked the kitchen door and watched the flakes drift to earth, covering the ugly, littered, mossy yard with whiteness.

He turned his face up to the heavens, staring up as they floated slowly to the ground, pale brown in the sodium glow of the street lights, but pure brilliant white when they landed. Each one a little cold kiss on his face. He felt Narcisa's arm slip around his waist.

"Look," he said, "there's thousands, millions, zillions of them."

Narcisa burst into laughter. And that set off Caramarin. The others crowded around them, awed like children with the snowfall as infinite flakes fell around them. Artur lit up and the green passed round some more.

"I'm getting cold," said Narcisa. She took hold of Caramarin's hand and led him into the house and upstairs. Both had a fit of the giggles half way.

Much later, as they lay together in each other's arms, he felt her body shudder with silent sobs.

"You're going to hurt me," she cried. "I just know it somehow."

"That's just the weed talking. But what makes you say that?" Which was not exactly a denial.

"You're not really looking for someone. You're not here to learn English, find work or get a normal job are you? You're looking for trouble. Ewelina told me you were interested in some Albanian gangster. You're totally in the life, aren't you? I should've known better ..."

Caramarin gripped her shoulders. "Forget the Albanian," he said. "Don't you mention him to anyone, understood? No-one at all."

He thought for a second. "Sometimes you get into something and you can't get out of it so easily. I've got a few things to sort out and then I'll see what happens. Get myself right with the world again."

He dried her eyes with his finger tip, and then kissed her.

"What do you want, Nicu? I mean really? Since you've been here, you've been beaten to a pulp, you've got no money, you're dossing on a couch and..."

"I've moved up in the world. I'm in your bed," he pointed out, squeezing her boob.

"Beast. And you're messing with the Albanians?"

"You asked what I want? Maybe a little farm, somewhere in Romania or Moldova. Out in the country. Somewhere with plum trees, maybe even a little vineyard where I can make my own brandy. A good woman to share it with. Kids running around the yard?"

Where had that come from? The weed?

Narcisa snuggled next to him. "Sounds lovely. Hope you make it."

You not we.

CHAPTER 27. THURSDAY DECEMBER 17, 10:30.

Caramarin stretched out in the now cold bed. Shit, it was much later than he thought. Switching the phone on, he saw he'd missed a few calls. Pressing redial he spoke to Mihai Pojer.

"I'm to meet you tonight at Subrata Mohanraj's office," Pojer said. Short and simple.

"Tonight?" said Caramarin. "Thought Ozgan wanted me to raid the place tomorrow. When the man's at the Mosque."

"Ozgan's brought the plans forward. Doesn't like the idea of these records out of his sight a single day longer."

"Understandable."

"By the way, Caramarin, perhaps I shouldn't tell you this but Ozgan was coming to Manchester this weekend anyway."

That took him by surprise. "Why?"

"He's been invited to Subrata Mohanraj's wedding at the Lombardia Hotel this Friday night. That's why he wanted you to find Engin Hasanov for him. Ozgan wants to give this Mohanraj the Picasso as a present."

Some of the clouds cleared from his mind. It was starting to make a little sense now. Caramarin knew valuable paintings were often used as high value currency as they were smaller and easier to transport than mountains of cash.

"So what's he going to do with his nephew now? Forgive and forget? Must've put him to some trouble when he ran off with it."

"Nephew?" laughed Pojer. "That's a joke. Hasanov is Ozgan's lover. Thought you'd have picked up on that, man. Now he's back in Ozgan's good books, it's me who's got to watch my back."

"Do you speak English? Is that why you're helping me?" Caramarin asked abruptly.

"A little – enough to get by," said Pojer. "Not a lot."

Maybe it was the weed still in his system but Caramarin was starting to get a bad feeling about this. If it wasn't for the threats against Valeriya and her family back in Odessa he would give this outing a miss. His skin goose-bumped. He ran a hand through his dark hair.

"I'll see you later," he finished at last.

Quickly, Caramarin showered and dressed. He walked through the drizzle to Narcisa's pawn brokers. She was busy with customers so he waited, looked at the wide-screen televisions. The manager, a slim, young man who took a great deal of time over his appearance was checking the tills. He had gelled hair, designer stubble, capped teeth and narrow glasses. The manager scowled at Caramarin, recognising him from the earlier CCTV footage. But the man didn't have the balls to approach him.

"You shouldn't have come, Nicu," Narcisa said.

"If that bastard says anything, tell me. I'll see how long it takes him to pull his head out of his arse."

Narcisa giggled. "That's not the answer. But I'd quite like to see that."

"I know. Look, if you can get me some more cash, I'll be grateful. But don't worry if you can't. And don't worry if I'm not back tonight, I've got a few things on. But I'll make it up to you."

Narcisa nodded but her face was sad underneath her smile, her dark eyes wet.

"I hope you make it, Nicu."

"So do I."

The manager was tapping his watch. Narcisa stretched up and kissed Caramarin.

"Goodbye," she said.

* * *

Late evening found Caramarin outside the business centre on King Street. His baseball cap was low and his keffiyeh scarf covered his lower face. He'd bought a hi-viz jacket, a pair of latex gloves and a padded envelope stuffed with a newspaper, upon which he'd written Subrata Mohanraj's office address. The envelope was tucked up his jacket against the sleet.

His breath plumed up in the cold air as he watched the traffic outside. Trying to be less obviously watching Caramarin walked round the block a few times. All senses on full alert. A young woman in a miniskirt stood smoking outside – was she an undercover cop? – but a man in a skinny t-shirt to show off his tattoos picked her up.

No one else stood loitering outside; no parked cars with hard looking men sitting in them. There was nothing outside to raise the alarm but Caramarin had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach about this. Especially as he couldn't raise Mihai Pojer's cell even after several tries.

What the hell. There was nothing to be gained by waiting any longer. Caramarin grasped the padded envelope and ran up the stairs to the reception lobby. Crossing to the desk, the envelope held before him like a shield, he found only one girl behind the desk. This evening's security guard, a scrawny youngster with the bloodshot eyes of the true stoner stood fiddling with his cell. Caramarin scrawled an illegible signature in the visitor's register. The girl said something to him.

"Yes, okay," he muttered, then hurried away from the desk before she could say anything else and waited for the lift. Maybe he hadn't got it quite right as the security guard followed him over and took the lift up to the third with him. Caramarin ducked into the gents and waited long enough for the guard to get bored and leave. Listening intently he never heard the guard speaking on his cell. Stepping out the gents, Caramarin turned left and walked along the corridor to Subrata Mohanraj's office.

The outer door stood slightly ajar. No lights shone through the frosted glass of the inner door. Caramarin paused outside, listening hard, but heard nothing. Slipping on his latex gloves he gently pushed open the outer door near the hinges to prevent any creaks. Stepping inside, he passed the Barcelona chairs and low table with the magazines in the waiting area.

Then Caramarin crouched low below the glass panel and slowly turned the handle. The inner door was also unlocked. His body quivering with nervous tension, his breathing ragged, Caramarin pushed the second door open.

The smell hit him first. The coppery metallic stench of blood. Unmistakeable. No other smell quite like it. In the dim light filtering in from the windows, he saw a man's shape behind one of the desks. Caramarin closed the door behind him. His hand groped for the light switch.

Then, standing in the corner he saw another man. A man leaning against the wall watching him. A gleam of metal flickered in the half light. His battle hardened reflexes took over. Instantly, Caramarin hurled himself at the waiting man.

He smashed into a coat stand. A woman's long overcoat and scarf wrapped itself around him as the stand fell over. The crash sounded very loud, shattering the office's silence. Caramarin picked himself up, kicking away the wreckage. He gave a nervous laugh.

Caramarin switched on the light. In its glow, he saw six desks, all with flat screen monitors on them. But what he looked at first was the man behind the desk. It was Mihai Pojer staring up at the ceiling. Very, very dead.

Pojer's throat had been cut from ear to ear and the wound gaped wide, an obscene chasm in the man's neck. Caramarin saw the open tubes of the man's windpipe and gullet. Blood covered the corpse, the desk and the floor beneath. More blood sprayed over the carpet and up the walls. Looking down, the knife handle stuck out of the man's chest between his open leather jacket.

Caramarin stepped to the desk, careful not to tread in any of the puddled blood. Carefully he dipped a finger into the gore. Still wet. The man could only have been killed very recently. Within the hour, certainly no longer than that.

Lifting his hand, Caramarin saluted the corpse of the old fighter. The man wasn't a friend, no way, but he had come to respect Pojer. The man deserved a better end than being butchered like a pig. He closed Pojer's eyes.

What was that? Caramarin ran to the office's window. Blue lights bounced off the building opposite, reflecting in its darkened windows. Two squad cars outside. Fuck-shit. Another set up. Timur Ozgan had done it again. Too late Caramarin remembered the bloody red ruin of a chopped up woman in a warehouse back in Odessa.

So it wasn't like Timur Ozgan didn't have form for a stunt like this. Caramarin knew there was something wrong about a man speaking no English being asked to get hold of documents. He should have gone with his gut instincts.

CHAPTER 28. THURSDAY DECEMBER 17, 20:00.

Caramarin knew if he was caught in this office he'd be looking at life. No alternative. The law had everything; motive and opportunity. Even the murder weapon. Once the police prosecutors went through his past, they'd throw away the key. With his history there must be a thick file on him at Interpol. Cursing his stupidity, Caramarin ran back to Pojer's body.

"Sorry, comrade," he whispered. Taking a firm hold of the handle Caramarin wrenched the knife free. A twenty centimetre long hunting knife with a serrated edge pulled out with a horrible sucking sound. Feeling disgusted, he went through Pojer's pockets. He took the man's money clip and cell. As well as a small zip-lock bag of powder. Pojer wouldn't be needing them any more.

Giving the blade a quick wipe with a tissue from a box on the next desk, Caramarin then ran out of this place of horror. Caramarin flew down the corridor, slammed open the fire escape door and took the steps down two at a time. A broken neck was the least of his worries now.

His foot skidded out from under him, he grabbed the handrail and nearly wrenched his arm out staying on his feet. Racing down, he swung around the last stair return and fetched up against the fire door opening to the reception lobby. Drawing a deep breath Caramarin pulled the door ajar, just enough to see into the lobby itself.

Dark blue uniforms. Bulky under their stab vests. Radios. Three cops were standing by the receptionist's desk. More blue light pulsating in through the plate glass windows. The girl receptionist was now standing up, looking frightened while the security guard, pulling himself together was pointing to the lifts. There was no way out this way.

Caramarin turned and ran back up the stairs. He saw a red fire alarm with a little metal hammer dangling from its chain. Ignoring the hammer, Caramarin shattered the glass with the knife

hilt. Instantly, the stairs filled with deafening sound. He ran up to the second floor landing. The corridor was identical with the third, except for some neutral abstract prints on the wall. Caramarin charged along the corridor to its end. Another glass topped office door blocked his way.

Hardly pausing in his headlong rush, Caramarin kicked out at the door. The wood round the lock splintered but held. He booted it again, even harder this time. The lock shattered and the door slammed open, bouncing back into his face.

Caramarin charged into the second floor office. After the fluorescent glare of the stairs, his night vision was gone. All he could make out was the dim outline of desks to his left and the blue flashes from the cop cars outside. He ran over to the plate windows.

His foot caught something, he tripped up, falling flat on his face. He threw out his arms and crashed to the floor. A jolt of agony shot up his left arm. His cheek scraped over the carpet tiles. To one side, Caramarin heard a waste paper bin clattering away. Picking himself up again, he paused for breath.

Underneath the office window were two cop cars, their blue lights flashing, illuminating the street. Standing next to their cars was another couple of cops. Caramarin sucked in air, panting like a dog, waiting for his heart to slow a little. In the dim, flashing half light, he examined the window. Being an older refurbished office, he was in luck.

This office hadn't been fitted with toughened plate glass windows which couldn't be opened and an air-con system. This was an older sash window. So he could open the window easily. He wrenched the latch down and then pushed the frame up. Only made a slight noise, the cops down below wouldn't notice. Peering outside, Caramarin saw a narrow ledge, maybe twenty centimetres wide running along the side of the building.

Caramarin levered himself up and stepped out onto the ledge then pushed the window closed behind him. If the stone shelf extended around the business centre, he could maybe shuffle round to the other side to the back alley and drop down out of sight of the cops. He'd have to be quick,

though, before more of the bastards showed up. Slipping off the latex gloves he stuffed them deep in his pocket.

He sucked in cold, damp air. Clinging on with his fingertips to the frame, Caramarin edged out along the worn, corroded ledge, shuffling his feet along the stone. Risking a glance down, he saw no response from the cops in the side street below. Behind him, the electronic din from the fire alarm drowned out any sounds of the cops in the building. And more importantly it stopped them hearing him.

Now Caramarin had to let go of the partial security of the frame. Back to the wall, he edged along. Left foot, a slide, now right foot. Left foot, slide, now right. Take it easy. A couple of metres ahead, the next window, its wider sill giving him a little more space than the mere twenty centimetres. His goal. Keep breathing, just concentrate on his footing. Don't worry about the fall or the cops. Left foot, slide, now right.

Now at the next window; its sill letting him stand free for a moment before carrying on. Can only take a short rest. A few deep breaths, drawing oxygen deep into his lungs. His heart rate telling him time still important. Clinging on with fingertips again, edging back out along the narrow stone shelf. Another couple of windows coming up in a few metres. No problems. If you're a mountain goat.

Below, shouting. Orders. An increased flurry of radio traffic from the cops. Don't look down. Take no notice. More blue lights and a different siren joining the squalling below. Caramarin took a chance and glanced. A large van with a number on its roof joined the two squad cars. Guessed that was the ambulance.

Shuffle along, only a couple of metres to go to the next set of windows. Ankle tendons starting to ache with strain. Glad he wore a decent pair of walking boots with a deep tread and grip. Left foot sliding along, following with right. And again. And again. Slow and easy. Made the

window sills. Relax. Pause for just a moment. Time important. But just as important was not falling off to the street down under.

That's enough rest. C'mon. Oh, Fuck-shit. At the end of the sill, just where it narrowed was a plastic milk container. Someone too lazy to take the fucking thing to the fridge. Left it outside in the cold. Careful, can't afford to knock it off the ledge. No way would the cops miss a two litre bottle three quarters full of milk smashing to the ground, milk splashing in a white explosion every which way just a few metres from where they're standing.

