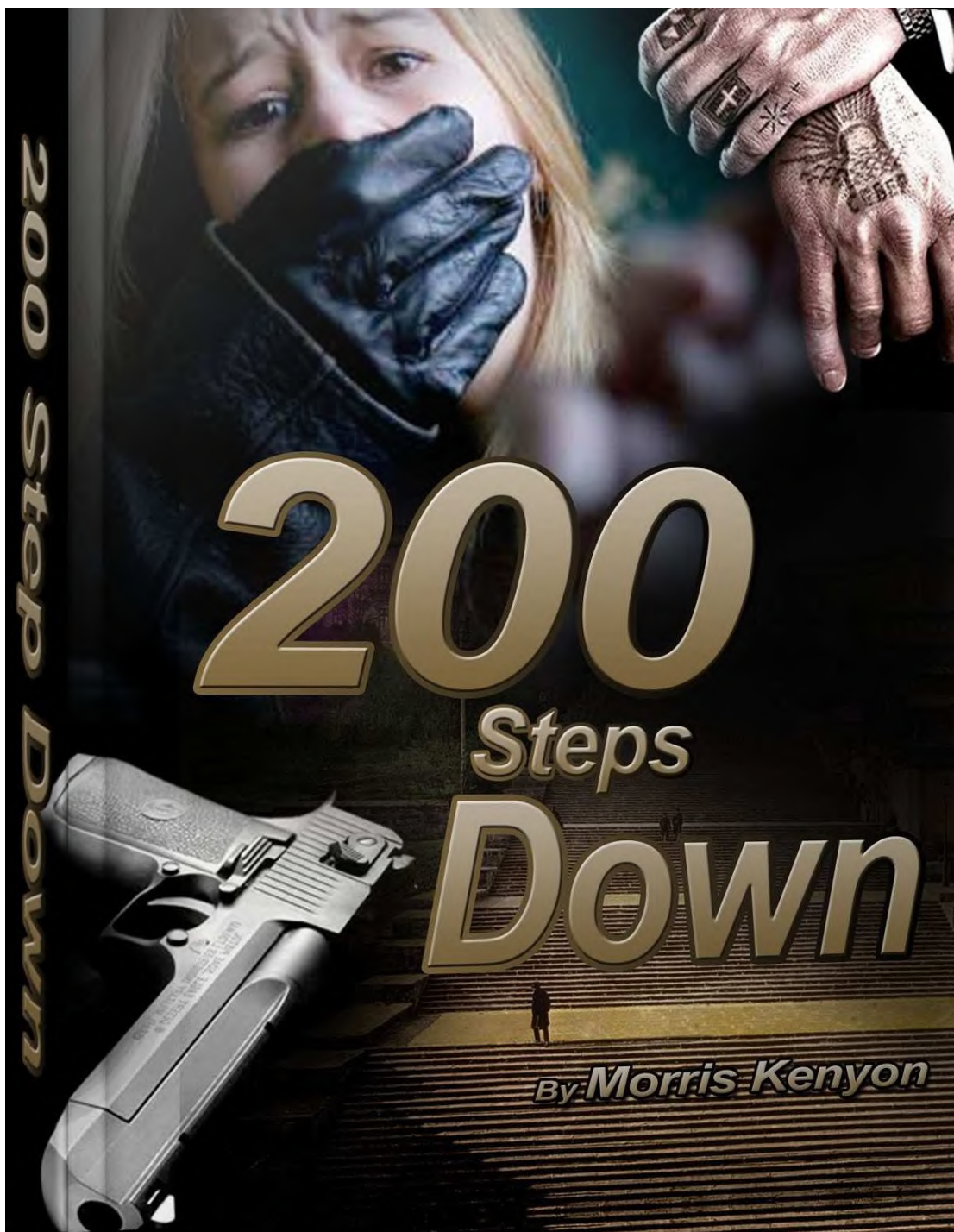




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by steps





200 STEPS DOWN.

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The forces of good and evil are working within and around me, I must choose, and in a free will universe I do have a choice.

Anonymous

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?

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

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200 STEPS DOWN.

CHAPTER 1. MONDAY OCTOBER 5, 20:30.

If Nicolae Caramarin was nervous, he didn't show it. Not when he was holding six tits he wasn't. And two nine spots in his hand. Drank from the vodka bottle and slid it back over. Opposite him, Nedelcho Videnov took a longer pull. Videnov glanced at his bodyguard standing just behind the players. The guard was leaning against the office wall with his hands in his pockets, next to a hastily wiped whiteboard.

Caramarin took a longer look at the woman in the corner. She was worth another look. Tied to a chair with a piece of duct tape gagging her is not the best look for any woman. As an image, it will never make the front cover of Vogue magazine. But you could see that she was beautiful.

“Your boss is branching out, then?” Videnov said. Money always interested the accountant. He liked being around it and if he could cut himself into a slice of any deal then he wanted his piece.

There was a disreputable air about the man. Only young, late twenties, but already balding. Pale blue eyes behind gold framed designer glasses. His silk tie was loosened and rode half way down his chest. He'd chosen his short cut to wealth by advising on tax evasion and money laundering for the underworld.

“Yeah,” grunted Caramarin.

“Hear he got stiffed by the Georgian. Lost a lot of money?”

“Abkhazian, actually, comrade. But he's dealing with the matter,” Caramarin said.

“Bit of a step up from money lending and protection to people trafficking?” Videnov took another pull from the bottle and slid it back again. The man's eyes glassy now.

Caramarin took another slug, saw Videnov trying to stare him down and took a deeper drink. The vodka burned its way down his throat. Only a cheap brand poured into an expensive bottle. Fooled no-one.

“He has contacts. From the time of the Bosnian War. He knows what he's doing.”

“Word of advice,” said Videnov. “And I don't give many of those for free. It's not as easy as it once was. The E. U. has toughened their border controls recently.”

“He knows what he's doing. And it's me taking the risks while he gets the money. As always.” Caramarin looked over at the woman. “She's a bit knocked about, isn't she?”

“Tried to get away. But she'll clean up fine.” Videnov paused and drank again. “She's pure, too.”

“You mean...?”

“Yeah. She's virgo intacta. Unusual, these days I know. That's why she costs more.”

Caramarin raised his eyebrows. “Unless she's had that op I've heard they can do.” He glanced at his cards again then dropped another hundred hryvnias onto the pile of currency on the desk. Euros, roubles, Ukrainian hryvnias and Turkish lira all lay mixed up together.

“I've a long way to go tonight,” Caramarin said, stretching his back. “I'll see you now.”

He turned over his three Queens and laid them out in front of him. Videnov turned over three Jacks and shrugged. Disappointment in his eyes. The man hated to see money leave his office. Unless it was heading into an offshore account. Caramarin swept up the cash and casually stuffed the notes into his combat jacket. Then he picked up a padded envelope from the floor next to him and tossed it onto the desk on top of the cards.

“It's all there. A kilo of Afghan brown.”

“Surprised he could get it together so quickly,” Videnov said. “Heard the Georgian – sorry, Abkhazian – really hurt him.”

“Maiorescu's doing all right. He knows what he's doing. Looking to expand again now.”

Videnov looked unimpressed. He knew as well as Caramarin that Eugen Maiorescu was in trouble. He called his bodyguard over.

“Open it, please. Make sure there are no nasty surprises.”

The thick set man swaggered over. Slid the envelope over to his side of the desk. Caramarin watched light reflect off his shaved head as the man leaned forward. He picked up a package tightly wrapped with tape from out of the envelope and tossed it in his hand. Then a second package.

“Looks like it's all there. Weighs about right.”

“You know, I may be wrong but I'm getting a bad feeling about this.” said Videnov.

“Where did a piece of shit like Maiorescu get this from? Let's check this out.”

Videnov leaned down and fetched a small Swiss Army knife from out of his desk drawer and passed it to the man.

“Test it,” he ordered.

The guard jabbed the point of the blade into the first package and licked the powdered tip. He frowned at Caramarin and poked into the second package.

“You cheap weasel. As I thought, boss, it’s cut to fuck - really low quality.”

Probably the only one surprised in the room was Caramarin. Maiorescu had never let him down before. A split second of hesitation was all it took before his old paratrooper training took over. He jumped to the balls of his feet and slammed the cheap desk into Videnov and his guard.

Videnov fell down, hitting his back on the floor, his chair under him. The guard was caught off balance but with his boxer training recovered himself quickly. The thug leaned forward and slashed out at Caramarin with the Swiss Army knife, narrowly missing his face.

Caramarin snatched up the vodka bottle before it rolled off the desk and shattered it against the edge. He jabbed it full into the guard's face and twisted it. A shard ripped his cheek open, a flap of skin falling loose. The guard screamed and his hands flew to his face in agony. Blood poured from the open wound flooding down his white shirt.

Caramarin vaulted the desk and stamped on the still prone Videnov. He punched the guard twice in the gut, knocking the wind out of him and then smashed his bald head once, twice onto the desk top, a crack as his nose broke, then kicked his legs out from under him.

He turned to Videnov, grabbed him by his loose tie and sat him up. His glasses hung loose.

“You're fucking dead,” said Videnov. His words were tough but his face betrayed his fear.

“I never know the H was fake. Maiorescu's always been okay before. You know that,” said Caramarin. He dragged the accountant up. “Pick up your chair and sit down. Hands on your head.”

Videnov did as told and Caramarin crouched, keeping an eye on the accountant. He picked up the Swiss Army knife from by the prone thug and gave him another kick to the ribs to remember him by. He opened a desk drawer; found just the usual office junk. The second held the roll of duct tape, car keys and an envelope full of cash. He pocketed the money and keys.

“Sorry about that. Sit still and it won't hurt.” He pulled the accountant's arms down and quickly duct taped him to the chair, gagged him and went through his suit. Videnov's weak eyes bulged and he tried to say something. Too late for that now. Caramarin helped himself to the man's phone and the money in the wallet.

“Nice phone, that. One of those smart ones,” said Caramarin patting the man's cheek. “Say if you need it. No?”

Caramarin knelt and wrapped more duct tape around the heavyweight's ankles and wrists. Safe for the time being he was about to exit the office when he remembered the girl in the corner.

“Fuck!” He crossed the office to her. Her eyes widened in horror and she jerked her head back, making a muffled scream. Caramarin realised he was still holding the Swiss Army knife. With what she had just seen, she must think he was a devil straight from the pits of Hell.

“I'm not going to hurt you. Okay? You're safe with me, okay?” He spoke softly.

He cut away her gag. She made a liar of him straight away. The girl started to scream so he slapped her face. Not hard but enough to silence her. The sound whipcracked round the room.

“Don't make a noise. Come with me and you'll be all right.”

She didn't look like she believed him. Not surprising really. He knelt and cut away the duct tape binding her arms and legs to the chair and helped her stand up. She rubbed her arms and legs, wincing as circulation returned.

She was taller than he thought, maybe one point seven five metres, slim and graceful. She was only wearing a black sports bra and pants and was barefoot. Her face was perhaps slightly too long but she looked intelligent. Above it, she had long blonde hair, possibly not from the bottle as he'd thought, tied back in a pony tail.

That was all he had time for at a first glance but it was enough. Caramarin took her arm. He paused by the door. Now the adrenaline was wearing off, he thought about saying something to the tied-up men but didn't. He just switched off the light then locked the door behind him.

CHAPTER 2. MONDAY OCTOBER 5, 20:50.

Videnov's office was part of a Soviet era run-down complex just off Prymor'ska Street near the docks. Just outside directly under a street light was a black Mercedes S320. It gleamed darkly in the sodium glow. Old-fashioned but Caramarin could see why it would appeal to the accountant. He opened it and pushed the girl into the passenger seat then ran round to the driver's side before she could do anything stupid. He adjusted his seat, sparked it up and drove away.

He was at a bit of a loss and needed time to think. But time was one luxury he didn't have. He'd made two bad enemies tonight. Sure, Maiorescu wasn't quite the force he had been recently but the people that Videnov represented were far worse.

Maiorescu was strictly mid-league in the region's underworld. Protection rackets, extortion, loan sharking, property scams, knock-off gear, supplying a few night clubs with what they needed at over inflated prices. Yeah, that was Maiorescu's level. Mid level pond life.

Caramarin was happy with that. Well, not happy but he made out. Could live with it. But trading in sex workers was a big step up. Caramarin never wanted to get involved with people trafficking but he owed too much money to refuse. And now he was in deep trouble.

He swung right onto Prymor'ska Street and headed south. Past the magnificent Potemkin Stairs and the Hotel Odessa towering above the marine terminal. The girl was shivering in her seat so he turned the heating to full, even though the night was mild. He unwrapped his black and white keffiyeh scarf he usually wore and passed it over to her.

She flashed a quick smile at him. "Thanks," she said. "What are you going to do with me now?" Her voice husky.

"I hadn't really thought," he replied. "Don't think I can put it right just now."

"No." They sat silently as he drove on past the huge container port on the dock road. In the dark, the port spotlights shone with bright white intensity, the shadows harsh and dark. But they could do nothing to help lighten his mood.