Edge up to the carton. Left leg high. Step over it. Slide the left leg along a few centimetres. A little more. That's better. Now, right leg high. Shit. Clipped the top of the bottle. A wobble. Not enough. The container rocked, teetered then rested back on its base.

Ignore it. Safe. Carry on. Next set of windows only a few more metres on. After that, could turn the corner and be out of immediate sight of any cops chancing to look up. Unless there were more now posted at the rear of the building. Worry about that if that happens.

Suddenly his left foot shooting out from under him. Swaying forward, the street below rearing into view. The squad cars, the ambulance looming before him. Blue light pulsing in his eyes. Arms flailing back, banging his wrist on the stone wall. Painful. Using all the strength in his ankles, tendons stretched to the max. Pushing his body flat against the wall. Fingers gripping the tiniest cracks between the blocks. A grunt escaping his lips.

Caramarin stood there trembling, shaking like a leaf. His breath ragged and hoarse. Glancing down, saw a mess of pigeon shit. Couldn't carry on with this. No way. But what's the alternative? Life with a minimum of twenty to twenty-five? No mercy shown after they checked his past with Interpol. They'd throw away the fucking key. Might as well be dead as do a stretch like that. He'd be an old man when he come out. His breathing gradually slowing, becoming normal. Looked along the shelf.

The drizzle started up again, sleet mixed in with the rain. That fine rain that soaked you anyway. Can live with that but the worn stone ledge now greasy and slick. Treacherous. Just like that bastard Timur Ozgan. Want to escape. Want to live. Want to get even. Want to come out ahead.

Keep shuffling along. Don't think of revenge now. A luxury. Just concentrate on this narrow, worn ledge. That's what's important now. Nothing else. Fingers getting numb with cold and the effort of clinging onto tiny crevices in the stonework. No, don't hurry, just go carefully. The third set of windows gradually coming closer. Temporary safety getting larger with every small step.

The fire alarm louder now with every centimetre closer to the window sill. The radioed orders echoing up from below, the sound bouncing off the opposite building. A quick look up at the building over the way.

The windows the other side of the road all lit up. Another office, people working late at their desks. Most on their phones. Some manageress walking about, a file in her hand. Caramarin standing on this ledge, still with this fuckin' hi-viz on. Bright as Vegas. No way could those workers not have noticed the police outside. Must be wondering what's going on.

Fuck-shit. One of the girls looking out her window, looking down at the cop cars and ambulance, headset clamped to her ear. Just maybe might not see him; he out in the dark, she in a bright lit office. Maybe concentrating on making her sale. But he should have ditched the hi-viz earlier. Pick up the pace. Shuffle a little faster. Nearly at the next window sill now. Only a few centimetres to go. Made it. Has that girl said anything?

Suddenly, the silence as loud as the blare, the fire alarm fell silent.

CHAPTER 29. THURSDAY DECEMBER 17, 20:15.

Hearing the echoes of the fire alarm still ringing in the ears for a moment before realising the clanging has stopped. Need to be quiet now as well as careful. The cops and paramedics' voices clearer, less distorted now. In the near distance, more sirens, the sound booming off the buildings, street noise muffling their clarity.

Dragging more cold air into the lungs. More sleet swirling around his face. Two deep breaths, three, four. Flexing chilled fingers, restoring some circulation. On now. Now. Keep going. Move away from the window and round the corner next. Left foot, slide along, now right following. Left, right.

What's that. A silver slug out on the ledge? A nudge with the side of the foot. No, some guy's tadpole bag. A late night shag after working hours? A quickie over a desk? Rubber tossed out the window. Dirty bastard. Forget it. Not important. Keep moving.

Now at the corner. A gust of wind blowing sleet into his face. Stinging chill flakes mixed with wetness. Blinking, a quick head shake. Very carefully, edge round the corner. Another step, another slip... careful... body edging round the corner, the sharp angle digging into his back, snagging the hi-viz, rucking up the polyester. Tricky, another shuffle, now bring the right leg round.

A pause and a breath of air. Out of sight of the cops in the side road. Their voices muted now and the blue flashes less insistent. Looking down, careful don't lean too far over.

Caramarin saw he was standing at the tip of an 'L' shaped wall. Below him, taking up the inner part of the 'L' was a small goods yard, lit by a security spotlight. The yard was enclosed by a corrugated metal wall, topped with coils of barbed wire. Old polythene bags and papers were snagged in the wire, mournfully fluttering in the chill breeze.

Overfilled dumpsters lined up against one wall with a stack of abandoned pallets piled up near them. Straining his eyes in the gloom, looking along the wall, Caramarin spotted a drainpipe. Marvellous. Careful, don't want to fall now the end is in sight. The wind getting up, a billow of sleet in the face, this ledge more wet and slippery. Control breathing, control hope, glide along.

Foot slipping on a patch of moss or lichen. Get balance back. Easy. Only a hundred centimetres to go, fifty, thirty, ten, one, fingertips quivering with tension. Safety. Sort of. Hand grasping the cast iron down-spout like it was his best friend. Which, just at the moment it was. Shuffled over and gripped it with both hands.

A commotion of noise coming from the office block behind him. Very little time. Caramarin swung out into space and shinned down the drainpipe and into the goods yard. Creaking noises from the pipe, and it trembled under his weight but it held firm. Caramarin dropped the last metre into the yard.

In the drizzle the cobbles were slick and treacherous underfoot. He ran to the dumpsters, shrugging off his hi-viz. He stuffed it deep into the first dumpster then pressed down its lid as hard as he could. Grabbing a nearby pallet, Caramarin propped it on the dumpster's lid to make a crude ladder against the corrugated metal wall.

Scrambled up on the dumpster, slipping on its greasy, sleety, wet surface. Almost fell back into the yard. Would be stupid to fail right at the end. He climbed up the pallet, and swung a leg over a narrow part of the barbed wire, resting his foot on the narrow top of the corrugated metal. The barbs snagged his jeans, pricked his calf. A quick glance along the back alley. No-one in sight yet. But not much time.

Caramarin gripped the wire between the barbs then swung his right leg over too. The pallet fell away off the dumpster, clattering to the cobbled yard floor. Caramarin swayed on his perch at the top of the fence then, trusting to fortune, he let go and dropped to the alley outside. From his

awkward position, he couldn't judge his drop properly. Couldn't do a Paratrooper roll. He fell heavily; hitting his side, banging his knee, winding himself.

No time to waste before the cops sealed off the rear of the office block. Caramarin picked himself up and limped down the narrow, dark alley. Turned the corner, down the next side street and then back onto the hustle and bustle of Cross Street. He glanced behind him and saw a few cops grouped around the entrance to the office block. One of them, a burly young man, looked up and pointed.

The cop said something to the others and stepped off the entrance stairs. Caramarin turned and dodged through the crowds, for an instant out of view. Hurrying his pace, ignoring the pain from his knee, Caramarin jogged down Cross Street. Risking a look behind. The cop was following, mouth bent to his radio.

Maybe the cop had a description from the security guard or the receptionist. Hoping his knee wouldn't give out, Caramarin broke into a run along the crowded street; he elbowed aside a woman in a burqa, she stumbled and fell behind him. Her shopping strewn over the sidewalk. Shoved aside a young woman pushing a double buggy who shouted abuse, barged past a well dressed business man.

He ran along, dodging out into the road to avoid a knot of young Afro men. The cop was following, pounding along. Caramarin might as well have a neon sign over him flashing 'Stop! Murderer!'.

Heard a siren wailing behind him. Fuck-shit. The cop had called up the cavalry. Caramarin raced past a large group of women waiting for a tram, for a moment out of view of the cop. Sprinted down some side street. This wasn't as solidly crowded as Cross Street but still busy.

It was lined with smaller shops of a more ethnic character. Passed a small supermarket. Fruit and vegetables stacked in racks and boxes outside. Hanging in the window, a rack of blood red

Santa costumes, complete with cotton wool beards. Caramarin braked and burst into the shop, already fumbling in his breast pocket.

An elderly Indian looking gent with a white Islamic beard stared goggle-eyed at Caramarin. The old man must have thought he was about to be robbed as he raised his hands disarmingly. Caramarin threw a purple twenty onto the till and snatched up a Santa suit from its rack. Several more tumbled unheeded to the floor.

In front of the staring man and his few Asian customers, Caramarin shrugged off his combat jacket and pulled on the Santa jacket over his head. No time to take off his boots so just stepped into the red trousers. At this point he couldn't care less about ripping them. Shoved the hat on with its long, floppy crown and adjusted the itchy beard over his chin. A quick glance at his reflection in the shop window. Totally unrecognisable now.

The shopkeeper had laid out his change on a magazine by the till. The man had backed as far as possible away from the till and the dangerous lunatic who had burst into his store. Caramarin took enough for the bus fare but left the rest. He shook his head forcefully at the old gent and hoped the man understood that meant not to say anything. Then he rolled up his jacket around the bulk of the hunting knife and shoved the bundle into a plastic bag. He nodded politely to the customers and stepped outside. As he closed the door he heard them start talking behind him.

He saw no cops in this street up to now. Feeling a little calmer, he turned away from Cross Street and walked the other way up to Market Street. A few people glanced at him in passing. Caramarin hoped he just looked like a lad out on the lash for the night. And not like a man wanted for questioning.

Caramarin jumped the first bus he saw without caring where it went as long as it took him out of Manchester's city centre. He sat at the back, head down, out of sight behind the steamed up window. It seemed like the first chance to relax for ages. The bus trundled along the main shopping street of Deansgate towards a suburb called Stretford.

No-one chose to sit next to him. Which was hardly surprising. Heading into the city centre, on the other side of the road, several squad cars raced past. Caramarin shrank back in his seat. But no way could they spot him hiding at the back behind condensed windows.

He waited a few kilometres until the bus drove through a housing estate. Definitely no CCTV cameras here. Caramarin stepped off. Instantly, sleet bejewelled his Santa suit. Checking his street atlas he started walking. Halfway along a small parade of shops, Caramarin saw a barber's shop was still open. It had pictures of African-American sports stars in the window.

A tall man in a Hawaiian shirt with short dreadlocks was shaving gang stripes into a young man's cropped forehead. They both looked amazed when Caramarin walked in wearing his blood red Santa suit. Too polite, or maybe too worried, to let their jaws hang open but the effect was the same.

Caramarin took a seat next to an older black man took off his fake beard and waited. As soon as the stripes were etched and the young man brushed down, the barber spoke to Caramarin and gestured to the chair. The older man next to Caramarin nudged him forward. Obviously, they wanted rid of this crazy white dude before he picked up a pair of scissors and went berserk. He noticed the young man take his empty seat instead of leaving. Just in case something happened.

Caramarin gestured to the clippers and mimed shaving his head. The barber looked at his two customers. Caramarin knew what the man was thinking. Wishing he had a few more Afro men in the place. Preferably big strong men who worked the doors.

Pointing to the shortest setting; a number one. He smiled in the mirror, catching the gaze of the two customers behind him. He hoped he looked non-threatening but the two men still looked wary. Then he mimed shaving his head again.

With a shrug of his shoulders, the barber set to work, clippers buzzing like an angry bee. Within seconds, Caramarin's long dark hair fell to the floor around him. In a way he felt a little like Samson losing his strength. The barber worked quickly and within minutes he'd finished. Caramarin

stood, now with short stubble covering his head. He ran a hand over his head feeling his bumps, a chill on his ears. Looking in the mirror, he had to agree. Yes, he looked different now. It had been years since he'd had a convict cut. And then it was a genuine one.

The barber and his customers looked pleased after he paid and left. Pleased and well relieved that they hadn't had to deal with a raging lunatic after all.

A group of young men lounging by a pub watched Santa pass. They looked at each other, nodded, and then swung down from their wall. Caramarin's troubles weren't over that evening.

CHAPTER 30. THURSDAY DECEMBER 17, 21:40.

His sixth sense kicked in as he passed a metal-shuttered betting shop set by itself on an expanse of cracked, rain swept concrete. A concrete and burned brick building looking like a graffiti daubed Second World War blockhouse. There was no attempt to soften this building or make it inviting. It was pure brutal function only.

One flickering street light at the edge of the parking lot cast more shadows than illumination. Fine rain blew in misty shrouds across the light. Like a local, his head was down as the rain drifted into his face, collecting wetly on his new stubble.

He knew he looked like an idiot or a drunk, walking along in a bright red Santa outfit. But that was better than sitting in a police cell waiting to be interrogated. Behind him, he heard footsteps. That little bit too close behind. Caramarin stepped to one side. Let them pass, no problem. One of the lads shoulder jostled him. Even then, Caramarin wanted to let it ride. He had more than enough on his mind to be going on with instead of dealing with three local toughs.

The young men were obviously from this estate. No one else would have any reason or wish to be here at this time of night. Two wore baggy low-riser jeans, no belts, crotch half way to their knees, the other trackie bottoms. All wore black padded jackets. Maybe it was a gang thing or maybe simply to make them harder to identify on CCTV. They all looked to be late teens. Even in this half light, they had a pinched, taut edgy look to them.

One, the smallest and spottiest of the three, said something to Caramarin. His accent harsh. Caramarin shrugged, spread his arms and gave a little smile. Tried to look friendly and non-threatening but didn't think that tactic would work tonight. Especially as with a bruised face and shaved head he had difficulties with both the friendly and looking non-threatening parts.

The lad looked to his two friends. No idea what he said but Caramarin picked up the word 'fucking'. Caramarin knew there was only one way this was going down tonight. The lad held his palm out while the other two split up to take him from the sides. Classic pincer movement.

No way. Get your retaliation in first. Not prepared to let these fools get the first blow in. With no warning. Caramarin jerked up his right arm, pivoted on his heel and smashed his elbow direct into the little guy's face. Throwing all his weight behind the blow.

The shot mashed the little guy's lips against his teeth, carrying on into his mouth, Caramarin felt teeth break in there. The young man staggered back, his face a mask of shock and pain. He said something through his broken mouth, no idea what but didn't sound like he was a happy man at the moment.

Instantly, his Paratrooper reflexes taking over, Caramarin wheeled on his left foot, facing the man on his left side. This guy was slightly larger but not up to Caramarin's height or build. Had a neck tattoo edging out from the top of his jacket. The lad looked tense and expectant. A tense grin on his face.

Caramarin smiled a terrible smile. All the frustrations with his day were condensed into that one punch. His old drill instructor back in initial training had told his recruits to punch through the thing you were hitting. Caramarin aimed at the back of the young man's head. Through his face. Thought he'd knocked the young man's head off. Like he'd care.

The blow hammered into the young man like a pile driver. Cartilage smashed as his nose moved to the side and spread out over his face. The thug gave out a small birdlike sound of distress, his feet shot out from under, then he collapsed. The man's head hammered onto the sidewalk slabs.

Suddenly Caramarin felt a huge blow of pain down by his kidneys. Rode the wave of red agony flooding his brain. Again, with his right elbow now up at shoulder height, he spun around on the ball of his foot, his hard elbow connecting with the third man's chin. The impact knocked the man back.

Caramarin jabbed out, with his left, another glancing blow, then followed through with his right fist. A harder blow but not quite hard enough. The young man's padded jacket absorbed much of the impact on his chest. The man fell back one, two paces.

Caramarin glanced at the first, smallest man. He was now spitting out blood and fragments of teeth onto the concrete. His eyes wild like a rabid rat's. Caramarin glided up and kicked him hard on the forehead. The lad's rat like eyes rolled up into his head. Then he hit the floor like he'd been hit by a truck.

The third lad launched a round-house kick at Caramarin like he'd seen in too many kung-fu movies. Caramarin grabbed the lad's ankle above his white trainer and flipped him over onto his back. His spine slammed onto the concrete with a crash. His head banged onto the floor. Not even his woollen beanie hat could save his skull from such an impact. The lad groaned.

Under other circumstances, Caramarin would have respected that lad. Give him his due, the young man had balls. He started to get up again, his mouth saying one of the few English words Caramarin understood. It began with an F. Enough.

Caramarin kicked out, connecting with the man's ribs, the force lifting him off the cracked concrete. The thug rolled over. Again, he tried to get back up, levering himself up with his palms to the rough concrete. Caramarin stamped on the man's right hand. Felt something shatter under his heel. No way was he using that fist again for a while.

This time the young man cried out, a shriek of animal agony. Howling up to the one remaining street light. The man raised his eyes from the concrete up to Caramarin towering above him. The man was gabbling something quickly. A grin flickering around his mouth but not reaching his eyes. No idea what he was saying but sounded like he'd had enough.

Caramarin stepped back. Away from the three young thugs. Two were lying still where they'd fallen. The third was now sitting up, clutching his broken hand to his chest. This man had lost

all interest in carrying on with the fight. Caramarin reckoned Ewelina's friends at the Accident and Emergency at Manchester Royal Infirmary would be kept busy tonight.

"Wrong man, wrong time," Caramarin said to himself.

He arched his back. His kidney area flared with pain. More of Ewelina's stolen codeine tablets for him tonight. Didn't think the men would be calling up reinforcements any time soon but he still didn't want to meet up with any more of their rat pack mates tonight. He turned away from the battleground and carried on. The pain in his lower back descended into a throbbing ache.

CHAPTER 31. THURSDAY DECEMBER 17, 22:30.

Caramarin knocked and Narcisa let him in.

"Where have you been? I've been worried about you. And why are you dressed as Santa?"

"Ho, Ho, Ho," said Caramarin. He'd picked up from their TV that's what Santa Clauses were supposed to say. He tried to give her a kiss, but Narcisa pushed him away.

"That was my present," he said.

"I'd prefer jewellery or perfume. Or maybe just an answer," she retorted.

"Sorry, I forgot to switch my phone back on. I had some men to see."

"I see. Reindeer herders were they? Or maybe toy makers?"

"What?"

"Would explain why you're dressed in that silly outfit."

"I thought it would make you laugh," said Caramarin. "I'm sorry it didn't." He took off the costume and then stepped into the kitchen to see if there was anything to eat. Or any more painkillers.

Narcisa followed him in. "And why have you shaved your head? It doesn't suit you."

She started buttering bread, the palette knife flashing angrily as she worked, gouging holes in the bread.

"I just fancied a change. And it's easier to manage like this." The excuse sounded thin, even to his ears.

Narcisa sighed. "I'm sorry I was snappy. I've been in a funny mood today. The manager's been on my case all day but I took out a moody loan on a customer and got some more money for you."

She handed over a small roll of notes.

"Please, pay this back as soon as you can. Before any paperwork starts going out. I'm trusting you, Nicu, but I know I shouldn't." Her dark brown eyes upturned, apprehensive.

This time, Caramarin took her shoulders and kissed her. Kissed her deeply. His hand dropped to her bottom, pulling her closer. She was a good woman, she deserved better than him. Maybe she knew that, too.

Fuck-shit. Caramarin had been here long enough to recognise the theme tune of the local news. Probably a bit early to worry, but a sharp reporter tipped off by the cops might have been quick enough to file some material at the studios.

He pushed Narcisa away, raced back down the hall into the girls' front lounge. Ewelina and Marta were huddled together over the laptop giggling over some freshly uploaded party photos on Facebook. Ewelina wore her usual white bathrobe. She clutched it closed, not wishing to risk another upset with Narcisa. The television was only background noise but both looked up, startled, as Caramarin burst in and changed the channel to something, anything else.

"Hey, I was watching that," said Marta.

He rapidly scrolled through the channels until an R'n'B music video showed.

"All men are perverts," laughed Ewelina. "Nicu only wants to watch the dancers' booties.

"Narcisa not enough any more?" said Marta.

Caramarin said nothing but returned to the kitchen, keeping hold of the remote.

"What are you up to, Nicu? I wish you'd tell me," asked Narcisa.

"You don't want to know. Honestly, you don't want to know."

They returned to the lounge and Caramarin ate the sandwiches, swallowing a Tramadol with some milk. As the pain ebbed, he started to drift off in the warmth of the room. Only problem was, Narcisa sat at her end of the couch, her legs tucked under her, her arms crossed. Not speaking. He threw his legs out and his head nodded forward.

An alarm startled him awake. What? It took a moment to snap alert to realise where he was. He shook his head.

"It's yours," said Narcisa. "Maybe one of Santa's helpers needing you."

Caramarin fumbled his cell out. Pompiliu Stanga. What the fuck did that man want?

Caramarin listened. All the girls heard was him saying, "yeah, yeah, I'll be there."

"I'm sorry, I've got to nip out for a while. Won't be long." Caramarin felt shattered. Truly exhausted. He could really have done without this. All he wanted to do was rest, needing to lie low and stay out of sight for a while.

Narcisa looked up. "Off to see the toy makers?"

"Not exactly. Will you call me a cab?" He tossed Narcisa his phone. He dragged himself upstairs. As he climbed the stairs, he heard the girls talking. They spoke English but he heard his name mentioned more than once. Caramarin couldn't face going out again. Needing a pick-up, he remembered the little bag of white powder he'd taken off Pojer's body.

Caramarin dipped a finger tip into the powder and licked it. His face lit up as his tongue registered the familiar sensations. Cocaine and first rate. Great. Crossing to the bathroom, he locked himself in and chopped himself a line. Only a small one as he'd not snorted for ages and there wasn't much left anyway. Caramarin rolled up a note then stooped over the cistern lid.

A moment of clarity stabbed his mind. Did he really want to go back on the Bolivian marching powder again? Thinking about it, he realised he hadn't snorted since leaving Odessa so his body was clean at the moment. But he needed a little extra if he was going to get through whatever

Stanga wanted tonight. With his lip curled in self-disgust he snorted up the line. Straightening up he wiped down the lid, then flushed the toilet.

The over familiar rush hit him like a velvet wrapped punch. His exhaustion vanished with the chemical high. For a while he felt like a tiger with muscles of iron and tendons of steel. He slipped on his jacket and keffiyeh scarf and bounced back downstairs.

He scooped up Narcisa and kissed her; then kissed her again, more deeply, before setting her down. She looked confused, her deep brown eyes frowning. She opened her mouth to speak but Caramarin didn't give her a chance by kissing her a third time. Half way through his passion the cab blew its horn so Caramarin escaped before she said anything more than a quick good-bye. Great.

Outside of Stanga's social club, Caramarin stepped out of the cab, and nodded to the doormen on duty. One opened the door for him and Caramarin stepped into a wall of R'n'B sound. The room throbbed with the bass beat cranked up. Spotlights lit up the stage, leaving the room in semi darkness. Despite the hour, the room was mostly full. He thought most of the men were East Europeans but saw a group of Turkish looking guys in one corner. But what hit his eyes first were the three girls up on the stage.

All were nearly naked. As he stood there, one dropped her bra onto the stage to cheers and wolf whistles from the men. She reached behind her, letting her hair flow down her back like a golden waterfall. She arched her back, her magnificent globe-like breasts pointing straight up at the ceiling. Caramarin lost interest. Fakes.

The athletic girl in the middle; a bright orange glow to her skin from fake tan, was upside down, her thigh twisted around a pole, slowly spinning down to the floor. Her long hair brushed the floor. Incredibly strong thigh muscles. Her arms stretched out to the men, as if imploring them to join her, as if only they could satisfy her needs.

But it was the third girl who caught Caramarin's eye. She didn't have the physique of an athlete and was perhaps a little shorter than the other two. The dancer had full breasts and dark

brown or black hair. He saw a tattoo snaking down her thigh. Apart from that, from this distance, she kind of reminded Caramarin of his girl, Valeriya, back in Odessa.

Suddenly he felt very homesick. What the hell was he still doing in this horrible, rain-soaked city? As he stared, the girl untied one side of her thong. The crowd cheered. She undid the other side, then slid the tiny thong between her legs.

Caramarin bulled his way to the front of the crowd, his eyes fixed on the third girl as she stripped. Their musical piece ended and immediately the girls waved and ran off the stage. There was a rush of men to the bar. More music, with only slightly less bass than before. Caramarin came out of his trance and peered through the gloom. To one side, with a good view of the stage, he saw Stanga's driver, Tibor Budescu, and some of his men. Caramarin pushed his way over.

"Dressed for a night out?" commented Budescu.

"My good suit's still at the cleaners," Caramarin said.

Budescu poured out vodkas. The men clinked glasses and downed the firewater in one. Caramarin glanced at his empty glass. Budescu took the hint and poured again.

"There'll be dancing again soon. We'll watch that, then I'll take you to see the boss," said Budescu.

The same three girls came back out, this time dressed in pink sequined cow-girl outfits. Caramarin had eyes only for the shorter girl with the big breasts. Stetsons off first, tiny bolero jackets next. The girl noticed Caramarin sitting next to Budescu and figured he might be important. She tossed her thong to him, but Budescu, laughing, snatched it out of the air one handed. The dancers finished off wearing only white cowboy boots.

"Not bad," said Budescu. "Noticed you staring at Ada. The boss might be able to fix you up, if you're interested?" Caramarin nodded, light headed; the coke's buzz mixed with vodka and exhaustion.

Budescu led the way to the side of the club. He pushed open a door near the stage leading to offices and storerooms. The noise level dropped but the heavy bass vibrated through the floor. A stack of cola boxes took up half the corridor. Budescu pushed open a door. A man jumped up from behind a cheap office desk. Several flat-screen monitors filled the desk.

"Fuck's sake, Budescu, I nearly shit myself," the man said. On the desk was a small mirror with a few fat lines laid out. A rolled up note lay on the mirror. Several brochures for luxury cruise holidays were piled up on one end of the desk.

Budescu laughed. "With what the boss pays the cops, we'd get plenty of notice of a raid." The man sat down again. Caramarin searched his memory, eventually coming up with the name of Daniel Perianu, the nightclub's manager.

"Any chance of some?" asked Caramarin. Trying to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

CHAPTER 32. THURSDAY DECEMBER 17, 10:30.

"Sure. Don't be greedy Daniel," Budescu said.

Caramarin watched Daniel Perianu inhale before the manager handed over the rolled up twenty. Caramarin stooped and then snorted a line himself. Just to keep the high going. After what he'd been through recently, he felt he needed a little lift. Not enough to get off his face, just keep the buzz on.

Stanga walked into the office and shook hands over the desk with Caramarin. The gang head spoke quietly to Tibor Budescu, who then left.

"Heard on the radio someone's been found stabbed in town. Funny, the description put out matched you quite well. Even down to the combat jacket. Except I see you've shaved your head since I last saw you," Stanga said.

"Nothing to do with me, I've not killed anyone," Caramarin said. "I just fancied a change of hairstyle." Very unconvincing, even to his own ears.

"What a coincidence. Be interesting when they release any CCTV pictures," Stanga grinned.

"They won't be as interesting as these," he said, pointing to one of the monitors focussing on the gyrating dancers up on the stage.

"Depends what your interests are," Stanga said enigmatically.

Even through his coke buzz, Caramarin wanted to change the conversation. "You've got a gun for me if you want me to doom this Albanian?"

"The gun's not on the premises," said Stanga, "I pay a tonne of protection but I'm not that stupid."

Caramarin nodded, a grin wrapped round his face. Everything was starting to feel good and tight again. All his aches and pains now vanished. Felt like a tiger burning bright.

"Are you listening?" said Stanga with irritation in his voice.

"That bastard Gjergji Shkurti visits the North Manchester Mosque on Woodlands Road before noon. He'll have his guards with him, of course, but they won't take any shooters into a Mosque. You're dark enough to pass as a Moslem – maybe a Turk or something.

"Wrap that scarf around your face, then doom him as he steps out his car. Run round the corner to Woodland Street where my driver will pick you up. He'll give you a pistol now. No problems."

Perianu nodded at Budescu's part in the plan.

"Tibor'll get me out of this city after?"

"Of course," said Stanga. "I don't want you hanging around pointing the finger after this."

"But won't the Albanians know it's you ordered the hit?"

"Possibly. But I'm not the only one Shkurti has in his sights. He's been a busy little fucker since he come here. I'm not his only enemy. And I'll have one great alibi," Stanga said. "Keep it simple. Foolproof."

Caramarin thought. His thinking raced through his brain. Thoughts came and went like meteors flashing through the night, but leaving darkness not illumination behind. It was getting hard to keep track of them all.

"What about the girl? How do I know she's safe? Not like I can take her on a hit with me, some catatonic girl," Caramarin asked.