"You're not from round here?" he asked.

"No, I'm from Donetsk, in the east."

"How did you get into this mess?"

"A woman at my dancing school said they were looking for dancers to audition in Paris. I wasn't interested at first but then my mum got herself a new fella and there wasn't room for me in the flat any more." She sniffed then carried on.

"I was sleeping on friends' couches and then I ended up sleeping in one of the parks so I thought I'd give it a go. But when I turned up, they wanted me to undress. I said no, I wasn't doing that no way but then he hit me, said they'd come after my little sister and threw me in a van."

Caramarin thought there may have been a little more to it than that, or a lot more, but let it slide.

“Do you want to go back? To Donetsk?” he asked.

“No way,” she said. “But I don't know what to do.”

By this time, they were entering the suburb of Moldavanka where Caramarin rented an apartment. He swung onto the grid of streets and pulled up outside his place. Took the keys out the ignition.

“Stay here and be quiet. I just need a few things.”

“I can't drive anyway,” she said.

“Right.”

He ran up the outside flight of stairs and let himself in. Doubted if he could stay at this place again. Maiorescu had been here several times and it would be too easy for Videnov to trace him back here. He would be sorry to leave this place but he didn't own much. He knelt by the bed and pulled out a shoe box from a hollow in the wall. A bit of cash – nowhere near enough as he'd lost too much recently – his foreign passport and a razor sharp combat knife was what he took.

Caramarin stuffed a rucksack with underwear and a couple of shirts and jeans and that was him. Done. He glanced around the room for possibly the last time. Not much to show for nearly forty years of life. Was sorry to leave his stereo. But he still had his health. For the time being.

He shut the door behind him and ran down the stairs. He popped the Merc's trunk. He swore. In the trunk was another woman. In the inky darkness, little more than a huddled shape. Tied up and gagged with more of the duct tape. This one was wearing black dancer's sweats. She twisted around to look up at him. In the darkness, he couldn't see much but he guessed that she was young and attractive.

“Fuckshitfuckshitfuckshit.”

His life had turned to something resembling rat shit in the course of an hour. Not like this was the first, second or third time he'd been served a large portion of rat shit but Caramarin could have done without this now.

He leaned into the trunk and helped her out. He was right, she was young and attractive. Looked like another dancer type, being slender and toned. Under her sweatshirt he noticed she had only small tits. She looked to be maybe only just eighteen. Young enough to be his daughter.

The girl's ankles were taped together so she couldn't walk. For very obvious reasons, he didn't want to spend too much time out on the street with a tied up girl so he stooped and threw her over his shoulder. Ignored her struggles and muffled squeals. He opened the passenger side and told the first girl to go up the stairs in front of him.

Back in his apartment he slung the bound girl onto the couch and told the first girl to sit down. He ran his hand through his long black hair sweeping it back from his face. He knew he couldn't stay here too long. When he didn't return with the girl Maiorescu had paid for they would come looking for him. Okay, he didn't think Videnov's crew would be here until the morning. But he certainly didn't want to be around for either lot.

Caramarin pulled the Swiss Army knife from out of his camo jacket and tossed it to the first girl. She looked at it like it might bite her. As he didn't want to face the terror on the tied up girl's face, he asked her to free the other girl. Not wanting to leave them alone for too long, Caramarin went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. Then he found a couple of his old sweatshirts and jeans for the girls.

By the time they were dressed, the tea was ready. His too large clothes made them look even younger and more vulnerable than they had before.

The first girl spoke up "I'm Ekaterina and she's Yulia. She's from near Donetsk, too. Look, what's going on? Why are you helping us?" They looked up at him from the couch.

He leaned against the kitchenette doorpost. "Don't know that I should. But this is all too much for me. I mean, I've done some bad things in my time but this is too much.

"I take it you don't want to go back to Donetsk?" They shook their heads, one blonde the second darker. "You can't stay here – in Odessa, I mean. What else..."

“I still want to go to the West,” said Ekaterina.

“Don't we all,” said Caramarin. Though he didn't really want to go West. He liked it here. He knew where he was and what he was doing. It was his pond and even though he dealt with pond life he got by. At least he did until tonight.

“What about you?” turning to Yulia.

“Yeah, I s'pose so. Why not?” She was shivering now. Whether with cold or a reaction to the terror she must have been in, he had no idea. Would take the girl a while to recover from being locked in a boot for who knows how long.

“Got passports?”

“Only my internal one. Not one for abroad. No, they took it off of me,” Ekaterina shivered and looked like she was about to burst into tears. Yulia just shook her head.

“You think they're back at the office?”

“Probably, I mean of course I had it on me when they took me at Donetsk but what happened to it, I dunno now.”

“Well, they're no use for going abroad anyway. Maybe I can get you fixed up but it won't be cheap.”

Ekaterina suddenly looked horrified again.

“No, I didn't mean it like that.” Caramarin said. Embarrassed himself now. “Look, we can't stay here much longer. Someone's going to come looking for us and we don't want to be here when they do. I know a place where you can stay the night, if you want.”

They stood up when Yulia announced she needed to go.

“I know – we're going now,” said Caramarin.

“No – I mean I have to go now.”

She dashed to his bathroom and closed the door behind her. Ekaterina looked at him. The cheap stud partition wall let you hear just about every sound in the bathroom. It's hard to make conversation when you can hear someone dumping their load only a few feet away. Caramarin found the view from his window over the back of the opposite apartments to be way more interesting than normal.

The two girls still seemed dazed and followed Caramarin down to the Merc. He drove them a few blocks away where he knew one of his ex's mothers took in guests. It was late, but not too late. More importantly, she could be relied on to keep her mouth shut. He'd always got on well with Bohdana – especially when given a few hryvnias to hold in her work worn, arthritic hands. Told the girls he'd be back in the morning and set off again.

This time he drove east over to the night clubs by Arkadia beach. Had two pieces of luck. Managed to find a parking spot and his friend Belgian was on the door of the Skorpion Club. The story went that when Belgian's unit was sent to Beslan back in 2006 during the spill over from the Chechen crisis, he thought they were being sent to Belgium.

Way he heard it, the man was looking forward to mussels and fries with mayo and maybe a romp with an overpaid E. U. Commissioner's secretary but got dust and flies and bearded fanatics who hated all infidels instead. No, not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but the man knew his way around the Odessa underworld.

Belgian was a sharp dresser. Wearing a tux and smelling of expensive cologne, he looked the part standing next to the velvet ropes and red carpet. Caramarin had worked the doors himself in the recent past and still put in the odd shift when business with Maiorescu was slack.

Belgian looked Caramarin up and down from his slicked back hair, combat jacket, check keffiyeh, blue jeans and walking boots. His normal day clothes.

“Still dressing like shit, Nicolae. Can't let you in lookin' like that, you know.”

Nicolae glanced at the handful of young and trendy people queuing outside. Lads in fancy shirts and long legged girls wearing too few clothes. The pulse of western dance music spilled out of the entrance.

“Not for me. Too old for all that now. Anyway, it’s you I wanna see. Spare a minute?”

Belgian gestured to one of the other bouncers, who nodded and stepped forward. Belgian walked back with Caramarin to the Mercedes. The bouncer raised his eyebrows, stripes etched into the right.

“What you doing with Videnov's ride?”

“Long story, comrade. I'll tell you another time. What do you hear about Maiorescu? He wants me out the way or has he really fucked up this time?” Caramarin briefly filled in Belgian about what had gone down tonight. He could trust Belgian as much as he could trust anyone – which was very little.

“Out of Maiorescu's league,” said Belgian. “He's never done much in the way of drugs before. You know that. Certainly not a kilo of brown. Whoever sold it to him must've known he's been losing ground and wanted to give him a little push. But I've not heard that he's got a beef with you so I reckon he didn't know. Fuckin' amateur.”

“Thanks, comrade.”

“Your big problem is the people Videnov's fronting. They'll think you've shafted them with the baking powder and you've got their chicks for free. You're going to have to sort that out fuckin' fast or you're gonna wind up at the bottom of the Black Sea. Look, if you need a hand, let me know. It'll cost but ... you know.”

The queue was building up and Belgian stepped out the Merc.

“I'll give you a bell or come down the gym. Keep in touch Big Guy” he called back. A joke as Belgian was a few inches taller and a twelve to fifteen kilos heavier than Caramarin. And all of it muscle.

“I will.” Caramarin fired up the Merc and pulled away. Yes, Belgian knew a lot but he didn't know everything. Caramarin could think of one very good reason why Maiorescu might have a beef with him. But only if he'd found out.

CHAPTER 3. SATURDAY JUNE 27, 14: 00.

It all went back to earlier that summer.

Maiorescu was hosting a hunting weekend at his country villa outside of Yuzhne further up the Black Sea coast. He'd bought it fire damaged off some business man who desperately needed money. So the man had torched it for the insurance.

It had cost a lot to do up and he wanted to flaunt it. Maiorescu had done very well out of a property deal with some gullible British men from Manchester who'd believed too much in what was on show on the website. To them, the price of Ukrainian land and the possibilities for development had been too good to be true. Trouble for them, it was too good to be true. Now they'd been well and truly burned.

The trouble was, Caramarin felt out of place as soon as his beat up Opel Combo was let in through the electric gates. Most of the men were wearing designer leisure clothes, golfing clothes and expensive knits. The women were like birds of paradise in expensive looking dresses and immaculately made up.

Because of the sweaty heat, he was wearing a just a white shirt and jeans. He drove round the back and parked next to the rust buckets driven by the hired help.

Didn't matter what Maiorescu wore, he still looked like what he was – a crook. The gang boss looked like the late President Nixon's uglier brother. That's if President Nixon had ever had a brother with a lifetime of sin and hard living etched on his face. In his mid fifties and looked older. He had a heavy, jowly face with a permanent shadow and home dyed black hair. The hood was holding out a cold Zibert Light beer

with the condensation dewing the outside. Caramarin took it. It slipped down easy on the hot day.

Maiorescu led him over to the buffet. Salmon, sturgeon, even caviare. The best Scandinavian import vodka and not the bathtub horilka moonshine Caramarin was used to. He'd even brought over a chef from one of the top French restaurants he protected. But there was also the Ukrainian food that Caramarin preferred.

Maiorescu had invited many of his business associates. A gathering that the Ministry of Internal Affairs should be interested in. Except Caramarin saw the Odessa Colonel of Militia talking to a head Caramarin knew had personally rubbed out several men. Not his problem.

He broke bread with Maiorescu and drank another couple of Zibert Lights. These gatherings didn't do much for him. He drifted over to the buffet. Maiorescu's wife, Natalya, was talking to the wife of Maiorescu's property developer partner. She was definitely a trophy wife, wasn't too sure whether she was Maiorescu's second or third.

Caramarin also knew that Maiorescu usually brought hostesses from the Casinos to his parties. Didn't know for sure if any were here. Though he guessed that some of the girls had been brought in to provide comfort to his important associates.

Maiorescu strolled up. "Nicolae, I'm just going out for an hour or so. Big boy's toys to play with."

Caramarin knew by this that Maiorescu wanted to go out in the forest to let off a few mags of his new Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifle. The peasant probably thought it would impress his property associates. And the gun almost certainly would. "Stay here and keep an eye on the girls won't you?"

Caramarin was a bit annoyed to have to hang about the party. Wouldn't have minded loosing off a few bursts with the Kalash. Would've reminded him of the good old days. He nodded and took another pull of his beer to show he was man about it.

Maiorescu's Mercedes drove away followed by a couple of other limos and 4X4s in convoy. Couldn't have looked more like gangsters if they'd tried. He shook his head and walked over to the buffet tables.

However, there were good sides to staying behind. Natalya was worth any man looking at twice. Or as much as you can get away with without being caught perving. Beauty may be only skin deep but what do you want – a great looking spleen?

She was in her early thirties, a full figured, dark haired beauty. She was wearing a white Dior dress, off the shoulder that clung to her body, also showed off her deep tan to great effect. Her hair was down to way past temptation and a mouth just made for kissing – and other pleasures as well.

He'd been told a woman's reputation is a brittle thing. Once broken, it can never be whole again. One thing Caramarin knew about her, she'd made some porno tapes back in the day. He'd even watched a few. If Maiorescu didn't care, neither did he. Maybe that's where Maiorescu had found her.

She saw Caramarin standing there, the Zibert almost finished. She blew a smoke ring kiss to him and brought him a fresh bottle. They clinked bottle to vodka glass and kissed on the cheek.

“Don't just stand there,” she swayed slightly on her feet sort of but not quite in time to the music. How much has she had? She dragged him over to a wooden dance floor. They danced, she with experience in the clubs behind her, he self consciously. A few other couples were dancing.

He noticed Videnov the accountant talking to some business types over by the pool. A cloud of smoke over them, drifting up in the summer's heat. The man's bald head now reddening in the sun.

The golden sun burning down to orange. The long hot day turning to evening. The booze. Beautiful women. Western dance music. Sweat trickling down his camo vest. Ice cold beer. People coming and going Natalya tripping against him, her breast pressed on his arm just a little too long, her vodka spilling down his front. He mumbled something.