"Well, what do you want to do with the useless bitch? As long as she says nothing about me or my business, I don't give a shit what you do with her after," said Stanga.

Caramarin knew he could rely on himself only. No one else. Of course, he needed to get out of Manchester quickly before the cops hauled him in; but if he played his cards right he might have enough time.

"I'll pick her up myself after I've doomed that Albanian. She's still here? In the rooms above this club?"

Stanga's mouth pulled down. He didn't look too pleased at the thought of Caramarin returning to his premises.

"Sure, pick her up afterwards. But no comebacks, okay."

"I promise. No comebacks," said Caramarin. The talk died as the men sat in the dingy office, the thumping bass banging through the walls. Perianu offered Caramarin another line. Caramarin leafed through the cruise brochures looking at the exotic destinations he'd never be able to afford while keeping one eye on the CCTV of the strippers. Stanga scrolled through his cell.

Budescu came back. He unrolled a newspaper on the desk. A matt black CZ-75 semi-automatic slid out onto the wooden surface. It looked the same piece as the one the other day. Caramarin popped out the magazine. This time it was nearly full. Racked the slide. The pistol worked like an evil dream.

"That'll do for me," said Caramarin. He pocketed the pistol. It balanced up the hunting knife on the other side.

There was a knock on the door. Ada, the dancer Caramarin had noticed earlier, stepped into the office.

"You wanted me, boss?" her voice was low. She had thrown an oversized sweatshirt over herself, but Caramarin noticed the swell of her breasts underneath the baggy garment. She wrapped her arms around herself.

"Take this gentleman up to your room. Show him a good time," Stanga commanded. The girl nodded. Up close, much of her glamour had done and she looked worn down and exhausted.

Tired lines framed her eyes and mouth and her make up barely concealed the shadows under her eyes. She was even shorter in flat shoes. She turned and walked out of the office, her shoulders down.

Caramarin looked at the other men.

"Well, what are you waiting for? She's a right dirty bitch. Does anything," said Stanga. "I'll see you back in the club when you've finished."

Caramarin followed Ada along the corridor and up a narrow flight of concrete stairs. He noticed damp patches on the walls. The girl opened a door and crossed to a bed. The room smelled of cheap perfume and cigarettes. The shadeless energy saving bulb cast a sickly, wan light over the room. She sat on the bed.

"Well, what do you want then?" she asked in a dull, flat voice. In the quiet, he heard a bed banging against the wall next door. A shriek of forced laughter. Underneath that, the unending bass beat from the club.

Despite his coke high, Caramarin felt his cock shrivel to the size of a gherkin. Suddenly, he wanted out. Just wanted to go back to Narcisa. Yeah, she'd probably be asleep by now, but fuckin' hell, didn't fancy this girl at all now.

"C'mon, man, boss says anything at all," she said. She pulled off her sweatshirt, then knelt on all fours on the bed, her hair falling around her face. Like she didn't want to see him either. She pulled aside her thong and spread her fleshy lips with one hand, her opening dark in the dimly lit room.

"There's some rubbers in the drawer if you want. Or you can do me bareback if you prefer. But not if you want to take me up the bum."

"Some other time," said Caramarin. "Not your fault but I'm not in the mood tonight."

"What about a blow? Or a hand-job? Give you a stiffy?"

"Look, put your panties back on." Caramarin thought for a moment, his ideas coming a little more into focus now.

"What about that girl in the room two doors down?" asked Caramarin. "The one that was locked up?"

"Her, that stupid Moldovan bitch; why, do you fancy a threesome?" Ada spat. "She's useless, doesn't want to do anything. Just sits there now, crying her eyes out."

"Have you heard what's going to happen to her?"

"How should I know? The boss doesn't tell me his plans. I suppose he'll get rid of her if she doesn't pull her weight any time soon. Move her on or something." Ada shrugged, the matter clearly not important to her.

Caramarin ran his hand over his stubble. Didn't want to raise suspicions by pushing the subject any further. He felt sorry for Ada, pitied her. She'd grown used to the life she was leading. But what could he do about it? He pushed away from the wall, opened the bedroom door and then walked downstairs.

Stanga and Budescu looked up as Caramarin returned to the club. The stage was empty and dark. The lights were up on the main floor which was thinning out now, most of the men having to work long hours tomorrow. Or technically today, Caramarin thought.

"That was quick. We'll have to call you Mr. Rapido," laughed Stanga. "Hope you're as quick dooming that Albanian."

Caramarin turned to Budescu. "Make sure you're in the right place with the engine running. I'm relying on you."

The big man nodded agreement. "Sure, I won't let you down."

"See you, then," said Caramarin. He followed the customers out of the club into the damp chill of the night air. As he left, he heard snatches of various East European languages. Mostly Polish, some Russians, but a number of Romanians and, he thought, Bulgarians.

Caramarin caught a cab back up to Crumpsall, his mind weighed down as heavily as his many pocketed jacket. The house was in total darkness now. He let himself in, kicked off his boots then rolled up his jacket and hid it under the couch.

Maybe it was the coke but he couldn't find sleep; his thoughts chasing each other round and round like rats in a hamster wheel.

CHAPTER 33. FRIDAY DECEMBER 18, 08:00.

Unusually, Caramarin was first into the bathroom so he showered and shaved. But still felt like shite. He hated the feelings from coming down from a coke high. It never got any easier.

Narcisa was first girl down. She wore her dressing gown over her nightie.

"Where were you last night?" she demanded.

"Sorting out some stuff," he thought about the traumatised girl in the Budapest's club. A life for a life. "If you knew, you'd be proud of me."

"Somehow, I doubt that," said Narcisa. Her dark brown eyes looked tired. Maybe Caramarin wasn't the only one who had a restless night. "I've been thinking last night. About us."

"Oh, yeah?" said Caramarin warily. Never a good sign when a girl wants to talk relationships.

"Yes. I haven't got time now, but we'll speak tonight."

"If I've upset you, then I'm sorry," said Caramarin. He spread his hands wide and plastered what he hoped was a winning smile onto his face.

Narcisa smiled at him, a ray of sunshine among the clouds.

"I'm sorry. I've been out of sorts the last few days myself. But you've been behaving oddly recently, haven't you?" Narcisa thought for a moment. "If you can, come and see me at lunch time. We do need to talk," she said.

"Not sure I can make lunch today but, yeah, we'll catch up later." Caramarin switched the kettle on.

She stretched up, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him full on the lips. Her brown eyes looked into his as if searching his soul for answers. Her body pressed tight against his, the swell of her breasts and stomach against his chest and abdomen.

After Narcisa left for work, he ran upstairs and looked through her room. Hating himself all the while for trampling on her trust. He found a small digital camera with a scratch on its screen which looked like it came from her pawnbrokers, and then shoved it deep into his pocket.

* * *

Later, Caramarin stood on the opposite side of the road to the North Manchester Mosque. The dead weight of his CZ-75 pistol felt like it was pulling him down to the ground. Once again, he almost wished he smoked; he would have been less obvious that way. Just a man killing time before the service started.

The mosque itself stood Woodlands Road. It was a large, red brick building with a green dome on the roof. Whoever had built had made an attempt to give it the desert architecture so beloved of Muslim designers. However, its fake desert architecture looked alien in this cold city of permanent rain and gloom. To Caramarin's eye, it looked more than half like a warehouse.

Men from all over the Islamic world walked towards the mosque. Caramarin watched men from Indonesia, India, the Middle East, Turkey and Africa join together in one faith. A few Africans stood talking French outside the doors. Even saw a couple of self-conscious white converts, one in Islamic clothing. And a coat.

Some of the men looked at Caramarin leaning against a doorway over the road. His olive keffiyeh scarf was wrapped around his lower face and over his shaved head. They didn't approach him, probably thought he was some jihadi barred from attending prayers. Or a member of the secret police pretending to be a jihadi to trap the unwary.

Caramarin waited. His mood as low as the dark grey clouds which seemed to lower only metres above the buildings. The rain had eased off but it had turned colder. Caramarin glanced up

the street. There was still no sign of Gjergji Shkurti. Stanga had told him the Albanian usually drove to services with his driver staying in the car. The men on the street were hurrying now, anxious to perform their ritual washing on time. He watched a grandfather with a red-dyed beard dragging two reluctant boys along.

Still no sight of the Albanian. A handful of young men all with full beards and wearing combat jackets, desperate to look tough, turned the corner and pushed their way inside. Obviously wanting outsiders to think they'd just come straight from a terrorist training camp in some war torn country. Instead of from the local I.T. College. Caramarin smiled to himself. Closest they'd ever been to killing any Western soldiers was on the X-Box.

The sidewalk was definitely thinning out now. No question about it. Caramarin looked up and down the street. Glancing at his watch, the noon services would start in a couple of minutes. He'd give it until then to abort the mission. Shkurti must have been called away on business today. His lucky day if he had.

Did he really want to do this act? Yeah, he'd killed before, too many times. But he was no hit-man. From Ewelina's trawl through the internet, Shkurti might be a bad lad. Yet the same could be said of Caramarin himself. Also, Shkurti had never done him any harm.

And most importantly did he want to take on the Albanians? Even in the hard man world of organised crime, the Albanians were people to be feared. Since the fall of communism, there had been a revival of their strict *Kanun* code. A medieval code covering every aspect of daily life. According to the code, as laid down by a powerful chieftain called Leke Dukagjin centuries ago, the most important aspect is honour. If a member of their family is murdered then it becomes the sworn duty of every male member of that clan to avenge the blood debt by killing a member of the murderer's clan.

So, mess with one, you took them all on. And Albanians all had an immediate family of brothers, fathers, sons, uncles; then an extended family of cousins, second cousins, half-brothers, step-brothers, in-laws and out-laws.

As well as that, an entire clan linked by unknown relationships forged by blood and adversity. And even beyond that clan kinship, more men linked by ties of patronage and honour. And all of them united by a medieval mountain-man's willingness to avenge any slight in a blood feud that could last for centuries. So, the question was, did he really want to take on Shkurti's clan?

Deep in thought, Caramarin almost missed a white Mercedes E220 saloon pulling up outside the main doors. Shaken by his inattention – his old instructor in sniper training school would have given him the rough side of his tongue for that – Caramarin recognised Shkurti as he stepped out of the back, together with another man. Time slowed down for Caramarin. Slipping his hand into his jacket pocket he felt the bulk of his CZ-75 semi-automatic, the cross-hatchings on its grip. He half drew it from his pocket, the end of its grip pulling free.

The other man, without a doubt Gjergji Shkurti's minder, alerted by some sixth sense turned towards Caramarin. Probably worried by a scruffy man over the road, a man he'd never seen here before, the man's head masked in a keffiyeh scarf. Maybe trouble? Whatever, it was not a good sight on the nearly empty street. The man started to move between Caramarin and his target, putting his huge bulk between them.

A moment of clarity streaked through Caramarin's mind. He should have thought of this before. If he hadn't been so coked up would have realised. He was the cut-out. Any flak coming down from Shkurti's death, Stanga would deny any involvement. Other than a visit to his club – and there were dozens of eastern Europeans watching the strippers on any night – there was nothing linking Caramarin with Stanga. And the mobster had even told him he was expendable.

With sudden clarity he bet there was evidence lying about tying him in with another mobster somewhere else in the city. Let them fight off the Albanians instead. Stanga might even get rid of two enemies for the price of one lone hit-man.

Caramarin dropped the pistol back in his pocket. He shook his head, turned on his heel and walked away. Shkurti's minder stood with crossed arms by the Merc and watched Caramarin disappear. Out of sight, Caramarin ran through a car park belonging to a block of flats, vaulted a low fence, and onto Woodland Street.

Now he had proof it was a set-up he wasn't expected to survive. The street was empty. No sign of Tibor Budescu or his BMW. Nothing. Caramarin swore, but he hadn't expected anything else. Only question now – what was he going to do about it?

No time to waste. Probably Stanga thought he was just some dumb moron who would doom an Albanian gang head in return for saving that traumatised girl. And if he was set up to fail with this hit, then there was no way Stanga would hand over that woman. So, if he wanted her, he would just have to take her.

Caramarin hailed a passing minicab. With difficulty and by pointing to his guidebook he managed to make the driver understand him. One foreigner speaking to another. The man tried to take the long way round, but one look at Caramarin's battered face as he tapped the driver on the shoulder and the man changed his mind.

Caramarin threw another purple twenty at the man and jumped out. He stood in front of Stanga's nightclub, dug out the digital camera and fired off several shots of the club and the nearby street sign.

The metal doors were shut with the neon lights out and grey. Caramarin jogged round to the side, his hand clenched around the pistol's grip. Parked in front of the side door was Budescu's BMW. Also, next to it, a fairly new bright red Subaru. He photographed them both, capturing their

licence plates. Caramarin hammered on the fire door, pausing only to let the echoes die down so he could listen. There was no response.

So he banged on the door fit to wake the dead.

CHAPTER 34. FRIDAY DECEMBER 18, 12:30.

As soon as he heard the chirps as the alarm deactivated, Caramarin stopped pounding on the door. The young stock man pushed the fire door open. Bad mistake. Caramarin whipped out the automatic in one fluid motion, smashing the barrel across the young man's face. Blood sprayed in an arc across the doorway. The man's nose smashed sideways. Caramarin followed with a left handed punch to the man's solar plexus, doubling him over, winded, gasping with pain.

An instant later, Caramarin brought the pistol's butt down hard on the back of the man's head. It hit with a sickening crack. The stock man collapsed onto the painted concrete floor at Caramarin's feet. A final kick to the head and the one sided fight was over.

Shutting the door behind him, Caramarin looked round the storeroom. Crates of lagers stood against one wall. Boxes of vodka, whisky and sodas neatly stacked against another. In the quiet, he paused to listen but heard nobody coming. On a shelf he spotted an old, paint splattered boom box. He didn't think the lad would be getting up any time soon but couldn't take a chance.

He pulled down the radio and tied its flex around the young man's wrists before stuffing a wad of blue tissue roll into his mouth. Then he rolled the lad onto his side and wedged a box against his back. Really he had no quarrel with the lad; he was just collateral damage and Caramarin didn't want him to choke on his own blood and die.

Caramarin opened the door to the corridor a fraction and peered down the passage. The cola boxes had been moved so the corridor was empty leaving a clear line of sight. He jogged down the corridor, CZ-75 in hand. He paused outside the manager's office. No sounds.

He tried the handle but the door was locked. Somehow, he didn't think anyone would be hiding in there so took a chance and carried on to the end of the passage. His heart pounding in his chest, all his senses heightened, he pulled the door open to the main club.

He swung the CZ-75 in a flat arc in front of him to cover every part of the large room. The nightclub was in near darkness. Hundreds of places for an enemy to hide. Behind the bar; behind the curtains on either side of the pole-dancing stage. Underneath the tables. Or just lurking in the shadows, waiting to shoot. Aware of time slipping through his fingers like sand, Caramarin knew he couldn't check it all out.

Keeping the wall to his back, Caramarin slid along keeping his CZ-75 pointing into the room. His eyes peering everywhere through the gloom, his ears like radar for any sound of movement. He edged along until he reached the door leading to the knocking shop rooms upstairs. Standing with his back to the door, he groped behind him for the handle. The door was locked. He took one last glance around the nightclub.

Caramarin turned his back to any threat and tried the lock again. Immovable. He thought for a second. Maybe he could return to the manager's office and search for the key. Always assuming it was there. And the office was locked, too. No, that would take too long.

If he had any element of surprise left, now was the time to lose it. Shielding his face with his left arm Caramarin shot into the lock. In the enclosed space, the gunshot deafened him and now he just heard ringing in his ears. He kicked the door. It quivered on its frame, another solid kick and the lock shattered and the doorway crashed open. It rebounded before slamming back again. He kicked it a third time and then ran up the narrow concrete stairs.

Remembering which was the girl's room, he ran down the passage. The door was also locked but it was only an internal door. No defence against Caramarin's powerful kicks. The door burst open.

"Come with me," shouted Caramarin, his head still ringing from the gunshot. A good sign, as the girl acknowledged him by looking up. She was sitting on her bed. Despite the cold, she was wearing only a stained vest and knickers. She was doubled over, one hand was clutching her belly as if she was in great pain. The other was between her legs.

Caramarin stepped into the room and held out his left hand. The girl looked blankly and moaned softly. Maybe she was frightened of the pistol he was holding. So he slipped it back into his jacket pocket, but kept a tight hold of its grip. She shifted position. Then he noticed she had been chained by the ankle to her bed. Fuck-shit. What next?

"I'll be back," he said. He ran down the passage to the room he'd seen the older woman come out of on his previous visit. A few of the other doors opened as he ran past. Young women peered from out of their rooms; one stepped into the narrow corridor in front of him. Not checking his pace, he thrust her back into her room, sending her flying backwards.

The older woman's door was locked. No surprises there, the way his day was going. He raised his leg and kicked the lock. Pain shot up his calf muscles and up his thigh. The door trembled on its hinges but held firm. Another kick and then another. The door flew open, its lock hanging from shards of wood.

Andreea was standing at the far end of the room, by the window. She was wearing a hideous orange sweater and black slacks. Caramarin jumped to one side as she flung a vodka bottle at his head. Just as well she'd already had most of it already as the bottle sailed past. Caramarin caught the bottle mid flight. He drained the last couple of centimetres left in the bottom. Two strides brought him across the room. He raised his fist.

"Give me the key. Now, you fuckin' bitch," he screamed into her face. Andreea recoiled but said nothing. He could smell booze and cigarettes on her breath. The woman said nothing. Then Caramarin punched her. Punched her hard. The woman fell to the floor, clutching her face. Blood flowed between her fingers. She screamed.

He was aware that a couple of girls were watching him from the doorway. At this point he couldn't care less if he had an audience or not. All one to him now. He gave her a hard kick to the ribs. She curled up. Caramarin hauled Andreea to her feet by her hair. Her hands flew up to her scalp. He saw blood pouring down her chin, staining her orange sweater.

"Want more?" he screamed again, right into her face. "You like a bit of what you gave her?" He drew back his fist again. The woman screamed in anguish into his face. Fuck it. He punched her again, full in her face. Blood streamed down from Andreea's nose, joining that from her mouth, her face a red mask now.

"Want more? Where's the fuckin' key?"

"In my bag," Andreea managed to gasp out.

Caramarin let go of the woman's hair. She crashed to the floor, once again curling up into a ball. She cried and moaned to herself. Caramarin spotted a black handbag on a cabinet. He picked it up and tipped it upside down. A purse, keys, lipstick, comb, receipts fell to the floor. He picked up the keys then crossed back to the woman.

"You fucking bastard bitch," he swore. Again, he grabbed her hair and yanked the woman to her feet. Andreea howled with pain. He dragged her out of the room. The other women stared at the scene, open eyed and open mouthed.

"Best chance you'll get, girls," he said. "You want out of this life, then go. Go now. Before Stanga or his mob come back. Go on, fuck off. Run while you can."

"Where will we go?" asked one, a tall woman with ash blonde hair.

"The cops, the hospital? How the fuck do I know? Just get out of here. Now."

He shouldered the women aside and pulled the still howling Andreea along to the young girl's room. The only one he had come here to rescue. He threw Andreea into the room, over towards the green locker.

"Open it, you cunt," he told her. The woman fumbled with the lock, then opened the door. Immediately, the stench in the room got worse. Nobody had taken the trouble to clean it out since. And that poor girl had been locked in there for God knows how long. Fucking hell, what a life.

"In! Now!" The older woman looked at him. Fury mixed in with her terror.

"No, no," Andreea whined through her mask of blood.

Caramarin thrust her into the locker.

"This is from me," said Caramarin. He spat on her face. Then he took out Narcisa's little digital camera and snapped off several shots of the room, the chained girl and lastly the older woman in the locker. Andreea covered her face with her arm until Caramarin knocked it away.

Slamming the door shut, he banged her elbow. He locked it. Locked it tight. The woman's cries echoed from within her metal box. He turned to the young woman. She was still sitting on the bed. Caramarin was glad that the girl was not so far gone in her own world that she hadn't noticed what had just happened in front of her. He knelt before her and tried the only suitable key on the ring. The padlock snapped open and the young woman stood. She blinked several times.

"Come on," he said, gently. "Trust me. You'll be all right now." He took her hand and led her out of her room. She followed meekly. Other women still hung about the corridor.

"Go on, leave," Caramarin said to them more quietly now. Adrenaline started to dump out of his system, leaving him feeling weak and shaky. He half led, half pulled the young woman along the corridor and down the concrete stairs. Only then did he notice that she was barefoot. No, nothing he could do about it now.

He paused at the foot of the stairs, and pulled the door open as quietly as he could with the pistol's barrel. The nightclub still seemed empty so he stepped out, swinging the pistol around, trying to cover every shadow at the same time. An impossible task. Was there really no-one there?

Caramarin stepped out into the club, half-expecting a sniper's bullet to doom him. Expecting an instant of total pain before stepping off into the great beyond. He paused. Nothing. Taking hold

of the girl's hand, he guided her around the tables to the corridor leading to the store room and fire exit. She followed, eyes still blank, not taking anything in. But at least she obeyed, not making any trouble.

As he passed, Caramarin wondered if it was worth breaking into the manager's office but decided he had no time. Don't push your luck. He led the woman through the store room. She glanced at the tied up young man. He was starting to move around. That was a good sign. Now it didn't matter, Caramarin took a moment to pull the gag out of the man's mouth. He flung the sodden wad over to the other end of the room. The young man had never done him any harm and he didn't want the lad choking on him.

Caramarin pushed open the fire door to the outside world. The fresh air, even with lingering traffic fumes smelled so much better than the squalid club. There was no sign of anyone and Caramarin couldn't believe his luck was still in. He thumbed through the keys on their ring and chose the Subaru's car key. He ran to the sports car and opened both doors.

"Let's get movin'!"

CHAPTER 35. FRIDAY DECEMBER 18, 13:10.

"C'mon," he called to the girl. "Let's get out of here. Now." But she just stood in the doorway looking out into the yard. She looked up at the clouds covering the grey sky like they were artworks on the Sistine chapel ceiling. She stared at the rough brick and concrete walls like they were Odessa's Opera House.

She shrunk inside herself and cried. Whether of happiness or terror or some other emotion, he had no way of telling. He returned to her and gently pulled her over to the Subaru's passenger side. Her skin goose-bumped from the cold rain.

Then two more women ran out of the fire exit. Neither had coats but both had shoes.

"Hey, you mister, wait, what about us?" shouted one. Another girl with a strong Moldovan accent. They ran over to the car. He was tempted to accelerate away, leaving them behind. He'd only come for the chained girl anyway. Let the other women take their chance in this hellish city.

Instead, he stepped out of the Subaru and flung down the driver's seat. "Go on. Get in quick."

The women hustled inside. One caught her heel on his seatbelt and tumbled in. Caramarin gave her a shove on her bottom. Not interested in respecting her feelings. The second girl stepped in and the first wriggled over on the back seat to make room. He was about to slide the driver's seat back into position when the first girl; the one who'd caught her heel, pushed it down.

"I forgot my bag, I need my things," she called up to him.

"I can't believe this. Too late," he shoved the seat back as far as it would go and jumped in. The girl squeaked with annoyance. Caramarin fired up the Subaru's two litre engine, switched on the wipers and side lights then moved out down the side street.

Fuck-shit. Down the side street came Stanga's Range Rover 4x4, its bulk filling the narrow road. In the front seats he saw Pompiliu Stanga and Tibor Budescu. Stanga pointed at their car. Shit, if he'd driven away just a few minutes earlier he and the girls would be clean away. Now he had a battle on his hands. Caramarin jerked the gear-stick into reverse. The Subaru lurched to a stop then hurtled back out onto Oldham Road's traffic.

Death missed them by inches. Only a bus driver's excellent reflexes saved them. Everyone heard the blast of a horn as the bus stopped with only centimetres to spare. The girls on the back seat screamed with terror. The bus driver leaned out of his window. Caramarin now learned a new English word.

"Wanker," the driver shouted and made a gesture that needed no translation. Caramarin did the only thing possible. Gave the man the finger.

Caramarin slammed the gear-stick top left. Their car lurched forward. Shit, they drive on the other side of the road in this horrible country. He swung the Subaru out into the left hand traffic, along Oldham Road heading out of the city centre. He accelerated down the road, Stanga and Budescu now blocked by the bus. He glanced in the mirror; he'd bought himself at least a few seconds time. Now he had to use it.

Caramarin threw the car over to the left, wheeling round into the first road leading off Oldham Road. He hurtled past some Goods Station. In his mirrors he saw the mobsters 4x4 following them. Caramarin shook his head – really he hadn't expected to throw someone as skilled as Tibor Budescu off this early.

Ignoring the oncoming traffic, and the girls' shrieks behind him, Caramarin sped the Subaru out onto Rochdale Road. He cut up a blue Toyota minicab then floored their car in and out of the traffic. Guessed his new English word was repeated several more times behind him.

Stanga's 4x4 swung out after them, several car lengths behind. Saw an opening in the traffic on his right and flew down a side road called Sudell Street on his right, buying a little more space and time for them.

Another right, more blasts from other driver's horns. Past a red brick church and school then threw a left coming back out onto Oldham Road. At this point it was a much wider road than before, a dual carriage way. Looking back, Caramarin saw the 4x4 pulling out. Taking more risks with their lives, Caramarin drove along Oldham Road as fast as he dared, weaving in and out; Stanga's Range Rover doing the same behind him. Not gaining on them but not falling back either.

As Caramarin drove, he blanked out the women's screams behind him. He glanced at the young woman he'd come to save. She sat like a living statue in the front passenger seat. Her body swayed with the motion as he threw the car in and out of the traffic but her far away gaze never left the windscreen. Almost looked like she was enjoying a Sunday run out in the country.

He looked behind him. Now the Range Rover was gaining on them. They had a far more powerful motor – and Budescu was more used to the roads in this back-to-front country. Also, the longer this chase went on, the quicker the cops would get involved. No way could Caramarin risk getting involved with the law. Not when he was wanted for questioning for murder. So he had to end this chase quickly. And so had Stanga. He wouldn't want his girls speaking to the law. No way. But how to get away? The road curved away gently to the left, past another, more modern, church.

The traffic in front of him was stopped. Ahead, he thought he could see a red light. Caramarin took a big chance. Like putting his all on the turn of a card or the roll of a dice. He pulled out and gunned the Subaru up the wrong side of the road, shooting past all the stopped cars. He saw stares of amazement as he passed them. Pedal to the metal time.

Shot past five, six – more than he expected – then saw cars heading towards him. In the lead car, a black Audi, some young Asian guy, his mouth and eyes three 'O's of shock, almost matching

his Audi's badge. The guy slammed on his brakes, his Audi's hood almost driving into the ground with the force of the rapid deceleration.

Caramarin swerved up onto the sidewalk; darted past the last few cars, all now stopped behind the Audi. Horns blasting away in fear and frustration. Pedestrians leaped out of the way as he sped past a row of auto repair shops. An old lady wheeling a shopping trolley legged it with a surprising turn of speed.

He hurtled round the corner, almost on two wheels, steering wheel flying through his hands, onto the crossroad past the traffic lights. Still up on the sidewalk.

"Shut up you two," he shouted, "we're not dead yet." The noise in the back went down a little. Maybe down from nine to eight hundred decibels. Increasing up to an even thousand as the wing mirror clipped a lamp post, the mirror ripping off and bouncing away in the backwash behind them. Caramarin flew past another line of five or six cars and vans waiting for the lights to change. As soon as he was past the cars; flew down onto a wide thoroughfare marked up as Alan Turing Way. The Subaru raced past a delivery office. A few couriers leaning by their vans waved as the red Subaru flew past at top speed.

"Other side of the road," shrieked one of the girls, "other side!"

"What?" shouted Caramarin.

"Other side," she yelled above the screams from the other girl in the back. Pointing with her left arm. He looked to the other side of the road. A few parked cars and vans, a derelict looking factory. Nothing to get excited about.

Looking behind him, he saw Stanga's Range Rover racing round the cross roads into Alan Turing Way. The vehicle grew larger in his mirror, accelerating, making up for lost ground after Caramarin's death-defying stunt.