“What was that?” she said.

“I need the toilet,” he said again. He had rarely been to this place out in the woods before. She picked up a fresh champagne bottle from out the ice bucket.

“Come with me, I’ll show you,” she said. She took him by the arm and led him into the house. No one else seemed to notice. There was a cloakroom downstairs but she took him up the wide sweep of curved stairs to the first floor gallery landing and into the master bedroom.

She pointed to the en suite. He looked around the mosaic tiled wet room as he pissed out the beer in an unending flow. Marble tiles, gold everywhere, even a flat screen TV over the bath. Better than any luxury hotel. Washed his hands and came out.

Natalya was naked on the bed, the white dress dropped over a Turkish rug. He looked down, she was still gorgeous. Kept herself in shape, hadn't put on a kilo since making those porno tapes. A body like hers wasted on a slob like Maiorescu.

“Open the champers,” Natalya said. “I need you inside me.”

There are times when you know you are fucking up big time but you still go ahead and do it anyway. Now was one of them. He picked up the bottle and uncorked it. Didn't do anything stupid like spray it over the room. He wasn't that far gone. She hadn't brought glasses so he put it to his lips and drank deep. The bubbles slipped down very nicely.

Natalya was now kneeling on the bed in front of him. She unbuckled his jeans and pulled them down. His cock stiff and ready. Natalya took the bottle from him and drank. She licked and sucked the neck like she was giving it a blow job. He sighed with expectation. He took the bottle again and drank. It was mostly empty now. Natalya took hold of his buttocks and pulled his body towards her.

She put her mouth over his cock and gave him head. The feeling of her trained lips sliding up and down. She wouldn't let him explode in her mouth but timed it just right just as he couldn't hold on any longer. She took her wicked mouth away and lay down on the satin sheets. Spread her legs letting him see her shaved cunt with her swollen

lips. With one hand, she opened herself, with the other she pulled him up the bed, slipped a rubber onto his cock and guided him in.

His hands on her breasts, hers on his arse. Took her hard, deep thrusts, no mercy. Explosion, ecstasy, a groan of extreme pleasure. Soon, too soon; spent exhausted, lying together. One whole separated into two halves again.

Natalya rolled over, her back to him. He could feel himself stiffening again.

“No, not now,” she said. “Nicolae, I need you. I've fancied you for ages, you know that.”

He wasn't bragging but he had an idea maybe she had.

“Eugen can't make love to me like he used to. He can't get it up much these days. He drinks, you know.” Not telling him anything Caramarin didn't know. Maiorescu could handle his booze if not his woman. She cried a little.

“And he beats me sometimes, too. He stands over me, likes to hurt me and make me cry. I hate him sometimes.”

Caramarin didn't ask any stupid questions about why she stayed. He knew you don't just walk away from a gang head like Maiorescu. And she probably needed the money. Liked going shopping in Odessa's boutiques, the jewels and the cars and respect. And what's an ex-porno chick going to do anyway? He put his arms around her and held her tight.

He could feel himself nodding off. Sun, booze and sex. Always does that.

“Do you want anything?” she asked.

He grunted. Could be taken any which way. She stood up. He watched her tanned naked body walk across the room. She came back with a small mirror and two fat lines of coke and a rolled up picture of Taras Shevchenko - a hundred hryvnia note. He snorted up the coke; felt the buzz and tingle shoot up his head and the world became even sharper, clearer and more vivid than before.

“Good stuff.”

“Should be – only the very best for Eugen Maiorescu.”

Natalya lead him to the wet room, she stepped into the shower and gasped as the initially cold jets hit her body. Caramarin stepped in after. He returned the favour, knelt down in the spray the water dancing off his back and placed his mouth and searching tongue into the tender folds of her sex. She moaned, took his long hair and forced his head down and forward, deeper into her.

Just as she was about to come, she pulled him up and towards her, pushed his wet cock into her vagina. He forced her back against the tiles and his powerful thrusts took her to ecstasy again. He came a second time as she was subsiding. He pulled out and then they showered together gasping, the soapy water sluicing off them, washing away their lusts.

“Wow,” he said, drying off. Pulled on his sweaty old white shirt and jeans. She picked up something from the floor.

“For you,” Natalya said. She gave him her lacy white thong she'd been wearing earlier. She smiled. He stuffed them into his pocket. Knew now that there'd be other times in the future. She slipped the Dior dress over her shoulders and turned so Caramarin could zip it up. No, she hadn't put on fresh panties.

“Our little secret,” she said. “Look, you go down now and I'll follow in a few minutes.”

Caramarin knew they couldn't be seen together. Hurried downstairs and found a recliner by the pool side. It was almost dark now. The other guests had probably all gone into the marquee or eating their heads off at the buffet. Didn't think anyone had noticed his absence. Hoped not anyway.

Maybe it was the coke bringing him down but his mood darkened as he lay there. Couldn't shake off a bad feeling that he was going to pay for what he'd done with Natalya. Sure, if Maiorescu found out he'd discover what the bottom of the Black Sea

was like. With his balls in his mouth. Yeah, she was a great lay but was it worth his life? Wasn't like he was short of female company if he wanted any.

As his mind slowed down but somehow; and he couldn't explain it to himself, he thought it was going to be worse than that. Felt a great sensation crawling over his brain; of doom, of collapse, of oppression. Fear of something looming towards him. Far worse than the terror he'd felt before his first proper paratrooper drop all those years ago. Couldn't tell you what but it was bad.

Suddenly, a great cold shock, total darkness, splashing, out of control, no way up was right, unable to breathe, a great weight bearing him down to the depths, death itself. His legs kicked, his head surfaced out of the pool. His recliner floated a few metres away.

On the side, standing there like an ugly troll, Maiorescu laughing his head off. By him, a couple of his associates from earlier also bellowing with laughter. Pissed out of their skulls.

"I thought I told you to keep an eye on the place." he joked.

Maiorescu staggered off. Caramarin pulled himself out the pool. He swept his hair back. The shock had cleared his head and purged the coke from his system. The good thing was, he thought, was that Maiorescu was so pissed he wouldn't be interested in Natalya tonight. Wouldn't have a clue what was going on until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest.

It was later than he thought – he'd slept for hours. It was cold standing in his soaking clothes. A few of the guests were still up and about but nearly all were pissed. A couple of the help were clearing away the buffet and taking down the tables.

"Fuck it, I've had enough." he decided. Walked over to his Opel Combo, fired it up, put the heater on full and floored it.

His mood had lifted slightly by the time he returned to Moldavanka. The grey light of dawn was gathering over the Black Sea. He fumbled in his pocket for his keys. Shouldn't there be something else? What the fuck could it be, what?

Where's her thong? He searched his jeans. No way. Guessed her panties would still be floating in the pool. Nothing to tell Maiorescu that they were Natalya's anyway. Probably, the help had scooped them out when they cleaned the pool and they were now in the trash. And Maiorescu was so pissed he wouldn't have noticed a whale in the pool let alone a pair of lacy white skimpiers.

Half way up the stairs, he remembered the empty champagne bottle in the bedroom.

When Maiorescu showed up at his office at the realtor's on Monday, he didn't say anything. And neither did Caramarin. Least said, soonest mended on both sides.

CHAPTER 4. FRIDAY JULY 3, 22:00.

Suited and booted. A wedge of Maiorescu's money in his pocket, a few lines of Colombian nose candy for later. Caramarin walked into the Centurion Casino. Said hello to the doormen on duty. He always felt a wave of anticipation as he entered. He only had to lose a bit; cash in his remaining chips and collect a cheque from the office to pass onto Maiorescu. Clean, washed money. But if he won, he could keep any winnings. Couldn't lose.

In the foyer he looked up at the gilt Roman statues. A nude, well muscled man with a cock like a horse locked in a clinch with a woman with water melons for breasts. God knows where they'd got it from. Probably from some deposed dictator's or oligarch's palace. The statue was in some sort of pillared temple structure. A pool with little fountains and living jewel koi carp surrounded the temple. Gamblers tossed coins or chips into the pool for luck. Caramarin wasn't any more superstitious than the next man. So he chucked in some kopecks anyway.

Twinkling lights like stars festooned the ceiling. Beyond the lobby, came the electronic jangling of the slots and behind the one-armed bandits were the games he liked to play.

He lost a little on the slots. Walked through to the roulette wheel and felt lucky. He usually played on the outside bets; red or black, odds or evens, high or low. Felt like better odds, especially if you weren't a greedy bastard. Placed some chips on odds. The ball spun round the wheel in a blur. Clicked and clacked then came to rest on evens. Can't win 'em all. So he slid more onto evens. This time the ball then stopped on odds. He laughed.

Third time lucky. This time, placed a neat stack of chips on odds. Thought stacking them neatly would bring him better luck. If he placed them better, maybe fortune would take more notice. You never know. Watched the croupier as she called for last bets.

There weren't too many playing tonight. Maybe they'd headed onto the nightclubs early. She smiled at him and seemed to give the ball an extra little flick as she spun it around the wheel. He watched the blur of numbers, watched it slow, the ball making its addictive clattering round the wheel. The wheel slowed, Caramarin saw the ball bounce from number to number, odd, even, odd, even, odd, lastly black twenty two.

He shrugged. Can't win every time. Was only Maiorescu's money anyway. He picked up the remaining chips to cash them in. Then the croupier smiled at him again. A more personal smile than the general all-purpose smile for the general punters.

“Try again, sir? Lady Luck loves a trier.”

He'd not really noticed the girl while he was playing, he was concentrating so much on the wheel. He'd not seen her before so she must be new at the casino. She was wearing the casino's uniform of maroon blouse and waistcoat. Not the most flattering colour, but couldn't take away from her amazing green eyes. High cheekbones and full, generous lips under a wide forehead. She had dark hair, pinned back around her shoulders.

He turned to the table and smiled back.

“One more roll, sir? The night's young yet.”

One reason Maiorescu sent Caramarin to the casino was that he trusted him. Trusted Caramarin not to steal the money or gamble it all away. He always stuck to Maiorescu's loss limit and when that was reached, he cashed his chips in then walked away. Yes, Caramarin enjoyed a bet but was in no way addicted to that rush.

But when the girl smiled, the devil in Caramarin woke up. Always had a weakness for a girl with a pretty face and a friendly smile. Got him into trouble more than once before and no doubt would drop him in the shit again in the future. But what the hell? You only live once. Let's go for it.

Carefully, he stacked some chips on odds as before. Had a bad feeling and raised his hand, then switched the pile onto evens. Put his hands into his trouser pockets before he could change his mind a second time. Have to go with your gut instincts. And then live with the decision.

When the few other players had placed their wagers, the girl sent the ball on its way. Gave it her special little flick. Followed it with his eyes, watched the reflected light bouncing off it. Eventually, it slowed, bouncing from number to number. Came to a stop on red nine. Fuck. Was in trouble now.

“Bad luck, sir.”

“Not your fault,” he said with a rueful little smile.

Caramarin thought for a moment. Should never have made that last bet. Maiorescu would hit the roof now he'd gone over his limit. But he wasn't too far over the limit and he could sort of get away with it. Maybe this once. If the gang head was in a good mood. The girl looked up at him with that heart stopping smile again.

Now Caramarin looked at his pile of chips. Of course, he still had a lot left. He cascaded some of them from hand to hand for a moment deep in thought. The devil in him won out. Before he could have second thoughts, stuck a pile on no, not odds or evens. Wasn't having any luck with them tonight. Put them on high numbers instead. Go for it.

Watched the steel ball on its journey. He had done a stupid thing with this bet. No way could he get away with losing this much. The lights and noises hurt his head now. The pressure inside was intense. Sweat prickled his armpits and trickled down his back.

Couldn't wait for the ball to stop but also at the same time dreading it stopping. He watched the ball make its rounds, slowing, descending to the numbered part of the wheel, clacking, passing the dread zero. Nerves on high edge. It finished on black thirty one.

Caramarin almost punched the air. He was all right again. In the clear. Now he was even. The girl looked at him.

“Are you all right, sir?” She had quite a low, sexy voice. A local Odessa accent. And a sexy smile to go with her voice.

“Sure,” he said. “No problems.”

Almost before he could think about it, Caramarin pushed a large number of chips onto high numbers again. Well, it was working better than odds or evens. If he lost this, he would be in bad trouble with Maiorescu, a severe beating would be the least of his problems. But if he won, he'd be sorted for a while.

The croupier looked at him. Called for last bets. Other punters watching the high roller. The ball sped on its way round the rim of the wheel. Caramarin watched it. Didn't know what had come over him to make this bet. Not like he was a greedy man. Which is why Maiorescu trusted him. Actually, he did know. Always had a weakness for a pretty face.

The ball dropped down to the numbers, started to make its unhurried way to its final resting place, slowing, slowing, clicking. Couldn't believe it. Black twenty. He'd won. Elation and relief flooded through him. Yes. This is what living is about. Taking risks, living on the edge. And winning.

The croupier pushed a large stack of multi coloured chips over to him. Caramarin gave her two green chips as thanks. She looked up and smiled.