Eyes back front. Fuck-shit. A large white van hurtling towards him. Now he knew what the girl meant. He'd forgotten they drive on the left in this fucked up country. Only his combat trained

reflexes saved them from a smash up. Caramarin threw the wheel hard to the left, leaving rubber on the road, the car missing the van by a coat of paint. No more than that. Bet the girls pissed themselves in the back. Fuck's sake, he almost did.

Stanga's 4x4 much closer now, the more powerful car almost up their tailpipe. Caramarin wrenched the Subaru's steering wheel left and turned into a small industrial estate on Lord North Street. Hoping against hope the unexpected manoeuvre would throw off Budescu. There was a huge patch of fenced off wasteland to their right. Some narrow side streets off Lord North Street, lorries and vans parked up both sides, the gap between the lorries as narrow as an asthmatic's windpipe. Hooked a swift right into a packed parking lot before the second side street, Clifton Street.

Caramarin had to slow a little, lifting his foot off the pedal, as he flung the Subaru around the parking lot. Caramarin drove as fast as he dared, only centimetres between his Subaru and the parked cars. A couple of business men in suits stopped gossiping and stared open mouthed. Hooked a left out of the parking lot onto Lord North Street and found himself back on the main road. As the sign flashed past, Caramarin saw the road was called Hulme Hall Lane.

No idea where Stanga's Range Rover was now. Reckoned they were probably searching for him in the car park. Time to put more distance between themselves and the pursuit. Dropping his foot down the Subaru shot under a railway bridge; the noise and vibrations of a local train overhead filling the car. Back out into the rain now, their wipers working overtime. Oh shit, there was Stanga again. Further away than before but not for long.

Speeding past a cemetery on the opposite side of the road from a gasometer. The bone-yard's wrought iron gates stood open. There was a woman selling flowers from a little cart. The other side of the gates, the carved stone angels looked dismal and forlorn in the rain swept gloom. Is that where he'd be buried if he couldn't get them away from Pompiliu Stanga and Tibor Budescu?

A few hundred metres further on, past a modern oval block of apartments, Caramarin spotted a turn-off into Gibbon Street. A bus trundled up Alan Turing Way, oblivious to the drama in

front. Caramarin swerved around the bus, for a brief moment out of eyesight of Stanga and Budescu. He looked like he was continuing down Alan Turing Way but at the very last split second, he threw the wheel over to the left.

Tyres screeching, the Subaru heeled over and he hammered down Gibbon Street. A gentle curve past a McDonald's diner. Not too bad. In his rear view mirror, he saw Stanga's Range Rover fly down the wrong road: Alan Turing Way.

Caramarin blew past a roundabout, car horns blasting out as he slalomed round them at speed, flying past the bulk of the Manchester Velodrome. The Subaru sped down a dead straight road, dodging round a couple of slower-moving cars. The graveyard he'd seen earlier lay peacefully on their left. The shrieking from the girls on the back seat died down just a little as the car stabilised.

Now he'd lost Stanga and Budescu's car, Caramarin just wanted to get clear out of the area.

CHAPTER 36. FRIDAY DECEMBER 18, 14:00.

Another long straight road coming up. A sign told him it was called Bank Street. Caramarin slowed down to a fast but more normal speed. Suddenly, he stamped on the brakes, rubber skid marks tracked out behind him along the wet tarmac. More screams from the two girls behind him. A young man, late teens, jeans half way down his arse, earphones wedged tight, leaped back from a crossing.

"Wanker," he and Caramarin yelled at the same time. Caramarin smiled. He was getting the hang of English now. Slammed the car into gear and onwards. The young man aimed a kick at their rear bumper. Caramarin knew he had to get away very soon. Couldn't be much longer before the cops showed up. And then it would be all over. No way could he out run the cops for long in this Subaru. Not when they had an all-seeing eye in the sky with their helicopter.

Some side streets opening off Bank Street were coming up ahead. Another main road crossed the bottom of Bank Street. Plenty of choices to dodge down. Except, suddenly, with no warning, Stanga's Range Rover pulled out of the main road. The huge 4x4 swerved out and aimed at the red Subaru on a direct collision course. That cut Caramarin's options down to one.

"He's gonna ram us," shrieked one of the girls. "We're all gonna die."

Caramarin pointed the Subaru straight at the Range Rover. No way. He saw Stanga and Budescu glaring at them through their windscreen. The two vehicles rushed together, the smash up inevitable.

But it was Caramarin who blinked first. He threw the wheel over hard, flying past the 4x4 with nothing to spare. Rocketed past the mobsters, skidded, braked, leaving more rubber tracks behind him. The Subaru skidded over to the left so he turned into the skid, the steering wheel hard

in his hands. The wheels clipped the kerb, climbed up onto the sidewalk, a hubcap bouncing down the road behind them.

The Subaru stalled; now facing along the main road, Ashton New Road, the way Stanga and Budescu had just emerged from. The Range Rover looming large in the windscreen. No time to throw the car into reverse and turn round again, instead he thrust the gear-stick back into first, the car jerked forward. This time along Ashton New Road.

Tibor Budescu reversed the Range Rover, trying to block the road with the 4x4's bulk. Cutting them off from escape. Caramarin accelerated, back up onto the sidewalk, swerved round their huge vehicle. More shrieks from the back. Caramarin had an opportunity now, so he seized it with both hands. While Budescu got the Range Rover back on the road, Caramarin powered along Ashton New Road.

Shooting through the lights at the junction with Ashton New Road, he slammed on the brakes to avoid a dirty white van, then gunned the Subaru back up the first stretch of Alan Turing Way. Back north – back up the way they'd come down originally. Even in the stress of the chase, Caramarin couldn't help but notice Manchester City Football Club's massive Etihad stadium crouching menacingly on the corner like a giant, grey, multi-legged spider. Or like some huge alien space craft. It was so huge, so out of place.

But more ominously, out of the corner of his eye, Caramarin noticed people standing on the sidewalk calling into their cells while watching them. No, they couldn't have much time left before the cops showed up.

Stanga's Range Rover was delayed slightly at the crossroads but the mobsters would be on them within the minute. Once again, racing past Gibbon Street, the Range Rover in hot pursuit. Stanga and Budescu would be on top of them any time now. Caramarin hammered north along Alan Turing Way. For a change, there was a gap in the traffic. He stayed on the right hand side of the

road for a moment, dangerously overtaking, then swung back into the left. The Range Rover much closer now, filling up the rear view window.

The bone-yard on their right again. So he did the unexpected. Stood on the brake, jerked up the handbrake and at the same time wrenched the steering wheel hard over to the right. The engine howled in protest as the Subaru swung round in a handbrake turn. An arc of rubber on the wet tarmac. There couldn't be much tread left.

Dropping the handbrake, he stamped on the gas pedal and the red Subaru shot through the cemetery gates. The elderly woman selling flowers leaped away in horror, the car just missing her. Caramarin gunned the car along a rutted path between the tombstones. Threw a u-turn before pulling up and leaping out of the Subaru.

"Stay here," he shouted to the girls. They stared at him, wide-eyed.

He fumbled in his jacket pocket and pulled out the CZ-75 pistol. Thumbing off the safety catch, Caramarin racked the slide, then took up a shooter's position, arms braced on top of a grave stone. Aiming along the path they'd just driven up. He breathed deep, trying to calm himself after that mad, chaotic drive. His chest heaved and his arms shook with the adrenaline. Not good enough. In the sudden silence, he heard rooks cawing in the trees. Black birds of ill omen.

Stanga's Range Rover pulled through the cemetery gates a moment later. Caramarin paused. Tried to clear his mind but found it was not that easy. Breathed in and on the exhale, squeezed off a shot. It went wild. A miss. The 4x4 kept on coming. This time, Caramarin allowed himself another breath before firing.

This time the bullet found its mark. It punched into the driver's front wheel. Chunks of rubber shredded off the tire. He watched Tibor Budescu struggle for control, the steering wheel sliding through his hands. The 4x4 swerved over onto the grass and smashed into a large granite tomb dedicated to some long gone Victorian merchant. The headstone toppled to remain at a

drunken angle. Instantly, the two men disappeared as the air bags exploded in their faces. That would keep them busy.

Caramarin stood. Only then did he realise it was still raining. Drops pattered from the trees all around him. Caramarin ran a hand over his head, trying to think straight. Too much going on at once, his brain mush. But he knew he had no time to waste. He ran back to the Subaru. One of the girls in the back was trying to struggle out. He pushed her back inside.

"Stay there," he said. "Nearly home free now." He stooped and smeared mud over the Subaru's number-plates before jumping back in and firing up the car. He pulled out in a smooth turn and headed past the Range Rover and out of the cemetery.

"You two in the back, get down. The cops'll be looking for a car with three women in it so get out of sight." The girls looked at him. "Now." he shouted. Caramarin wriggled out of his green jacket as he drove and put on his baseball cap. Not much of a disguise.

The two women lay flat on the back seat; nothing much he could do about the catatonic girl in the front seat. She still sat there, oblivious to what was happening all around her. Gone off in her own world. Caramarin drove carefully out of town avoiding Ashton New Road, keeping to back streets and rat runs as much as possible, glancing down at his road atlas from time to time.

He heard sirens racing towards town. Cops. With a bit of luck they'd catch Stanga and Budescu stuck in the graveyard. More sirens. They were taking the chase seriously; just a few minutes too late.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a police van flashing past along Ashton New Road, blurred outlines of bulky men in the back. Was that an armed response vehicle? They must have heard his gun shots. He turned left, away from Ashton New Road. Desperate to put some distance between himself and the cops.

Heading out away from the city now towards the suburb of Droylsden. Caramarin drove slowly and carefully, hoping nobody would link them to the chase. Checked his road map again.

Opposite a small park was a row of large Victorian villas. He drove slowly along the row, counting numbers. The one he wanted was hiding behind a large, overgrown hedge. A mossy gravel drive led towards a rambling detached house.

A couple of cars were parked at the far end of the drive near the house. It had been whitewashed with large leaded windows and a massive porch dominating the front. Now, the original whitewash was a dull greyish mottled white.

Caramarin pulled up.

"Here we are. You can get up now, you two." The two women sat up, taking in their new surroundings. Caramarin opened the door and gently helped the young woman out of the front. She stood, unmoving on the sidewalk. She looked out of place, standing in just her dirty vest and underwear. She shivered as the rain fell on her bare arms and legs, an involuntary movement.

"This is a woman's refuge centre. For battered women," Caramarin explained to the others. "I don't know if they can take you in, but they must be able to sort something out for you." He handed the digital camera to one of the girls. "Give them this. It'll help prove what you've been through."

Turning to the near catatonic girl. "Go with these ladies," Caramarin said quietly, "They'll look after you now." He kissed her on her forehead then placed her hand in one of the girls.

"Thank you," she said, so quietly he almost didn't hear her. He was surprised she said anything. So that must be a good sign as he thought she was almost completely comatose.

"Do either of you speak English?" he asked. Both women nodded. He handed the older woman's cell phone to the more sensible of the two; the one who'd screamed least on that nightmare chase.

"Ring this number at eight thirty tonight," Caramarin told her. He gave her instructions on what to say. "Remember, I'm trusting you with my life, I need you to ring this. Otherwise I'm dead meat. I got you out of Stanga's hell; now just do this one thing for me."

The girl nodded. "I won't let you down. I promise," she said. She threw her arms around Caramarin's neck and kissed him. "I don't know why you've helped us all but thank you, thank you so much. I won't let you down."

That would have to do. She let go, then the three women crossed the road and walked up to the over large porch.

Caramarin watched as a CCTV camera mounted above the porch swivelled to focus on the three women. No way would they open up if a strange man, especially one looking like him, stood at their door. But for three women, one in just her underwear, they'd have to let them in.

The front door opened. A tall woman with long hair, glasses and wearing a navy blue sweater, opened the door. He watched as the girls said something to the woman, before handing her the camera. The manageress peered over her glasses at the traumatised girl in her underwear then stood aside and showed them in. The door shut behind them.

He climbed back into the red Subaru. Rain drummed on the roof. He sat for a moment with his head thrown back. Exhausted, totally wiped out. He'd done all he could for those women. They were in the system now. He was sure the poor traumatised girl would get all the help she needed; detox, a psychologist, lots of support. He hoped she'd make it.

Fuck-shit. Should have remembered. He'd forgotten to wipe the digital camera's memory chip. Now there were pictures of him, Narcisa and the others in the system. Something else for the cops to chew over. But nothing he could do about any of it now.

He shook out the last grains of coke onto the dash, lined it up then rolled up a five and took a hit. Feeling a little better, he sparked up the Subaru and then drove back into town along the back streets and rat runs again.

Left the Subaru by the side of the road.

CHAPTER 37. FRIDAY DECEMBER 18, 16:00.

Now it was personal. Now it was time for himself alone. The sensible thing would be to run. Get out of this waterlogged, god-forsaken city before the cops picked him up. Before they had chance to circulate his mug shot or put a stop notice on the airports or ferry terminals. Get back as fast as he could to Odessa. With his tail between his legs.

But that was short term thinking only. Timur Ozgan had made not so subtle threats against his girlfriend, Valeriya, and her son back in Odessa. No, he couldn't have the gang boss taking out his anger on them. He would have to deal with Ozgan. The man had set him up twice, once in Odessa and again in Manchester. There was no way could he let that go. And Caramarin preferred to do it here and now while the gang boss was protected by only Mehmet and not in the Black Sea city with his whole mob behind him.

But how? Caramarin remembered the dead thug Pojer telling him that Ozgan would be attending a wedding tonight at the Lombardia Hotel. It was all he had to go on so it would have to do. He saw a bus lumbering into town so jumped on board. His fingers shook and he fumbled with his change. The driver took no notice – this man had seen enough wasted junkies on his bus before now.

Back in Manchester, Caramarin wanted to be off the streets and out of sight as much as possible. So he sat with his back to the window in a cafe near the Lombardia Hotel and racked his brains. He thought and tried out several plans but discarded them all. At last a germ of an idea came to him. Not great but it was all he could think of. He stood and walked around the back of the Lombardia Hotel.

From over the road he watched the rear service entrance for a short while. He figured that a large function like Subrata Mohanraj's wedding would need to take on extra temporary staff. No way could the regular crew cope with the extra work. He tail gated a couple of chattering young women who wouldn't have noticed an elephant following them into the hotel.

No way the back of the hotel matched the front. It was like it belonged to two different establishments. Caramarin guessed no guests had ever been back here. He followed the girls as they walked down a short corridor lined with bins and containers for dirty clothing and linen. Notices covered the walls. A damp ammonia smell of floors too frequently washed. He followed the girls up a flight of stairs and into a common area. Doors with the universal male and female symbols led to changing rooms.

In the centre of the area, a hard faced woman in a tailored grey suit stood by a table. A name badge identified her as 'Eva Konieczna'. She was clutching a clipboard as if her life depended on it. Or her whole future career at any rate. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and frowned at the assembled group. Everyone was much younger than Caramarin except for one grey faced man in his fifties who had the look of an alcoholic who couldn't wait to jump off the wagon.

The woman gobbled off in English. Caramarin was pleased he wasn't the only one who looked confused. There were a few glances and a couple translated in Polish or Lithuanian to their friends. The woman looked at Caramarin.

"Bulgarian?" she asked.

"No, Romanian," he said.

He understood enough when she muttered "Fuck's sake." The woman dragged over a plumpish girl with dark brown hair and stood her next to Caramarin.

"This is Firuta," Eva Konieczna told him. "You can work with her tonight." He quickly shook hands with Firuta.

The girl's English was excellent. She translated as quickly as possible for him.

The woman asked his name. Unfortunately she held the clipboard to her scraggy chest so he couldn't see any of the names written on it.

"Eugen Maiorescu." Where did that come from? The name of his old gang boss in Odessa? "The Agency only called me an hour or so ago. Said you were short staffed tonight." The woman nodded once.

"The Agency have checked you're allowed to work? You've got an NI number, work permit, food hygiene cert?" No idea what the first thing was but he nodded anyway as Firuta translated. She ticked something on her clipboard.

"Worked in catering before? Done silver service?"

"Yes," lied Caramarin. "I've done silver service before." He'd dined in enough good restaurants back in Odessa to watch the waiters. It couldn't be too hard to dish out potatoes or vegetables without messing up.

The woman nodded. Short rapid jerks of her head. "Right. I'll be speaking to the Agency tomorrow. I'm not happy with this. Not your fault, but I need staff who can at least fucking speak basic fucking English."

And that was his employment checks all complete.

The harassed looking supervisor ran through their duties. Some were behind the bar others waiting on. On the table next to the woman were lines of gold coloured name badges. Caramarin looked confused.

"You can be Robert tonight, okay?" the woman told him. Even after everyone had taken a badge, there were still a few left over. No wonder the woman didn't make too much fuss. She just wanted enough hands on board and wasn't too choosy where they came from. Caramarin scrawled his name and entry time onto the signing on sheets.

In the sweat smelling gents changing room there were piles of uniform clothing. He chose a very oversized black shirt and one of the hotel's pink ties. He dived into one of the cubicles, got

changed and then under the baggy shirt, he concealed the CZ-75 semi-automatic and hunting knife. Looking in the mirror, their bulges couldn't be seen.

Finally he knotted his tie, pinned on Robert's name badge and smoothed down his hair. Very professional looking. Slick. Except for his face. Caramarin re-entered the changing room and bundled his jacket and jeans into a locker.

Eva Konieczna pushed Caramarin over to Firuta. "Don't let me down, er... Eugen," she told him.

Caramarin followed Firuta and some others over to the kitchen's service area. Rows of stainless steel shelving stood between the waiters and kitchens. A few linen covered trolleys also stood nearby. Behind the shelves, chefs and kitchen porters worked like demons stoking the fires of hell to maximum temperature.

Despite the noise and clutter by the grills and stoves, no-one got in the way of anyone else. The chef's staff knew their jobs and worked efficiently. The hot earthy smells of India hit Caramarin. Similar but so much better than the takeaway food he'd shared with the girls and Artur. His stomach rumbled. With the excitement, he'd forgotten he was starving.

"I've not done an Indian reception before," Firuta confided.

"Don't worry. We'll get through it," smiled Caramarin. But he just hoped he'd get through the next hour or so without ending up on a mortuary slab in a Manchester hospital. As he watched, platters of samosas, bhajis and spring rolls appeared on the stainless steel shelves. They were in business.

"Follow me with those," Firuta said. She pushed her way through a swing door. Caramarin one step behind.

He stopped. An explosion of colour and lights hit him. No, not an explosion. An H-Bomb of colour blew him away. He was stunned, overwhelmed. His mission forgotten. If anyone socked him on the jaw now, he wouldn't have noticed until he hit the floor.

The wedding's chosen theme was red, gold and ivory with crystals covering everything. At the centre of the top table were two marble coloured thrones. The bride and groom were about the most beautiful couple he'd ever seen. They looked like supermodels.

The groom had a straight nose, a neatly trimmed beard that must've taken an age to cut. He wore a red turban with a little peacock fan sticking up from the top, then flowing down his back. Also a long, ivory jacket richly embroidered with swirls and lines of crystals in a tadpole paisley pattern. The man looked like a Persian prince. God knows how much his outfit cost – more than some Indian villages earned in a year he guessed.

But the bride. Apart from the time he'd driven Miss Ukraine, she was the most beautiful woman in creation. Far beyond his earthly lustful thoughts. The girl must've lightened her skin tone somehow as she was the palest woman in the room, even lighter than the handful of bare shouldered orange tanned Anglo women there.

She had dark, sensuous eyes, full red lips and a soft, loving expression. Her beauty was heightened by that glow that all new brides have. She wore a dark red bustier top, absolutely covered in diamanté crystals and sequins. Over that, a gold sash, also blinged to the max with crystals. She wore an ancient looking gold and ruby pendant on her forehead teamed with a matching necklace and earrings. Intricate henna tattoos covered the backs of her hands.

Next to the bride and groom on the top table; almost as equally beautifully dressed, were their parents and families. The bride's family all stuck to the red and gold theme but one or two on the groom's side struck out for independence by wearing dark blue or turquoise.

Caramarin wasn't the only one who was impressed with the exotic sight. The waiter following him bumped into him knocking him back to reality. Caramarin's platter of samosas slid. He levelled it just in time to stop them falling to the floor.

Below the top table were twenty or so round tables with the rest of the beautifully dressed guests sitting around them. On the far wall, opposite the top table was a waterfall of lights, creating

a shining illusion cascading down the wall in ripples and swirls. Together with the chandeliers brilliance reflected off the guests' jewellery and crystal covered outfits.

He'd never seen anything so ostentatious or gaudy yet so perfectly beautiful. He just couldn't take it all in with one look. Only then did he notice gentle Indian music playing in the background.

"Follow me and just say 'vegetable samosa?' Got it?" Firuta whispered. Caramarin nodded as he practised his phrase under his breath. He followed her up to the top table. Starting with the bride and groom he then worked his way along the row after Firuta. The guests' perfumes mixed with the spicy cuisine to overfill his nose as much as their costumes overwhelmed his vision.

As he served, he glanced among the other round tables for Timur Ozgan. In amongst the gorgeous costumes, there were a few Europeans in sober grey business suits. But he couldn't see Ozgan anywhere. An older Indian man with a red dyed beard turned and spoke to him.

Caramarin froze. What the fuck?

CHAPTER 38. FRIDAY DECEMBER 18, 17:30.

Being more experienced, Firuta had got a few steps ahead of him. The man repeated his request. Caramarin shrugged then stepped forward and tugged Firuta sleeve.

"He's asking for some water. Finish serving the top table then go to the kitchen for some," she interpreted. Caramarin nodded.

He finished dishing out his samosas and then picked up the empty mineral water bottles and walked to the kitchen, his eyes never leaving those men in western business suits. But he still couldn't see Timur Ozgan anywhere in the room.

Looking at his watch as he collected more mineral water bottles he realised there was not too much time left. Maybe Ozgan couldn't make Subrata Mohanraj's wedding, after all. No, no way. The man wouldn't travel all the way from Odessa and then not show unless he'd had an accident.

Caramarin pushed his way back into the room, into the sensory overload. No, he couldn't allow himself to be overwhelmed. Remembered what his instructor during sniper training, back when he'd been a Paratrooper in the old days, had told them. Focus. Sure, take in the big picture but concentrate on the essentials only. Don't allow yourself to be distracted by all the other stuff.

There, at one of the round tables near the waterfall of lights, now shimmering a soft blue; was that Engin Hasanov? The man was wearing one of those long Indian jackets, in a soft, buttery yellow. Slim build, long dark hair neatly combed back. Could be.

Caramarin returned to the kitchen for another platter of samosas and spring rolls. Now the top table had been served, he was free to see to the guest tables. Firuta pointed out which ones were his. He made his way over to one next to Hasanov's. As he dished out their food, he scanned the next table.

His heart leaped with a dark joy. Yes, that was Hasanov. No doubt about it. So, the broad shouldered, grey haired man sitting next to him had to be Timur Ozgan. The gang boss was also wearing a richly embroidered jacket in a dark plum. But maybe to make a subtle point at this over-the-top wedding, he also had on a plain white Islamic skullcap.

Caramarin glanced at his watch. He saw he had only a couple more minutes left to take action. He looked around at the incredible scene of exotic beauty, dished out some more food, working round his table until Ozgan's table was directly behind him. Took a deep breath. Now was the time. If he was going to do it, now was the point of no return. He set down the platter, drawing a few surprised glances from the guests.

Unhitching his shirt-tail from out of his pants, Caramarin reached behind his back then withdrew the hunting knife. Light flickered off its wicked serrated edge but it was like nothing happened, like he'd turned invisible. One young woman frowned, looking confused.

Now he really understood how waiters feel to be totally ignored, just part of the background scenery to most diners. No more than menial flunkeys, just there to serve their betters and keep out of the way. But he changed all that in an instant.

Caramarin turned with his knife in his hand. He was now standing directly behind Timur Ozgan. With one fluid motion, Caramarin grabbed Ozgan's right arm, then skewered his hand to the table.

For a second or two, nothing happened. It was like he'd carried on serving food. Then, like a bomb blast ripping through a crowded place, the chaos and fear and noise spread outwards in circles. Ozgan looked at his hand, half the blade and hilt sticking out. Blood oozed out of the wound, then more poured out staining the snowy table cloth a bright crimson. The blood looked nothing like spilled wine.

Then Ozgan screamed. A yell of pure pain and rage. He reached out with his left hand to wrench the blade out of his wrecked hand. Caramarin punched the gang boss full in the face,

rocking the Abkhazian's head back. The force jerked his pinned hand back, widening the wound, blood gushing from it now, spreading further out over the linen tablecloth.

The other people at the table looked on with horror, some stood up, chairs crashing back to the floor. Men gasped. A woman screamed. People at the nearby tables craning their necks to see what was happening. Caramarin pulled his CZ-75 out of his waistband and then jammed the pistol into Ozgan's face.

"Shut it, you bastard," he said. Glancing around he saw a man on his cell. Swivelling round, Caramarin pointed the semi-automatic at the man.

"No calls," he shouted. The man didn't understand his words but got the idea anyway. He dropped the cell like it was red hot. He pointed the pistol at several random people but he knew people at tables further away would soon be making calls. That's if they hadn't already. He turned back to face Timur Ozgan.

"You set me up, you bastard. You set me up to take the fall for Mihai Pojer. Just like you did with that dead girl back in Odessa. I fuckin' knew I shouldn't have had anything to do with you."

Next to Ozgan, Engin Hasanov jumped to his feet. The young man's face was pale, his eyes staring with shock, his little Errol Flynn moustache a black scrawl on his lip.

"No, you killed him," Hasanov shouted at Caramarin. His voice even shriller than normal. "You were the one who killed him."

Caramarin glanced round. People were shouting or screaming all around him, he noticed people running out of the dining suite's door. The bride and groom's family up on the top table were straining to see what was happening; what was wrecking their perfect day. A couple of girls, he thought they might be bridesmaids, were next to her, one pulling the bride to her feet.

Then all the alarms went off. The blaring sound adding to the fun house atmosphere of chaos and disorder all around. More people pushing and shoving their way out of the dining room. Some

were panicking now, one woman screaming hysterically, her husband trying to pull her out of the room. Another man just standing vacant like his brain had shut down.

Caramarin smiled. A wolf's grin. The girl had come through for him. She'd phoned that bomb scare through. He had no time left now. None at all.

"Listen," Caramarin said to Hasanov. Speaking loudly over the din. "I never killed your friend. First, why should I? I had no beef with him. Second, he was killed by having his throat slit from ear to ear before being stabbed through the heart.

"For someone to get that close to him; up close and personal, he'd really have to trust them, wouldn't he? Who here wanted to rub out your lover and who did Pojer know? If it wasn't me and it wasn't you..."

Hasanov turned to Ozgan. "You bastard. You never needed to kill him."

Caramarin looked round. There was a lot fewer people in the dining room now. Caramarin flipped his CZ-75 semi-automatic then pressed the pistol into Hasanov's hand. Hasanov looked at it like he'd never seen a gun before.

"N, N, No," stumbled Ozgan. "Don't... I love..."

"It's up to you now," Caramarin cut in. "You loved Mihai Pojer. I were you, I'd doom the bastard. Send his soul to the great beyond."

There were still people pushing out of the room. A couple of uniformed security guards trying to force their way in but making no headway against the tide of brightly dressed people pushing out. One of the guards speaking into a mouthpiece like he thought he worked for the CIA or FBI or something.

The wedding feast was now a wreck of tangled chaos. Leaving Timur Ozgan to his fate, Caramarin vaulted over the nearby table then dodged through the wreckage and raced for the opposite doors leading to the kitchen area. He tripped over a dropped napkin, stumbled a couple of steps, recovered his balance, banging his wrist on a table's edge.

Caramarin barged through the swing doors nearly knocking Eva Konieczna flying, the woman's face filled with anger, not confusion. She seemed the only one who'd kept her cool. Respect to her. Her clipboard clattered to the floor so she stooped to pick it up.

Firuta shouted as Caramarin shoved past the two women.

"What's going on?" Firuta called after him. "Someone said there was a man with a gun?" She followed him over to the changing area.

"Don't know," yelled Caramarin over his shoulder. "And he's got a fuckin' bomb in there! I'm not paid for this – I'm out of here!"

He threw his locker open then tugged on his combat jacket over his uniform. "I think he might still be in the room." He carried on out to the rear of the Lombardia Hotel. All the chefs and kitchen staff were huddled together like smoking penguins, separate from the agency waiters.