“If my luck's still in, you'll be free for a drink later on?” he asked quietly.

The girl faced him. “Don't you work on the doors here sometimes?”

“Sometimes. Not been a while, though. Name's Caramarin.”

“All right, then. I finish at twelve. I'll see you by the staff entrance?”

His luck was in a second time, then. Grinning to himself, Caramarin decided to put temptation out of reach before he did something stupid. Something that would earn him that beating. He nodded to the girl, then carried his chips over to the cash office and picked up a cheque for Maiorescu. Even after that, still had a decent amount left for himself. Tucking the cheque and his cash into a pocket, he wandered over to the restaurant then went to have a word with the doormen.

Thought he might have a few more bets on the slots, see if his lucky streak was holding out but stepped outside into the night air. A sea breeze from the Black Sea cooled his urge to gamble on. However, his luck was still with him. On the doors were a couple of men he got on with. Tailpipe and VCR stood talking.

VCR was a man who looked like time stopped in 1989. He wore his hair in a mullet and teamed it with a straggly blond moustache. His tux jacket sleeves were rolled up to the elbows showing gym toned muscles. A thick gold chain around his neck went with gold knuckle duster coin rings.

“Who's the new girl? On the roulette wheel?” he asked.

“The short one? With the nice rack?” asked VCR.

“Yeah. Dark hair. Bright green eyes.”

“Who's looking at the eyes when she's got those great tits?” said Tailpipe.

“You've got a one track mind, comrade. Make with the name.”

“Valeriya something or other. Why the interest?”

“I'm meeting her later.”

“You lucky bastard. I've been tryin' all week and got nowhere. Beginning to think she's a lesbo or something,” said Tailpipe.

“Just haven't got my animal magnetism, comrade.” Caramarin grinned.

“Yeah. It's a shame as I told her my girlfriend died recently.”

Caramarin was taken aback. He'd been out with Tailpipe and Tamila several times. He'd heard nothing. He gripped his friend's arm.

“I'm sorry, comrade. What happened?”

Tailpipe looked sad.

“Well, she was on her death bed at home. She looked up at me and said she had a confession she needed to make before she passed on. She wanted to get it off her chest. 'Go ahead, love', I said.

“‘Well,’ she said, ‘I've been very bad. I made love to your Dad, your brothers, the best man at our wedding. Even the entire reserve team of the Chornomorets Odessa Football Club.’

“‘I know,’ I said. ‘That's why I poisoned you.’”

Caramarin looked at Tailpipe and then all three men burst into laughter.

“Good one, comrade. Had me going there.”

Caramarin glanced at his watch.

“Catch you later, comrades. Oh, do us a favour and call us a cab.”

“You're a cab,” said Tailpipe.

He shook hands then walked over to the staff entrance and waited. Valeriya came out only a few minutes after twelve.

Tailpipe was right. She was quite short, maybe one metre fifty-eight. But she was wearing heels and had piled her dark hair onto her head to give her some extra centimetres. She'd wrapped a light jacket over her uniform.

“You should have carried on,” she said. “Maybe you could've broken the bank.”

“No, I think I've done better than that tonight.”

CHAPTER 5. SATURDAY JULY 4, 02:30.

“That's nice,' I said. I linked arms with Caramarin's and we walked round to the casino front. One of the bouncers, VCR, held open the cab door for us and gave us an elaborate bow.

“Your carriage awaits,' he said to us.

“Where do you want to go?' asked Caramarin.

“My Mum's looking after my boy so I can't stay out too late. Somewhere quiet,' I said. See, I was thinking of you. Not like the old days, Mum. I'm a good girl now, you know.

“Caramarin said he of knew a good bar so he directed our driver to the other end of town. He said he didn't use this bar too often, but it made a good impression for a first date. Yes, if it was a first date, I don't know yet, do I, Mum? But he's nice.

“He paid the taxi off and we walked downstairs to the club. Another Romanian ran the club and Caramarin ordered a couple of Absolut vodkas in his own language. Didn't I say he's Romanian? He's quite dark. Dark and handsome with the most amazing deep brown eyes you've ever seen. And thick, black hair. He's good looking. Not one of these pretty boys but a real man.

“A jazz combo was playing in a corner and a number of couples, mostly middle aged and well dressed, were swaying to the music. Nice place. Classy. You'd have liked it, Mum.

“The Jazz club had nice black and white and red decor. Jazz and blues posters from the 1950s covered the walls. I could just make them out in the dim light,

“Quiet enough for you?” he asked me.

“Perfect,” I said to him.

“I'm more careful than I used to be, Mum. You know that. I asked the girls about him at the casino before going out. They said he's okay. Knows how to treat a woman. I think one or two would like him to be around more often.

“Yes, that's good to know, Mum.

“No, he's not at the casino all that much. He wouldn't say what he does when he's not working there. It was only a sort of first date. But he's not like some of the bouncers there. Bad men.

“We only had a couple of vodkas and listened to the music. Would've preferred something a bit livelier but I enjoyed myself. Yes, I told him I only started at Centurion Casino a few weeks ago. Which is why Caramarin hadn't seen me before. Yes, I told him about Vladimir. Yes, I mentioned that before working at Centurion, I'd worked as a dancer but I got out of that world. He didn't seem to mind. What's in the past stays in the past. That's what he said.

“Quit pestering me Mum, He seems like a good man and I'll see him again. He even called me a cab at the end. No, Mum, he didn't try it on. A real gentleman. No, I won't let him break my heart.

“So, Mum, thanks for staying up with little Vlad. I appreciate it.

“You look worn out, now. Let me make up my bed on the couch whilst you go to bed. Thanks again for staying up, Mum. I'll see you in the morning before you go to work. Give us a kiss.

“Goodnight.

CHAPTER 6. FRIDAY, JULY 10, 19:30.

There are good things in life as well as bad. One of the good was meeting Valeriya at the casino. Another was when she agreed to go out with him after her shift.

That date had gone well. At least, she'd agreed to see him again. It had been hard to wait almost a week before seeing Valeriya again. Caramarin felt nervous, almost like a teenager again as his taxi picked Valeriya up from her apartment then headed into town.

Valeriya was wearing a white blouse with a couple of buttons left undone revealing a gold cross resting between her full breasts and tight dark trousers. Her black hair was down around her shoulders this time. She was teetering in glittery killer heels but she still had to draw herself up to her full height to kiss Caramarin.

Standing in the entrance to her apartment block, waving her off, was an older, plumper woman with dyed red hair and a small boy in red shorts. Caramarin watched as the woman took the boy's hand and led him back inside. Just for a moment, he felt a wistful pang for their family life.

“My son,” she said defiantly. “My man did a runner years ago, soon after I; we had him.”

“He's not been back in touch since?” Caramarin wanted to know if he was treading on any toes.

“No, I got a card from Kiev a few weeks after he left but I've heard nothing after that.”

“He was a fool,” smiled Caramarin.

“No, just immature. We were both young and it just happened. But I'm glad because I love Vladimir. Only good thing that fella ever did for me.”

“He looks a good lad,” said Caramarin. You can go a long way by flattering a woman about her children. Valeriya smiled up at him from the back seat.

Caramarin had booked a smart restaurant on Prymorsky Boulevard. It was close to the Opera House and he could see the magnificent over decorated building from his seat. They sat out at a table in the evening sun. The crisp white tablecloth was covered with a variety of cutlery and sparkling crystal glasses. He ordered a bottle of the sparkling local champagne whilst they waited for the food. Valeriya slipped off her heels and he saw she'd gone to the trouble of a pedicure as well. For a girl who spent a lot of time standing at the roulette wheel, she had pretty little feet with delicate toes.

“I hope you're hungry,” he said.

“Starving.”

He ordered blinis to start. Little pancakes stuffed with pork and olives, a speciality of the restaurant. He was hungry so the flavour filled his mouth. Looking around, he saw some of the passers by glancing enviously at them.

Then, a pan fried sea-bass with vine ripened tomatoes and mushrooms and new potatoes. If anything, even better than the blinis. He was glad to see that Valeriya was enjoying her meal. A crisp, light gold Chardonnay from the Crimea made the perfect combination. He poured her another glass.

Like most Ukrainians, he found Valeriya had a sweet tooth. She ordered a fruit tart with cream but Caramarin only took a couple of mouthfuls, intended to push his around his plate but it was too tasty for that. He could work it off at the gym tomorrow. Looking at her, he wondered where she put it all. On her boobs, probably.

They sat back and relaxed as the waiters cleared their table. He ordered a couple of Finlandia vodkas.

“The best vodka in the world,” he told her. “It's made with glacier water.”

“I know,” Valeriya said.

They sat and watched the people walk along Prymorsky Boulevard past their table. Although the restaurant was busy, none of the waiters even tried to move them on. Caramarin was too well known round here for that. The sun had gone down and the evening sky turned from blue to indigo. A sea breeze blew up from the port below. Valeriya shivered.

“Shall we move on?” Caramarin asked.

She nodded. Caramarin placed some notes under a glass leaving a decent tip and they joined the crowds walking along the boulevard. He draped his jacket over her shoulders and she snuggled into it. Snuggled up to Caramarin, too, when he put his arm around her and drew her closer.

Spotlights illuminated some of the pastel coloured buildings, the baroque statues and ornate detailing creating dark recesses and shadows. A feast for the eyes.

Halfway along Prymorsky Boulevard, they arrived at the Potemkin Stairs leading down to the harbour.

“Shall we?” asked Caramarin.

“Let's. I'm just too full to eat or drink anything else at the moment,” said Valeriya.

They stood at the top of the famous Steps. Many other people were walking up and down them enjoying the cooling sea breeze. Behind them, the large toga clad statue of the Duc de Richelieu, the founder of Odessa, stood with his arm out.

“He always looks like he's bumming for spare change,” said Caramarin, which made Valeriya smile. “And you'd think he'd have got dressed when they made the statue. He looks like he just got out the bath.”

Looking down the wide Steps, they saw the marine terminal and the huge, blue and white tower of the Odessa Hotel almost straight ahead, its name in red neon, like a column of light in the night sky. Trams and trolley-buses were still running along Primorskaya Street at the foot of the Steps.

On either side of the Odessa Hotel, the docks stretched along the curve of the shore as far as the eye could see. A few ships and ferries were out on the Black Sea beyond, seeming to float in the vast darkness.

A noise distracted them. Heading up the slope, on the right side, clanking on its ratchets, was a little cable rail car bringing the last passengers up the steep slope from Primorskaya Street to Prymorsky Boulevard. On the other side of the Steps was a park with plenty of bushes and trees. A nice place to sit on a sunny day.

“Shall we?” said Valeriya.

“Go on, then.”

Giggling like children, they jumped onto the cable car, paid the few kopecks fare and took the journey down.

“Have you been to the Hotel?” asked Caramarin.

“Not on my wages,” giggled Valeriya.

“Don't get to come here much myself,” Caramarin said. Partly that was because its owners were too powerful to pay insurance to Maiorescu or the other medium sharks of the underworld. Probably a lethal great white shark like Major Balashov had it in his pocket. They dodged the trams and trolley buses, crossed over Primorskaya Street to the Hotel.

The concierge opened the door and bowed. Caramarin tipped him a few hryvnia and then they were in. Took the lift up to the restaurant at the top of the tower. Caramarin nipped to the toilets and sniffed a little Colombian jazz powder, just to heighten the experience. Not that he was nervous or anything. Straightened his tie; rubbed his nose, made sure there was no tell tale residue and back out.

In the bar, they talked and enjoyed a couple of Absolut vodkas looking at the breathtakingly panoramic view from the windows. The night lights of Odessa spread out below them. The windows facing the Black Sea were dark but those overlooking

the city were a riot of colour like jewels on a sheet. He watched the tail lights thread along the dock road of Primorskaya Street. Fucking marvellous.

Valeriya told him a little about herself. She used to be a dancer in the nightclubs.

“Which ones?” Caramarin asked, thinking he might have seen her.

“Club Dolphin, over by Dolphin beach,” she replied. Not one that Caramarin used to go to. Didn't know if he was pleased not to have seen her dance.

“What sort of dancing did you do?”

Valeriya looked down at her feet and stroked her ear.

“I did some cage dancing and some pole dancing. But I never did any private dances. No way,” she quickly added. Caramarin wondered about that. But he'd also done things he wasn't proud of, too.

Then, she hooked up with her useless fella, got pregnant with Vladimir, so she'd given up dancing.

“He was a big baby so my stomach never really recovered,” she said sadly. Caramarin glanced down, it looked all right to him but the trouble was, there was no shortage of eager ever younger women for the nightclub owners to choose from. And sleep with if the fancy took them.

“Then my useless fella left me. Said I wasn't the same any more. Well, I couldn't be, could I? Got a baby. But it was his problem. He couldn't take the responsibility of looking after a baby. Didn't help that we were all still living in Mum's apartment and we had no space to ourselves.”

She blushed a little, her face even more lovely.

“And little Vlad cried during the night.

“Then I took a couple of years out. Worked as a cleaner for a while in some offices. My mum really helped me through that time. Then, a few months ago a friend had a word and I was taken on by the casino as a croupier, I really love my job.”

“Well, your smile helped me win the other night.”

Like most men, Caramarin didn't like talking about himself. And in his case, it was only the very edited highlights he could tell her. There was just too much he couldn't tell anyone. Too much dark water under too many low bridges. If she was interested, she'd find more out from the other doormen. Actually, being a woman, she probably already had.

They finished their vodkas. Set the glasses down on little paper napkins on the little table. He nipped to the gents and took another short line, just to keep the good feeling going. He caught his reflection and laughed.

“Shall we go?” asked Caramarin. They walked out of the Hotel Odessa into the cool night air. He glanced at his watch. It was later than he thought and the little cable car had finished for the night. He felt good, felt wired in fact.

They stood at the foot of the Potemkin Stairs.

“It's amazing,” said Caramarin. The coke was buzzing through his system, tingling his nerves, loosening his tongue.

“You know that when you stand at the bottom of the Steps like we are and look up you can't see the treads of the steps; only the risers and when you stand up at the top you can only see the landings and not the risers. It's a really great optical illusion.”

Valeriya glanced at him.

“I know, I've lived here all my life,” she said.

“Let's go,” said Caramarin.

“What? Up there? There's two hundred steps,”

“They look longer than they are. Another illusion. C'mon, I'll buy you a last drink at the top.”

Valeriya sighed. “What are you on?”

“Nothing. Honest.”

They linked arms and walked up. Soon, Valeriya slipped off her killer heels. She was so much shorter without them. At this time of night there were far fewer people using the Stairs. Caramarin threw a few kopecks to a down and out, who grunted his thanks. Paused half way up to admire the viewpoints. Valeriya yawned.

Back on Prymorsky Boulevard, at the top of the Stairs, Caramarin was as good as his word. They had a last Absolut before he called a cab.

They shared a few kisses in the taxi, he tasted the alcohol and exhaustion on her breath. Didn't expect to be invited into her apartment so wasn't too disappointed. But there would be another time.

CHAPTER 7. SUNDAY, 12 JULY 19:15.

“So you work eighty, ninety sometimes a hundred hours a week. You've got an ex and her kids to feed. Teens now and they want everything. Western clothes and jeans. Not content to wear the gear every working guy in this damn city wears. Want the latest smart phone, iPod, computer, God knows what else. Can't keep up with it, me. But the little beggars don't want to work for it. No, sir.

“Want you to sweat your balls off whilst they goof off on some college course. Studying history or horse care or some useless subject. I dunno. Only history you need is to know the Great Patriotic War finished in 1945. My Granddad was in that. Come out with one leg and a chest full of medals. There was a real man. Not like my lads. Wasting their lives away, hitting the beaches by day and the Arkadia clubs by night.

“My current lady with her brood and they all wanna feed off of you as well. Give her credit, she works damn hard, comes and cleans here on her days off. Our flat way too small and too far away, damp creeping up the wall, roaches walking about like they own the place. One of 'em last night just stood there waving its feelers at me. Like it owned the place. Landlord wanting his rent, he's not gonna take many more excuses before he sends the heavies round with an eviction notice.

“Suppliers fed up too, one or two hinting they'll stop credit terms any day now and wanting cash on delivery. The oven needs work, the fridge on the fritz – you have to wedge the door shut now. Staff knowing the restaurant on a downward slope. Already lost my head chef and the newly promoted sous chef not good enough really.

“He's okay but nowhere near up to head chef status yet, you with me? Now he's looking to leave, know he's been in touch with my old head chef looking for a place under him again. Lydiya, you know, that pretty, friendly waitress who brought in a lot of repeat customers, she's handed in her notice.

“On top of that, my stomach's hurting. Real sharp, twisting, gripey pain. Hope it's only stress, not an ulcer, can't afford to be off with something like that.

“And now two loads of gangster thugs wanting protection. You know you've got to pay some 'insurance' in this city. Goes with the territory. Part of the cost of doing business, I knew that before I took this place on. Could just about afford to pay off one lot of hoods but not two. No way. A new bunch showed up a few weeks ago, some Georgian mob. Tell you what, President Putin knew how to deal with Georgians but Maiorescu's over the hill mob, well they have no idea.

“Excuse me, Maiorescu's heavies have just come in. Stay here, I'll be back in a few. If they don't break my legs. Only joking, I hope.”

Two men, one looking like a shaved gorilla that spends all day lifting weights. The other a scruffy bugger with swept back black hair and wearing an old combat jacket.

“So, you say you've got new...security... arrangements in place?” said the scruffy one with a Romanian accent.

“Yes, a new Georgian lot.”

“And this affects me how? You saying you're not paying?” said the Romanian thug.

“I can't. I'm out of money. It's costing me money just to keep this place open now,” my friend the restaurant owner said.

“It's tourist season. Must be raking it in hand over fist.” The camo jacketed hood walked over to the till and opened it. Obviously not as much as he'd expected but he took it anyway.

“Make sure you've got it next week, comrade, or there'll be trouble.”

My friend the restaurant manager breathed a sigh of relief. He was okay for this week but what about next? We watched the two hoodlums go down the road to a newly opened bistro.

Later.

Decided to take my lady to that new Bistro that's just opened. One or two of the guys at my law firm say the food's excellent there. Not cheap but worth it. Looks the part anyway. Ah, here's the owner.

“Sit down, take a seat. Here's a menu,” the man handed out some smartly printed menus. “May I recommend the calamari? The squid's fresh caught this morning. No, well what would you like to drink?”

“Here you are, sir. Peroni for you and vodka cranberry for you, miss.”

The place was rather quiet as we were early for lunch as I had a court case to attend in the afternoon. I was taking my secretary out as she was coming to court as well. No,

it's nothing like that! I'm happily married with another on the way. You know that. No, I'm not saying my secretary's not good looking. She is, but you don't shit where you eat. First rule of the office.

“Yes,” the manager told us. “I've only recently opened. Managed to get this place cheap. No, I don't know what happened to the previous owner. Maybe he retired. Was he a friend of yours?”

“What's that?” the manager continued. “Yes, the refurbishment wasn't cheap. But worth it as I wanted that authentic Genoese look. I wanted to raise the tone of the place, make it a top place to eat in Odessa.

“Trouble? Well none from the customers. Excuse me, whilst I deal with these two gentlemen.”

Listen to me now. Two men now entered the Italian style fish restaurant. Not whom you would expect to see in an upmarket joint like this. One looking like a gorilla that'd been taught the rudiments of language wearing a cheap, brown suit. The other, with slicked back black hair, bloodshot eyes and wearing a combat jacket and jeans.

The new owner of this fine dining establishment shrugged his shoulders at the men and opened his arms dismissively, even though there were lots of empty tables. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't listening but I caught some of their conversation.

“I'm disappointed, comrade, you were short last week and you promised you'd have it here now.” said the man in the combat jacket. He had a Romanian or Moldovan accent. The man sniffed a few times, wiped his nose on a tissue he dropped to the mosaic floor. Don't think he had a summer cold, you with me?

“I'm sorry. I've only just started and I'm trying to build up trade and I can't pay you and the Georgian as well,” said the manager.

“Not good enough. You pay us. You know that. Don't worry about some Georgian no mark.”

“Shall I hit the bastard?” the second thug built like a weight lifting gorilla leaning against the door stopping any further customers entering the restaurant.

The first hood waved the second back.

“When does this Georgian collect?”

“Mondays, usually,” said the manager.

“Well, next week you make sure you pay us. And with interest.”

The owner, a man who was working to better himself and his family and probably working all the hours God sent just to keep going, moaned. The gorilla leaned over the bar and helped himself to a couple of bottles of vodka. He looked at the labels.

“Why don't you order a decent brand? Give us a decent drink,” the thug said.

Then the two gangsters walked out.

I looked at my secretary. She's from out in the sticks originally. Now she'd seen some of the underbelly of this city. The owner looked at me, a sick smile on his face. I'm not always generous but I'd had a decent bonus from work. So I ordered the most expensive food on the menu and a couple bottles of wine. And I left a decent tip. Well what can you do? And I knew I was on to get a decent gratitude shag out of her later. Only joking! Don't say anything to the wife, you hear?

CHAPTER 8. SUNDAY JULY 12, 20:30.

Too many places round here were unable to pay. Or said they couldn't. Didn't want to start getting too physical without orders from Maiorescu himself. But Maiorescu would have to do something about this Georgian mob muscling in otherwise his reputation would end up like a little girl's. And he'd have to do it quickly.

Caramarin drove Tailpipe back to Maiorescu's office at Prokhorovs'ka Street, pulled in behind the Mercedes.

Maiorescu seemed distracted by something on his laptop but his heavy, sweating face looked even more annoyed than usual when Caramarin explained their failure to bring back the full 'insurance premiums'.

“We should have just slapped 'em about a bit. They'd have coughed up then.” said Tailpipe.

“Not much point if they've not got it.” said Caramarin.

“You're right, Nico. And I'm not having some fucking Georgian arse wipes thinking they can just walk into my city and help themselves to my business. Shows a total lack of respect. I'll see what I can find out about 'em and then we'll see what we're going to do.”

He looked down at his laptop, a leer twisting his ugly face.

In Romanian, a language Tailpipe didn't speak, Maiorescu asked Caramarin to go over to his villa and pick up his wife, Natalya, and a load of cash for laundering through the casinos. Give her a night out. Caramarin raised an eyebrow.

“Keep an eye on her. Don't want her spending it all on dresses and shoes, do I? I don't get anything back, then,” he laughed.

Caramarin drove out of Odessa north along the coast road to Yuzhne, elbow resting on the door sill. Turned on Prosto Radio 102.5 FM and sang along to the hits. The sun shone. What a good afternoon to be alive. An hour later, he turned up the gated drive to the villa. A couple of gardeners were tending the flowering shrubs and cleaning the pond.

He parked and saw Natalya reading a celebrity magazine by the pool. She looked up and took off her sunglasses. Her tan was really deep and brown now. She was wearing that tiny white bikini again that set off her figure to perfection and looked divine. She

was so far out of Maiorescu's league it was unbelievable. She stood and dropped the magazine onto the recliner.

“I'll go and get changed.” Natalya said.

“Want me to wait here?”

“What do you think?”

Caramarin waited a few minutes, talking to the guy cleaning the pool, then followed Natalya up. Any thoughts of caution gone from his mind. She was out of her bikini and out of everything else. She welcomed him with open arms, her full breasts glistening with oil, her shaved pussy open and inviting.

Caramarin growled and threw Natalya to the bed. He took her quickly, passionately, enjoying the pleasure. She moaned, laughed, moaned again. Her oily body rolled out from under him until she was on top, her hands pressing his wrists down to the bed. Her body riding his shaft like a pole, her full breasts two bouncing orbs of pleasure. He stretched up, trying to catch a nipple with his mouth. She pulled back, taking her breasts out of reach, still riding his penis.

He tried to hold back, tried to prolong the exquisite pressure but lasted no longer. He exploded inside her tight love tunnel, bringing Natalya to fruition. They lay together on the damp bed sheets, calm, relaxed, at peace with themselves.

Natalya stood and took a jar of white powder from out among the dresses of her wardrobe. He watched her full body as she brought it to him, his excitement growing again. She lay down and poured a little into the cup of her belly button. He snorted it up both nostrils, waiting for the power buzz that would lift him higher.

Then she sprinkled a little more powder onto his penis. With a wicked smile she swallowed him whole, her lips moving up and down his thickened length and brought him to ecstasy again.

Afterwards, they lay together as the afternoon sun threw shadows over their bed and the white walls. Peaceful, tranquil. Caramarin watched the shadows slide over the

room, getting stronger, getting darker. Moving from the corners and alcoves taking over more and more of the walls.

He shivered with a sudden feeling, a sudden premonition of, well if not doom exactly but some bad feeling. Probably been taking too much coke recently. He propped himself up on one elbow and sniffed up a little more snow, the bad feeling edging back towards the back of his mind.

“You're bleeding,” Natalya told him. Caramarin rubbed one hand under his nose. A thin trickle of blood smeared his finger.

“Never mind.” He'd have to ease up sometime soon. Now would be a good time, or soon at any rate.

He took a shower, washing away the dried sweat and juice from their love making.

“Take me into town,” said Natalya. “I fancy a night out, spending Eugen's money.”

“Not like that,” he laughed. “You've got nothing on.”

She towelled her hair, then slipped into a cream and black dress, which showed off her great body to perfection. He looked at her gym toned arms and legs, her blonde hair, her beautiful face. Again, he was struck at the contrast between Natalya and her husband. She made a kiss at Caramarin, applied lipstick and sprayed perfume behind her ears and wrists.

“I'm ready. Let's go.” She twirled round. “You can't you see any panty line under this?”

He peered at her bottom. “No, no I can't”

“That's because I'm not wearing any.” She lifted up her dress and proved it.

“C'mon. Don't forget the money.”