Apart from the head chef and one of the sous chefs they all seemed to be enjoying the unscheduled break to their evening. After all, they were still getting paid. A hotel manageress in a hi-viz jacket was running around ticking off names from a clipboard. The alarms were much quieter outside the building.

Caramarin pushed his way through the crowds of staff and out of the rear exit to the street. Apart from Firuta, nobody knew him and nobody took any particular notice. So he used his anonymity to his advantage. Caramarin walked quickly down the side street. As soon as he was out of sight of the Lombardia Hotel he ran. Ran like the wind.

Immediately, he heard sirens wailing louder. The cops. Of course they'd respond instantly to a bomb scare at a packed venue like the Lombardia Hotel. Especially as their intel must have told them that some of the wedding guests were in the life. Blue lights flashed and bounced off the buildings. A car threw itself round the corner then sped towards him.

Caramarin ducked into a deeply recessed doorway and hid in the shadows. One, two more cop cars raced past his position. As soon as they were gone, Caramarin hurried down the street. A police motorbike whizzed past at high speed, its rider concentrating on the wet road.

Caramarin jogged to his parked Subaru. He breathed a sigh of relief as he fired the car up and pulled out. He passed what he thought must be an armed response van with blacked out windows. It splashed through a puddle, dark spray fountaining onto the sidewalk.

After that, nothing.

CHAPTER 39. FRIDAY DECEMBER 18, 19:10.

He weaved his way up to the girls' house in Crumpsall, avoiding the main roads as much as possible. Pulled up further down the road from their terraced house. He rang the doorbell and waited until he heard the echoes die away. Then he pressed it again. Longer this time letting it ring and ring.

A light came on in the hall lighting up the fanlight then the front door opened up a crack. He saw Ewelina behind it. Even in the dim light behind her, Caramarin could tell she'd been crying hard. Ewelina tried to push the door closed, but Caramarin held it open, forearm braced.

The girl pushed harder but she was no match for his strength. She gave up and the door flew open. Caramarin stepped up and into the hall. A pile of coats was piled up on the bottom banister post. The top one was still damp.

"What's the matter? What's happened?" he asked.

"You bastard. Get out. Get out of here. I hate you." Her pretty heart-shaped face was blotchy, twisted with rage and misery, tears streaming down her cheeks. Black lines streaked her cheeks from her mascara.

"Why? What have I done?" Caramarin asked genuinely confused. He cast his mind back. Yeah, he'd just come from doing some bad things but they didn't know that and he'd never hurt the girls here. "C'mon, what's wrong?"

Ewelina flew at him, her small fists pounding uselessly on his chest. He grabbed her wrists, fending her off. She still struggled furiously, trying to hit him, still sobbing. Her slippers feet kicking out at him. Her white robe slipped open with her struggles, her nightie loose underneath. He caught sight of her small breast, even a glimpse of her pink nipple.

Caramarin looked away, ashamed.

"Go on, you bastard, why don't you rape me? Like you raped Narcisa's feelings?"

"What? What are you on about?"

Suddenly, Ewelina stopped her one sided struggle. She broke away from his grasp. She wrapped her robe tighter around her body then sat down at the foot of the stairs. She held her head in her hands, her shoulders hunched up and her body shook with her misery. Deep sobs racked her body.

"I still don't know what's happened," said Caramarin. He went to the kitchen and switched on the kettle. He set out two mugs on the counter.

He took the tea through into their lounge. Ewelina had moved into the living room and sat on the couch. She'd stopped crying now and looked up at him. She blew her nose.

"You bastard," she spat. "Narcisa took you in when you were hurt and you've gone and wrecked her life. I wish she'd never met you."

"Look," said Caramarin. "I've no idea what's going on. Honest. Please tell me what's happened."

"Narcisa's been arrested!"

"What!"

Now it was Caramarin's turn to sit down. He'd never expected that. The force of Ewelina's words hit him harder than any blow. The scalding tea slopped over onto his hand. But he barely noticed the pain.

"Yes. The police came for her at the shop this morning. There'd been a few complaints from customers – about loans they hadn't taken – so her manager had done an audit and found those moody loans she'd done for you. I told her not to do it. I told her. You bastard. She loved that job, she loved living here and now she'll never work again."

Ewelina's body shook, but her eyes were dry now. Anger more than sorrow now her dominant emotion.

"I'm sorry. I was going to pay her back." But how true was that? He still had next to no money on him.

"Yeah? A bum like you? You're a taker, Nicolae. That's what you are. A taker. You just use women for your own ends. And then you move on. Narcisa told me you probably still have a girl on the go back in Odessa."

Caramarin threw his arms wide. "I'm not like that," he protested.

"Yes you are!" Ewelina looked up at him. "You're going away now. You're running out like a rat. You killed someone yesterday, didn't you? The I.D. picture on the local news looked just like you before you shaved your head."

"That wasn't me. Promise. It was a set up. And I've sorted it out," but he could tell what he said wasn't believed. Okay, he'd sorted things out with the real murderer although he hadn't sorted it out with the law. And he had no intentions of walking into a police station and clearing his name.

"If you haven't killed that man then who else have you killed? You're some sort of gangster. I always knew you were no good but Narcisa wouldn't have it. She said you were okay. Well, you're not and you've gone and wrecked her life now.

"If you were a real man instead of some low-life crook, you'd go down the police station and turn yourself in. Tell them that you forced Narcisa to take out those loans. Then they might go easier on her."

But that wasn't going to happen. No way was he going to hand himself in and do years of hard time again. They'd never believe he'd not killed Mihai Pojer, not after they'd sifted through his past. No way. He wasn't going down again. Not for anyone.

"So when will they let her go? She'll post bail?" asked Caramarin, desperate to change the subject.

"I don't know, do I? She phoned earlier and I told her to get a lawyer. She'll need one."

"But that's not all," Ewelina said. She stood up, wrapping her robe tightly around her body. She seemed to have recovered some of her calm now. Or maybe her mind couldn't take any more emotion for the time being and had sailed into the eye of a hurricane. She searched among the clutter on top of the mantelpiece and found a small pink box. She opened the box and handed a white plastic stick to Caramarin. He looked at it.

"What's this mean?" he asked. At one end of the stick was a small window with two pink lines showing. But he had a horrible idea what was coming next.

"She's pregnant. She was so looking forward to telling you this evening. Now she can't."

"So that's what she wanted to tell me this morning," he said. Caramarin slumped onto the other couch. His mind racing but his thoughts were going in ten different directions at once.

"But we used protection. I had no idea." He felt weak and his muscles trembled. Even Ewelina could have beaten him up at that moment.

"You wouldn't know. You're only a man," said Ewelina. "You don't pick up on these things like us girls." She clutched a cushion in front of her chest like a barrier.

He shook his head.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry how it's all turned out. I never meant for any of this to happen," he said.

"That's the trouble. You men don't think how you affect us. You just go ahead, doing what you want, when you want and leave us girls to pick up the pieces afterwards.

"I think you should go now."

Distantly, at the end of the road, he heard a siren race past. Sure, it could be an ambulance, nothing to do with him, but Ewelina was right. He needed to get away very soon. He was pushing his luck by remaining here. He struggled to his feet.

He nodded agreement. "Narcisa's got my number. Ask her to call when they let her go," he told Ewelina.

"I will. But don't hold your breath. You've really let her down, you bastard."

In the corner of the lounge, near the door, he saw his battered old rucksack. Somebody, probably Ewelina herself had packed it for him. He lifted it, swung it onto his shoulder then let himself out of the house and down the steps.

The rain mixed with his tears as he walked back to his car.

THE END.

Freedom fighter, jungle explorer, international mercenary, Riviera jewel thief, jet pilot and gigolo. I've done them all. In my dreams.

Mostly writing fast-paced crime, horror and science fiction, I have been writing for several years with my main literary influences ranging from HP Lovecraft to Elmore Leonard.

You can connect with me by emailing: morris.kenyon@ymail.com and I look forward to hearing from you.

OTHER BOOKS BY MORRIS KENYON:

Morris Kenyon is rapidly establishing himself as an acclaimed writer of fast paced, exciting thrillers. However, he likes to challenge himself and write in other genres as well.

*** SLEAFORD NOIR 1:**

McTeague's once trusted friend and associate, Wheelan, has broken off part of the older mobster's crime empire around the east Midlands. Far worse, Wheelan has also taken McTeague's much younger second wife, Claire, away with him.

Knowing the rest of his empire will fall away or defect to Wheelan if he fails to act, McTeague sends his trusted and lethal enforcer, Hennessy, to Sleaford to show Wheelan who is chief and to take Claire back home. So Hennessy starts a campaign of violence until Wheelan has no choice but to return Claire. But that is only the start of both gang boss's problems...

*** SLEAZEFORD (SLEAFORD NOIR 2):**

One sleepy Fenland town. Two Polish chancers eager to make a fast buck with no questions asked. A group of businessmen with funny handshakes wanting to rake off big bucks from town

planning contracts. A neo-Nazi bigot who'll jump at the chance of becoming Mayor as his first stepping stone to total power. His bunch of thuggish skinhead hangers-on. Add a huge, abandoned industrial complex on the edge of town ripe for redevelopment. Put them all together and what could possibly go wrong? Except that matters soon escalate way beyond anything any of these groups expected.

Welcome to Sleazeford...

*** BULLETS DON'T LIVE FOR EVER**

A round-up of shorter stories, including the prize winning 'Journey'.

A collection of shorter fiction in a variety of lengths and genres from *A* for Action through *R* for romance all the way to *Z* for Zombie. Action and adventure, crime, horror, humour, romance, sci-fi. There should be something to please everybody in this collection. It also includes the prize winning short story, 'Journey'.

SCIENCE FICTION AND HORROR:

*** THE HORROR FROM THE BLIZZARD.**

Any scientific expedition to the Arctic expects plenty of risk. However, Dr. Welham of Miskatonic University's survey uncovers far more than the usual geologic and ethnographic samples. In the severe blizzards of the far north, the team comes across a hideous object from an elder age. A relic that brings earth shattering terror in its wake...

This story is loosely inspired by H. P. Lovecraft's short story from 1918, *Polaris*.

*** THE LURKERS WITHIN.**

A collection of shorter horror fiction loosely based on the works of H P Lovecraft and his Cthulhu Mythos. It includes some longer tales like *Of Mi-go and Men* down to flash fiction but all will give you sleepless nights and haunt your dreams for weeks to come.

Warning – for your own sanity, do not read these tales when you are alone, or in the dark or after midnight...

*** KRILLAZ**

You'd need a good reason to visit Hancox I – a tide-locked world infested by biological terror weapons – Krillaz – a nightmare genetically modified cross between rats and humans. Even hunters avoid the place. However, interplanetary recovery agent Vic Vargo has one million reasons to go. In line to collect a million Hydrans if he rescues a playboy from the talons of the Krillaz, he teams up with a group of executives on a management bonding exercise and heads out to an abandoned city.

There, Vargo realises they have all bitten off far more than they can chew. Unlike the Krillaz...

Includes the bonus short story, 'Sideways Through Time'.

*** HARDSHELLZ.**

This time, Vic Vargo is hired to bid at auction for a valuable sea shell on behalf of an oligarch with more money than sense and then guard it on its way to a private museum. Easy money, Vargo thinks. What could go wrong? But that's just the start of Vargo's troubles as everything does go wrong. And is the oligarch himself a man to be trusted? Using his wits, strength and reflexes Vargo does his best to save his friends, succeed in his mission and keep his reputation as the best interplanetary recovery agent in the galaxy.

Although this is a follow-up to Krillaz, it is a stand-alone story.

THE NICU CARAMARIN SERIES FOLLOWING THE ADVENTURES OF A ROMANIAN GANGSTER AND HARD MAN:

* **WARNING:** These books contain scenes of a sexual nature, graphic violence, strong language and drug abuse. They are not intended for those easily offended or persons under eighteen years. You have been warned, so if you read them, don't blame me.

*** 200 STEPS DOWN:**

When his crime boss in Odessa, Ukraine, decides to up his game by getting involved in people trafficking, Nicolae Caramarin must make a choice. Should he turn a blind eye to the horrors he witnesses and carry on being a good soldier for the gang; or take his stand and bring them all down in the only way he knows how?

*** LOOKIN' FOR TROUBLE:**

With little choice but to flee his home city of Odessa, Nicolae Caramarin must recover a gang boss's missing valuable painting if he ever hopes to return. He follows the trail to the windy and rainy city of Manchester. There, he soon falls into his bad old ways with the local underworld. But things soon escalate out of control. Who can he turn to for help? Who can he trust? Soon Caramarin finds himself relying on his strength and wits in a battle for survival where just staying free is a bonus.

He follows his misadventures in Britain in the next story in the series:

*** TWO WAYS OUT:**

Having fallen on tough times, hard-bitten ex-con Nicolae Caramarin is lying low. However, he's thinking of going back to the only life he knows – crime. Yet when an old friend asks him for a simple favour, he has no idea of the trouble he'll soon be in. Hours later he's standing in front of a murdered Prosecutor's body – and dead centre in the sights of a group of corrupt cops from Romania's Black Sea port of Constanta.

Only question is how will Nicu Caramarin get out from under and clear his name?

*** SNOWBIRD:**

The fourth in the series. To be written...

EROTICA SERIES:

*** SLAVES OF THE COPPER COAST:**

When wealthy young broker James Baxter is sent to the tropical country of Kupro Marbordo, the Copper Coast, he is amazed to find that slavery is a well established custom there. Initially shocked, he soon finds himself owning a beautiful slave-girl – with all that implies regarding her discipline and training.

*** SLAVES OF THE COPPER COAST 2:**

On her eighteenth birthday, Rebecca daCastro's father buys her a very special present – a slave-girl. Her very own slave-girl who will attend to her every need. Even better, it is one of her ex-school friends who has fallen on hard times. But will the two girls get on?

*** SLAVES OF THE COPPER COAST 3:**

Every so often, the ruling junta of Kupro Marbordo, the Copper Coast, sends the cavalry to sweep the distant, lawless Pine Mountains free of brigands. A great opportunity for Ensign Fernando Bartro to make a name for himself – and maybe capture a slave-girl. But there are dangers ahead for the young officer. Will he make it through?