It was getting dark outside. Stars shone in the deep blue sky. Natalya insisted they took her new BMW M5 saloon. He didn't mind arriving in style instead of in his beat

up old Opel Combo. She was a fast driver with lead in her heel, the powerful engine speeding the car along the coast road. She cut up slower moving traffic, overtaking every vehicle she passed. Giving the finger to anyone who dared flash their lights.

Caramarin watched her drive. She wasn't relaxed. Her hand gripped the steering wheel, moved the gear stick with short jerky motions. It was like she was releasing her pent up fears and aggression in her driving.

She pulled up with a squeal of brakes in front of the casino. A valet ran up to park their Beemer.

“Go on inside and change the money, I'll be with you in a minute.” said Caramarin. He walked over to Belgian and Tailpipe manning the doors.

“Quiet night, lads?”

“So far,” said Belgian.

“When are we goin' to see you down the gym?” asked Tailpipe. “Haven't seen you there for a bit.”

“No, I've been busy recently.”

“I was there this morning,” said Tailpipe. “This fat guy comes in and asked me what machine he could use to impress that blonde bint with the big tits over on the rowing machine. I looked him up and down and said 'Why don't you use the ATM in the bank over the road, chubbster.’”

The three men laughed.

“Speaking of blondes with big tits, you're not knobbin' Natalya are you?” asked Belgian.

“No.” said Caramarin. “Do I look that stupid?”

“You don't want me to answer that, do you?” laughed Belgian but there was a hard edge to his voice. “Seriously, mate, that's one lady to leave alone. You get me?”

“Well, I'm not. Maiorescu only asked me to take her here and keep an eye on her. See you later.” Caramarin hurried up the steps and into the gaudy world inside. Replayed the conversation in his mind. It worried him.

Worried him a lot.

CHAPTER 9. WEDNESDAY, JULY 15 18:30.

“I'm not having this,” Maiorescu slammed down some papers and looked out the window of his realtor's office on Prokhorovs'ka Street. Dusty property details filled the front windows. It hardly did any legit business. Just a front for the gang head to hide behind. The man lit up yet another smoke.

Caramarin looked up. “The non payments, you mean?”

“What else?”

Caramarin could think of some other shit that his boss wouldn't have if he knew about it.

“Want us to sort it out, then?” Said Dmytro 'Placid' Litovchenko.

If there was one man Caramarin didn't want to be on the wrong side, it was Litovchenko. But probably too late to worry about that now. His street name was 'Placid' because he wasn't. 'Psycho Bloody Mayhem' would have been better. One scary man. He was one of the Arkadia beach's chief doormen and looked the part.

He was almost two metres tall, covered with the sort of muscles only serious steroid and testosterone use can give as well as putting in serious work down the gym. His head was shaved to the bone except for a neatly trimmed goatee. Under the man's white shirt, Caramarin could see Litovchenko's prison tattoo of Christ on his cross. Knew the man had stars on his knees, showing he would never kneel to anyone. More tattoos covered his hands.

He'd heard of, and seen, Litovchenko do some really bad things. Nothing seemed to be beyond him. He enjoyed violence for its own sake. Sure, Caramarin had done violence, had few problems with it; but for him it was a last resort, a means to an end.

But it would be a mistake to think that Litovchenko was just a muscle bound thug. You don't survive as long or get on in the underworld unless you can provide brains as well as brawn. Helped that the man was connected to several of the crime families in the Odessa region.

“Little point leaning on the clients,” said Caramarin. “Can’t expect ‘em to pay us and these Georgians. What’ve you found out about them?”

Maiorescu turned to face Caramarin and Placid, the dim light filtering through the grimy window dying on his sallow, jowly features.

“For a start, they’re not Georgian. They’re Abkhazian. Y’know, that breakaway region of Georgia. Doesn’t matter to us ‘cos we’re going to flatten them into the ground. Their boss is a rag head called Timur Ozgan. Life got too tough for him even over in that hell hole, so he came here. I’m told their security forces threw him out.”

Maiorescu moved a pen stand to one side, perched on the edge of his desk, looking down at the two men. He blew out smoke.

“His men are going to show at...” he glanced at his Tag Heuer, “...Bourges Bistro in a couple of hours. Why don’t you pick up a couple of the lads and show them that Odessa is more dangerous than Sukhumi.”

Placid stood and cracked his knuckles.

“No, no deaths. Not at this stage. Just show them the error of their ways, capisce?”

Caramarin opened his mouth to protest, but looking at the two men, thought it best to shut his mouth again. He nodded once, slowly.

Caramarin drove, Prosto radio lifting his mood; they picked up Belgian and Tailpipe from the gym and headed through the afternoon traffic over to the Bourges Bistro.

Followed a blood red Porsche for most of the journey. He hoped it wasn't an omen. He parked down a shady side street where they kept the front of the Bistro in sight.

“Turn that radio off, cunt,” said Placid.

“That Natalya is a nice piece of meat,” commented Belgian from the back seat, looking up from a porn mag. “Wouldn’t mind porking that.”

“Too right. She was here, I’d bend her over this car and do her right now. Up the ass,” said Tailpipe. He made a gesture with the iron bar he was gripping.

“Wouldn’t take too much hard work. Don’t think she wears any knickers?” Said Belgian.

“Dirty slag.”

“You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you, Caramarin?” said Belgian.

Caramarin spun round in his seat.

“Shut it you two,” snapped Placid. “And keep your eyes to the front, cunt.”

The car fell silent. Placid leaned over and offered a small vial of coke to Belgian and Tailpipe in the back. Caramarin looked at him. Only then did Placid offer him any. There was next to nothing in the bottle, but Caramarin snorted it up anyway.

Then a beige Mercedes pulled up outside the Bistro. Two large, dark skinned men in brown suits stepped out, glanced around, and walked into the Bistro.

“That’s them. Let’s go,” ordered Placid.

“Remember, no deaths,” said Caramarin, more to Placid than the others. “We’re only sending a message.”

Placid glared at Caramarin. If looks could kill, Caramarin would be pushing up the daisies. The four men crossed the road and pushed through into the Bistro. Caramarin turned the sign over to read ‘Closed’. The two Abkhazians looked at the four men. Their eyes flashed to each other. It was clear they were in big trouble.

One, a tall skinny man with a lantern jaw, pushed the Bistro manager at Maiorescu's men, and then both wheeled around and ran for the kitchen door. Belgian dived on the slower one both crashing to floor. A table fell over, crockery shattering, knives and forks bouncing on the stripped floorboards.

Placid and Tailpipe chased the lantern jawed man into the kitchen, the swing door banging after them. Caramarin helped the manager to his feet.

"Watch. You won't have any more trouble from these guys again."

The manager looked terrified, his eyes starting from his head. There was a huge crash from the kitchen and a roar of pain. A sound of blows, then the big jawed Abkhazian was flung back into the Bistro. A kick from Placid sent him to the floor.

"Easy, remember," said Caramarin.

However, the beating was savage and prolonged. The two men were beaten to pulp. Fists, boots and the iron bar fell repeatedly on their bodies. Heard the crack of several broken bones. The two thugs were hard men and tried not to scream. Later on, they were unconscious as the blows fell. Caramarin took no part this time, but stood by the door to keep out any customers and made the manager watch the beating.

"They've had enough," Caramarin said, pulling Placid away. The three hoods stood over the bodies, breathing heavily.

"Too much for you, cunt?"

"You remember what Maiorescu said. No deaths, okay."

Caramarin knelt and felt through the bloodied clothes of the Abkhazians. He pulled out a wad of hryvnias and peeled off several high value notes. He patted the manager on his arm.

"Get this place cleaned up. You won't have trouble from these again."

The manager trousered the money but still looked terrified.

“Let’s lose these fools,” said Placid.

They hoisted the broken bodies upright and half walked, half dragged them to the Abkhazians’ beige Mercedes. Placid took their keys from Caramarin and drove off with Belgian and Tailpipe. Caramarin followed, this time with the radio on full.

Placid drove south out of the run down city suburbs to the Dniester estuary, just as the sun was going down but the heat was still in the day. The day trippers had all gone home by now and the picnic spot was deserted. A flock of white birds flew overhead, calling harshly. Placid kicked the two Abkhazians out the car, where they sprawled limp on the gravel. Laboriously, one dragged himself upright, using the Merc’s hood for support.

“Tell your boss, he’s finished. Unless he wants a taste of what you’ve had. Got that?”

The man spat. Said something in his own language.

“I think that was ‘fuck you’ in Abkhazian,” laughed Belgian.

Placid punched the man to the floor, started to apply shoe leather. Not for the first time, Caramarin stepped between Placid and his victim.

“Enough. We’re not to kill them, okay, comrades.” Caramarin thought Placid would start on him. Despite Placid being the larger man, Caramarin fancied his chances. Too much slow steroid muscle on the man. Placid breathed in, gave Caramarin a look of pure hate.

“One day, cunt. okay, strip them.”

“I think this one’s pissed himself,” said Tailpipe.

The hoods stripped the beaten Abkhazians to their underpants, threw the clothes into the beige Merc then rolled the limo into the Dniester. They watched the car sink, bubbles rising to the surface.

“Job done. Let’s go home.”

Later that evening.

“Good evening. Great to see you again. Take a seat by the window. Put some life in the place. Beer?”

“I’ll tell you something. Now these gang bangers are using my Bourges Bistro as a battleground. That scruffy Romanian bastard in the combat jacket thinks he can throw me a few hryvnias and I’ll just shut up and keep paying through the nose for their protection. And his lot never even protected me from the other Georgian lot. Just used my little place as a battleground.

“Yeah, I knew it would be tough – I know Odessa’s got a bit of a reputation but I didn’t expect a re-enactment of the Saint Valentine’s Day massacre on my premises. I cleaned up their mess but I’m going to the realtor’s as soon as I can. I’ll take any half way decent offer.

“What worries me is what this Georgian mob are going to do next. They going to smash me up because their men got smashed up in my joint? They going to come after my wife and family? I don’t know, do I?”

“If I can find a mug who’ll buy this place – no of course I’m not going to mention what’s happened here, I look that stupid? – I’ll buy a place somewhere quieter. South Central Los Angeles, Beirut, Mogadishu come to mind.

“Pizza Margherita? Certainly. Rapido.”

CHAPTER 10. FRIDAY JULY 17, 18:30.

Caramarin never officially moved in with Valeriya. Not that she never asked him to, but there just wasn't the room. Not with her, her mother and little Vladimir all in the same one-bed apartment. And Caramarin valued his independence. Yeah, he loved women but always he kept a part of himself close and locked down tight.

Usually the women he shared his life with knew they could never have him one hundred per cent. Some wanted more than he could give and others accepted the situation. Until either they moved on for another man who could offer more; or more usually Caramarin himself became fed up and walked out. Tried to leave amicably but that wasn't always possible.

However, with Valeriya, he quickly grew to care for her a lot. Little Vladimir also loved him. Hero-worshipped him. The boy was always talking about Caramarin. When he had time, Caramarin picked him up from playgroup and treated him to something to eat on the way home. To a growing four year old boy, that means a lot.

Once, he took Vladimir to the Potemkin Stairs and helped him count them. Couldn't count all the way up to two hundred but counted to a surprisingly high number. This time, they took the cable-car back up the hill. Simple pleasures but good ones.

He visited the Centurion Casino more often to play on Valeriya's roulette wheel and gambled with his own money as well as laundering Maiorescu's. Sometimes he broke even, but not always. Started losing, sometimes big time, trying to chase that elusive jackpot that was always just on the next turn of fortune's wheel.

Then, one evening, Valeriya's mum took Vladimir out. Couldn't remember the reason but it was so obviously an excuse. She could read Caramarin better than he thought. Knowing Caramarin's love of local food and drink, the woman had placed a bottle of home distilled horilka moonshine spirits on the table for them.

“It's good,” said Valeriya. “One of Mum's friends makes it. It's flavoured with gooseberries and she leaves it on her roof for months to bleach it to perfection. I thought you'd like it.”

“Sounds great,” Caramarin poured it into two glasses and toasted Valeriya. The horilka was more than good, it was great. The fruit infusion was just right. Not too sweet, a dry clear taste. Burned on the way down and warmed him up inside.

He refilled his glass and crossed to the window. He drew the net curtains. They billowed slightly in the breeze, casting ghost shadows on the carpets.

“Close the curtains as well, please,” said Valeriya. Caramarin did as asked. The bright sun still filtered through, casting the room into a soft dovelike shade of grey.

Valeriya was wearing a floral sun dress. She turned her back on Caramarin, then with one practised movement she pulled it over her head. Her white bra and panties stood out in the semi gloom of her apartment. Caramarin put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. He kissed her full on her lips. After a brief pause, her mouth opened and she slipped her tongue into his mouth. He tasted the horilka on her tongue. They broke apart, flushed, panting for breath.

Caramarin looked down over the swell of her stomach. Valeriya covered herself with her arms.

“Don't look at my terrible jelly belly.”

Gently, he pulled her arms away. Silvery grey stretch marks traced their way over her belly.

“My war wounds. From the birth,” she murmured. Caramarin knelt in front of her and covered her tummy with kisses. His tongue licked into and around the dimple of her belly button. Valeriya ran her hands through his long, dark hair holding his head in place.

Slowly, Caramarin moved lower down over the swell of her abdomen. Gripped the elastic of her panties and tugged. She helped him by slipping them down her thighs. He kissed the stubble of her lady garden, then tenderly his tongue found her button.

Her feminine scent filled his nose as his tongue worked its way ever deeper. She moaned and her hands gripped his head harder, holding him tight. Caramarin took her

to the edge, then scooped his hands under her bottom and carried her over to the couch. She was a little heavier than he expected. He dropped her onto the cushions and flung his own clothes off throwing them in a heap on the floor.

Valeriya arched her back and unhooked her bra. Her large breasts fell free to either side of her body. Caramarin pressed them together and buried his head between her flesh. His tongue worked her large nipples, teasing them up to maximum hardness.

Still holding her breasts, he worked his way down her body again. Could tell the girl was sucking her tummy in. He kissed some of her stretch marks on the way down, showing he loved her, that he wasn't put off in any way. That he found her truly sexy. A real woman.

Again, he came to her cleft. His head burrowed down, spreading her thighs apart. His tongue probing and prying. He looked up, his eyes asking a question. Valeriya nodded.

Caramarin moved back up her body and slipped a rubber over his rod. He slipped into her easily, no messing. She threw her arms over his back, her mouth kissing him, nibbling his lips. His strokes, gentle at first then harder, faster, deeper brought him to climax. He carried on, felt her buck beneath him. Then collapsing, he laid on top, gasping. They lay together for a while, he still inside her until he withdrew.

He kissed her again and again until Valeriya excused herself. She wriggled out from under, crossed the sitting room to the bathroom. Her dark hair fell half way down her back but he could tell she was still holding in her tummy. On her way back, Valeriya picked up the horilka and refilled their glasses.

Watched her cross the sitting room. Yeah, if he was honest, had to admit that Natalya had the better body. No doubt about it. Both had large breasts, but Valeriya's were perhaps a little heavy with less well defined nipples. And Valeriya was self conscious about her looser stomach.

But Caramarin didn't mind anywhere near as much as Valeriya thought he would. She'd brought life into this world and was bringing up Vladimir as well as she could. The woman deserved respect. And she did have great feet and ankles.

They drank the horilka together. Its rough, fierce potency livened him. Almost as good as the coke hiding in his jacket pocket for that. Finally, he took her glass, pushed her down onto the cushions and took her again, gently yet passionately.

“Pass us my ciggies, please,” asked Valeriya.

Caramarin rolled off the couch and walked over to the low table in the middle of the room. He could sense her eyes following his bum as he walked. He clenched his cheeks for max definition. By the time he'd tossed her a packet of smokes and lighter she had draped her sun dress over herself.

He then pulled a small bag of white from his jacket pocket and showed it her. He grinned and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“Shall we?”

Valeriya sat bolt upright, clutching the sun dress to her boobs.

“Get that out of here,” she shouted. “I'm not having that junk around Vladimir.”

Caramarin was surprised by her sudden rage.

“I don't understand. He's not here. There's only you and me.”

“Doesn't matter. I'm not having no drugs in my flat. And don't you dare take them here. I thought you were better than that, Nicolae.”

Her face was screwed up with anger. Tears leaked out of her slightly almond-shaped eyes.

“I'm sorry,” said Caramarin, slipping the little zip-lock bag back. “I just thought it would be fun. Heighten the pleasure.”

“I don't know why you want drugs when you've got me. I should be enough for you. What's wrong with you?”

“Nothing. Anyway, you smoke. What's the difference?”

In answer, she flung her cigarette packet at him, It bounced onto his chest and onto the carpet. Her dress slipped down, exposing her large boobs. He held her in his arms. She tried to push him away but Caramarin was so much stronger than her. She stopped struggling.

“I’m sorry,” Caramarin said “I didn’t realise you felt that way.”

“When I was a dancer in the clubs, I saw too much of where drugs take you. Please stop, Nicolae. Or if you can’t, please don’t bring them here again.”

“I understand.”

“Anyway, I don’t smoke much,” she said defensively. I’m trying to give up.”

He nodded. Wiped the tears from her pretty green eyes and kissed her.

“Listen, I’m really sorry,” said Caramarin. He looked deep into her pretty green eyes.

“I promise I’ll never bring gear round here again.

“Ring your Mum, ask her to look after little Vlad. I’ll take you out, nice restaurant, make a night of it. What do you say?”

She sniffed, then nodded.

Caramarin dried away her tear drop with his fingertip then licked it. “That’s better. I’ll go home, get changed and meet you later, okay?”

He’d toot later.

CHAPTER 11. FRIDAY JULY 17, 21:00.

Sometimes life doesn’t get any better than this. Cash in the back pocket, a pretty woman to take out and the evening free to enjoy. Perfecto. The evening sun calmly shone on the old pastel coloured Italianate style buildings of the city centre.

Caramarin strolled through the centre of Odessa, along the Prymorsky Boulevard among the tourists and the beautiful people looking to see and be seen.

Lots of middle aged men walking out with strikingly beautiful women. But unlike them, Caramarin didn't have to buy his girl. He walked past the cafes and restaurants, deciding which one she would like later on.

Unusually, Caramarin had put away his camo jacket and jeans and was wearing a blue suit and tie and a pair of Ray-Bans. He flattered himself that he was getting his share of female glances and a few little smiles. He was smiling himself. He felt good. He felt lifted with the help of a couple of lines of Bolivian best racing through his system. Took him to another level. He felt awesome.

He sat at a table under a shade tree and ordered a Zibert Light beer and enjoyed watching the people walk by. Valeriya showed up maybe twenty minutes later. She'd had her hair done and was wearing a floaty blue dress. She leaned over Caramarin, deliberately giving him a great view down her front and kissed him. He smiled. His day had just got better.

They moved onto a recommended restaurant nearby and ate good Ukrainian food and drank Georgian wine as the evening turned to night and the lights sparkled and the music made them happy. Yes, life was good. Only drawback, he'd run out of coke. When they'd finished eating and lingering over brandies, Caramarin suggested they go onto a nightclub. Hailed a cab down to the Skorpio at Arkadia beach. When times were slack, Caramarin sometimes worked the doors there and knew all the doormen.

Two of his mates, Belgian and Tailpipe were standing by the ropes. Another guy, Serhiy Bilokin, known as Oilfield, was with them. Caramarin knew Oilfield slightly. A muscular man with a broken nose and long hair oiled back into a pony tail, which also helped with his street name. He worked for Maiorescu's lot on occasions.

But Caramarin had heard whispers that he was also an enforcer for Major Balashov's group. If that was the case, he was a dangerous man. Seriously scary. Balashov took on ex Special Forces types only. And only those who didn't care whose skulls they smashed or whose lives they rubbed out.

Oilfield's name comes from the time when he was guarding the huge oil pipes in the Trans Caucasus badlands. Wolves weren't really the problem out there. Nor frostbite. Chechen bandits, saboteurs working for rival corporations and poverty stricken peasants trying to siphon off the oil flow were the problem.

Caramarin had heard that Oilfield's unit had caught up with some bandits; took them for a ride high into the Caucasus Mountains, stripped them naked and left them. In January. When the temperature was down to minus fifteen and with the wind chill it was much lower. Their frozen bodies were probably still up there now. A nice chap.

Talked to the doormen before they lifted the velvet ropes and let him and Valeriya into the club past the queue of waiting punters. He led Valeriya round the packed dance floor to the bar. Strobe lighting flashed and the frenzied dancing of men and women determined to enjoy themselves. Had to shout over the banging Ibiza trance music to order a couple of Absolut.

Caramarin wasn't really a big fan of nightclubs. Sometimes he felt too old these days. But tonight he still felt great. Couple more Absolut and he was good. But felt he needed to get a bit extra to cope with the bouncing music smashing against his head. He shouted to the supermodel type behind the bar if Vasin was in tonight. She knew what he was after. Told him he wasn't but another guy could help.

Left Valeriya with a girlfriend of hers she'd met up with. A girl who appeared to be a head of blonde hair on infinite legs. Probably looking for a banker or an oligarch to take her home for the night. You can't get better than Odessa for great looking women. He found the dealer and scored a few lines. Enough for the night. He pushed back through the crowds back to Valeriya and the other girl. As he'd just found out, Valeriya didn't do coke but he invited the other girl.

She was interested so she led him down to the ladies toilets. Tipped the babushka collecting kopecks for toilet paper. The old lady was knitting and lost in a world of her own. They pushed past a queue of women and barged into a vacant cubicle. A few squeals of indignation and one girl beat on the door. Caramarin and Valeriya's girlfriend giggled with laughter at the desperate girl. He spread out the snow, rolled

up a Shevchenko – a hundred hryvnia note and they snorted. Next to no sparkle up his sinus. Flat as a fluke. Might as well have taken sugar as snow.

“What the fuck? This shit is cut to fuck. It's just dextrose.”

The girl looked at Caramarin as he swept the white powder onto the floor. He flung the cubicle door open and shoved past the line of wide eyed girls waiting to use the toilets. He stormed into the corridor. The dealer looked up in alarm at the fury coming his way. He turned to run but Caramarin slammed into him.

Caramarin punched the man twice in the face, blood fountained from his nose. He threw up his arms to protect his face; Caramarin punched him in the stomach, doubling him over his fist. Girls fled screaming from the corridor. Heavy nightclub music spilled down the corridor, their shrieks muffled by the volume.

He slammed open a cleaning cupboard. He knew its lock was broken. A couple were inside, trousers round his ankles, little black dress hitched up over her waist. Their hips moving in time to the bass beat thudding through the walls. The girl looked up and screamed. Caramarin grabbed the two youngsters and hurled them into the passage, the boy tripping over his trousers.

A fist and a boot sent the curled up dealer into the cupboard. He picked up a broom and smashed it down onto the scum bag. The man curled up even tighter and screamed and whimpered uncontrollably. His pathetic defenceless body on the floor enraged Caramarin even more, sending him into a fury. He was putting severe leather into the man, laying into him with the handle, swearing incoherently, froth mixing with the obscenities from his mouth.

The cupboard door opened behind the violence. Strong arms wrenched him off the man, out of the cupboard and slammed him up against the far wall. His red eyed stare saw the giant Belgian and Tailpipe holding him back.

“Take it easy, mate, take it easy.” Belgian told him, his slab of an arm across Caramarin's chest.

Caramarin took a few deep breaths. No way was he fighting his two friends. In a cluster at the end of the corridor, he saw Valeriya and the other girl. Shock and horror made huge 'O's of their eyes and mouths. He tried to relax. Belgian nodded at Tailpipe, who checked the cupboard.

“He'll live.” said Tailpipe.

“I think you've had enough for tonight.” said Belgian.

Caramarin nodded.

“I'm sorry, comrades. Don't know what come over me.”

“It's OK, mate. Dunno who that rip off merchant is. Didn't get permission off us to work here so you've done him a favour – we'd have given him worse. Who put you onto him?”

Not wanting to get the girl behind the bar into trouble, Caramarin shrugged his shoulders. Belgian let him go and showed him to the back fire exit.

“Don't worry, mate. I'll wipe the tapes.”

“Thanks, I owe you one, comrade.”

They shook hands and Caramarin headed off past the bottle bins and dumpsters down the alley to the front. He looked at the queue still trying to get into the nightclub. He'd given those who'd seen the beating something to talk about tomorrow.

The anger, no the sheer bloody fury had cleared his head. He didn't think he'd see the girls tonight. Hell, he didn't even know Valeriya's girlfriend's name. Too early to go home but he didn't want to go to another ear splitting club. Picked up a cab heading back into Odessa and over to one of Maiorescu's new massage parlours. The young Russian girl knew how to use her hands and Caramarin felt cooler and more relaxed when he left.

The next day, had a long shower. Had a few hours to kill before Maiorescu needed him. He felt a prickle of conscience. Not about the fake dealer. He got the kicking he

deserved and he guessed Belgian and Tailpipe would've finished off the job. No, felt he'd let Valeriya down. He bought a bouquet of flowers and headed over to her table at the casino.

Walked past the players to the front of the table and handed over the flowers. She looked up and shook her head.

“Go away, Nicolae. I don't want to see you ever again.”

“Come outside. I need to talk.”

“I can't. I'm working.”

Caramarin knew the woman who pit-bossed the roulette wheels on the floor. She was well in with Maiorescu and his under the counter activities and couldn't object when Caramarin led Valeriya out into the sun.

“I'm sorry, Valeriya. I lost control last night.”

She lit up and blew smoke into the blue sky.

“I don't like that side of you, Nicolae.”

“I don't either. That man ripped me off and I lost it. Sorry. I'm over it now.” He paused whilst she smoked furiously.

“Look, you like your smokes. I don't smoke but I like a bit of blow now and again.” Liked it more than he used to. Have to cut it down a bit.

“Yeah, but I don't go around beating up people in clubs, do I?”

“No. And I promise not to do it again.” He spread his arms wide. “Give me another chance, okay? I'll make it up to you later.”

She nodded, but looked unconvinced.

“I've got to get back now,” she said.

“I’ll give you a call then. Catch you later.” He waved as she went back into work. He was encouraged by her little smile at the end.

Sort of.

CHAPTER 12. SATURDAY JULY 18, 13:00.

Looking back, Caramarin knew when the wheels really came off and it all turned to rat shit. It was that afternoon after seeing Valeriya when he was sitting in Maiorescu's office. His boss had just bought a new sauna and massage parlour and was modernising it. The builders were knocking through downstairs.

Caramarin was sitting reading a two day old Romanian language paper his boss had finished. Maiorescu was working on his laptop, his head wreathed in smoke, when he looked up.

“I want to set up a charity.”

Maiorescu could not have said anything more surprising. Caramarin looked into his boss's sweaty, jowly face.

“You what?” All four chair legs hit the floor.

“I said I want to set up a charity.”

Caramarin tried not to laugh but couldn't help himself.

“Go on, boss, what's the catch.”

“No catch, Nico. I want to do some good. Give something back.”

“Well, what sort of charity? The Help for Romanian Gang Boss's Charity?”

“No, seriously. A charity to help women with liver and kidney diseases get the treatment they need in the West. You know our hospitals here aren't good enough, not up to Western standards. Well, it's to put something back.”

“You mean, help drunks and alkies dry out?”

“Not like you, Nico. No, you've seen the girls out on the streets. I just want to send them to the West to get the care they can't get here.” Maiorescu leaned forward, both elbows on the desk.

“I guess with my history I might have a few difficulties with the authorities setting it up myself, capisce? I've asked Natalya and Olga to put their names forward as Directors of this charity, and they've agreed. I want to file this urgently so do us a favour and nip over to my villa with us and get their signatures on this form.”

“Who's Olga?”

“The house keeper. She might be in if we hurry.” Maiorescu looked in his desk drawer and removed an orange folder. Handed it over.

Caramarin shook his head. Knowing Maiorescu there was more to it. As far as he knew, his boss wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire.

The two men stepped out of the office. Maiorescu let Caramarin lock up whilst he brought his new car round. Whilst he was checking the alarm, Caramarin was startled by a car horn. Turning on his heels, he saw a metallic blue BMW M5 saloon. Leaning out of the window, the jowly face of Maiorescu greeted him.

“What do ya think?”

“You bought that?”

“Think I boosted it? Yeah, picked it up this morning. Hop in and I'll give you a run.”

Caramarin swung into the shotgun seat. The scent of new leather, Maiorescu's aftershave and new air freshener greeted him. The hot sun poured in through the open sun roof.

“Nice,” he admitted.

“So it should be. Cost enough. Looks good though. Nice and curvy shape.”

Maiorescu weaved through the traffic. The over powered five litre V10 engine that pushed out over five hundred brake horse power couldn't show its worth in the city traffic. Maiorescu was desperate to show off the multi function steering wheel.

“You see these two buttons there?” he pointed to them. Caramarin nodded.

“Well, with these, I can adjust all the various settings of its suspension, steering, throttle response, traction control and gear stick to get the very best performance from it. So I can potter round the city streets and then unleash the tiger on the open road.”

“Awesome.”

However, on the open road to his villa, Maiorescu gave the BMW its head.

“Can get up to one hundred kilometres an hour in under five seconds,” boasted Maiorescu.

“On these roads?” queried Caramarin.

“Possibly not, but on the Freeways; fuck yeah. Got Sat-Nav as well.”

Caramarin looked at the switched off Sat-Nav.

Maiorescu laughed. “Haven't worked it all out yet. Give us a chance, I've only had it a day!”

Maiorescu swung up his villa's drive. He leaned on the horn as Caramarin stepped out. They admired the five point alloys, polished to a high gloss. After a minute, Natalya came round the side of the villa, wrapping a white beach robe around herself.

“Like it?” asked Maiorescu. He tossed her the keys. Natalya flung herself into her husband's arms.

“It's marvellous,” she said, kissing him. “Can I drive it?”

“Of course. It's in your name, darling. You could run Nicolae back to town after lunch.”

Maiorescu couldn't stay on, had an urgent meeting with some property speculators so backed his old Mercedes out and zipped down the drive with a farewell wave and toot of the horn. The late afternoon was even hotter but a sea breeze freshened the air by Maiorescu's villa at Yuzhne. Apart from Natalya, the place seemed deserted; maybe because the heat was sapping the energy out of everyone. Caramarin fetched the folder and walked round the back to the pool.

Should have brought his shades. The reflected sun glare off the pool dazzled him and he screwed up his eyes. Some loungers and plastic chairs stood round the pool. Looking round, only one was taken. Natalya languidly stretched out on one of the recliners. Just as well he had his eyes screwed up or his eyeballs would have fallen out onto the tiles.

Natalya was wearing the tiniest whitest bikini he'd ever seen. Her blonde hair was tied back in a loose pony tail. She smiled and held her arms under her breasts, thrusting them up and out at him. With difficulty he looked up at her face. Sparkling blue eyes and full red lips and high cheekbones. Purists would say her nose was slightly too large, but Caramarin was no purist. She looked great. Absolutely fuckable.

Yeah, she'd been in the porno movies. Caramarin had even gone to the trouble of renting some of them. He guessed that was where Maiorescu had met her originally. He used to launder money through the adult movie business and met any number of actresses and hostesses.

She was in her early thirties but her trade had not ruined her looks or body. Now she was Maiorescu's woman, no one commented on her past. At least, not within Maiorescu's hearing. Some called her an old prozzie, but not Caramarin. The few times he'd met her, he'd always liked her. And he could tell she liked him.

Standing by the pool, he felt overdressed in his shirt and jeans. Sweat prickling his armpits and on his chest and down to his groin. Looking at Natalya, he stiffened. She

stepped forward, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. Her full breasts pressed against his chest. Two half globes of delight. He relaxed and laughed.

“Sit down, Nicolae. Take your shirt off and chill, man.” She brought him a Zibert Light from the mini bar by the pool. He watched her bum in the tiny white briefs as she bent over. Nice, very nice. He tossed his shirt and the folder onto a nearby chair. Condensation trickled down the side of the bottle.

First things first.

“Where's everyone?” he asked.

“Out. Olga's daughter's got a bug and the gardener's got the day off.”

“No one about, then?”

“No. Just you and me.”

She took off her top and dropped it to the tiles. Her large breasts fell free, her clean brown nipples stiff and proud. Only one way this afternoon was heading. Did he want this again? Would take their relationship several notches up from a one-off shag.

Too right. Yeah, he was too aware she was Maiorescu's current wife. His boss rarely kept them long but he would still be very angry if someone else was shagging away behind his back. And Maiorescu was a very bad man when angry. But he wasn't about to tell and neither would Natalya. But it was still a very bad idea.

Natalya picked up a bottle of sun lotion.

“Don't want you getting burned.” She poured out a handful and rubbed it slowly, sensuously over his chest, massaging it down his stomach and sides. Then unbuckled his belt and slid his jeans down, dropped them to the floor. She saw the bulge in his briefs. Hooked her fingers under the waist and drew them down too.

Poured more lotion into her palms. Took his cock and rubbed her hands up and down his shaft, the oily slickness heightening her touch. He gripped the side of the lounge to hold himself back. Natalya looked up at him and lowered herself down his body,

her breasts swaying free. Her tongue lapped his bell end, then her full mouth swallowed his penis all the way, delicious pressure building up inside. She knew her job, all right. Just as he was about to explode in her mouth, she sat back.

“Your turn now,” she said. She slid down her white briefs revealing her intimate beauty. Caramarin knelt, his tongue now exploring her salty tasting fleshy folds. He found her button, his tongue speeding up. She gasped, her body jerking. Natalya pushed his head away.

“Now, Nico, now,” she commanded. He pushed her down onto the recliner's cushions, his hips between her legs, his penis entering her wet vagina, pounding away, becoming one for a short moment.

They lay together on the narrow recliner. He poured Zibert over her breasts and licked it off, his tongue flickering on her nipples, tweaking them up.

“Not now, Nico. Another time.”

He sighed. “I understand, Natalya. As long as there is a next time.”

“There will be. Definitely.”

He stood up and dived into the pool to wash off the heat and sweat from their lovemaking. Swam a few laps, then emerged, water puddling to the tiles.

Natalya had put on her bikini. She looked flushed, happy, satisfied.

“Come again, Nico.”

“I will. Soon.”

He was back in Odessa before he remembered that Natalya hadn't signed the charity forms.

CHAPTER 13. SUNDAY JULY 19, 21:45.

“Thought that might happen. Didn’t expect one warning to work, did you?”

Caramarin asked his boss.

“Course not. Thick bastards can’t take a hint. Just have to rack it up a notch or two.”

“Shame about Tailpipe. Hope you’re going to meet his medical bills.”

“Course I am. Won’t be cheap but I look after my men. You do right by me, I do all right by you. That’s my motto.”

Caramarin thought about that. Sounded like Maiorescu got the best of it both ways. Figured. Always the way of it. But his head was so jazzed on coke it was hard to get things straight.

“What about his family?”

“Them, too. Like I say, I look after my people, capisce?”

Caramarin nodded.

“Bad luck he got in the way of that beating. This time, do what needs to be done. If they want to meet and greet Allah, then let them. Capisce.”

“Going down the hospital?”

“Yeah, later. Not much point taking grapes. Might take him grape juice – anything you can suck up through a straw.”

Coke racing through his bloodstream. Despite himself, Caramarin fell about laughing.

“Seriously, there’s a coffee shop down off Transportnyi Lane. Y’know, by the Mala train station. I heard they use that as a base. Take a few of the lads and torch it. Let’s send a clear message.”

Caramarin stopped laughing. Instantly.

That's going to escalate things, he thought.

"When?" was all he managed to say.

"This evening. Let's see if we can catch these rag heads after evening prayers or whatever it is they get up to."

Caramarin stood and shrugged his shoulders.

That's why Caramarin found himself in his beat up Opel Combo that evening next to Placid and Oilfield, two men he most certainly did not want to go on a mission with. Both were total psycho nutters with as much humanity as a starving wolf.

Placid sneered at Caramarin. "I'll drive," said Placid. "You didn't exactly get stuck in when we took out those two fuckers in the Bistro the other day, did you?"

Caramarin shrugged. Too much coke raced through his system and at the end of the day, who gives a rats? Maybe it would be better if he did the bombing instead of one of these two out of control ex-Spetznaz psychos. At least he could try not to kill anyone.

Placid threaded his way through the evening traffic. In the foot well, two bottles were wedged into a small cardboard box. Rags stuck out of the top and gasoline sloshed about inside. Caramarin sat and watched the bottles. Placid and Oilfield boasted about the weights they could bench press and strange dietary supplements.

They pulled up down the road from the coffee shop. The place was still open. A number of old men and a few teenagers sat outside enjoying the warm evening. Even on a summer evening, most of the old men were wearing hats and jumpers. Didn't know that the place was going to get a lot hotter very soon.

The men were sipping drinks and playing board games. One smoked a hookah. All of them were of eastern, Caucasian appearance. A waiter wandered about from table to table. It looked peaceful, but Caramarin knew enough not to trust surface appearances.

“What we'll do is this. We'll accelerate up to the cafe. Make the goat shaggers scatter. You jump out, lob the Molotovs and then we're out of here. Nice and simple – even a retard can manage that. Got that, cunt?”

Caramarin looked down the road. Their escape route looked all right, nothing blocking the street. He nodded. Wasn't happy about this but he couldn't back out now. Not with these two in his Opel. He nodded.

“Let's do it.” He wrapped his keffiyeh around his head. Covered his eyes with shades. Unrecognisable in any future line up now.

“Nice touch that, mate,” said Oilfield “you look like a towel head yourself now.”

Placid dropped the hand brake, gunned the accelerator and sped the Opel over the road towards the men sitting outside the coffee shop. A squeal of brakes and a blast from a horn as the Opel swerved across the path of a mini bus.

The relaxing men idly looked up at the noise, then saw the Opel hurtling towards them. There was a moment when nothing happened. The scene looked like a postcard from the middle east. Then there was a gasp of horror as they realised the meaning of the Opel van.

The men dived to the floor, the quick witted ones dragging the older or slower men out of the way. The hookah rolled to the floor. Chess men and backgammon counters bounced and scattered over the courtyard.

The Opel Combo leaped onto the side walk and charged onto the Bistro's courtyard. Placid slammed on the brakes. But one of the youths, too slow or dazed by the speed of events, tripped on an overturned chair, was side swiped by the car to the pavement. His head smashed to the paving flags and he lay still.

Caramarin leaped out of the Opel, lit the first petrol bomb and hurled it through the open door into the dark interior of the Bistro. Instantly, orange and red flame spread over the tiled floor, engulfed the wooden bar counter. Inside a woman screamed.

Caramarin didn't bother lighting the second. He threw that, too, into the Bistro, the flames eagerly swallowing the added fuel. The inside of the Bistro looked like a scene from the infernos of Hell. No way could anyone get into or out of the front door now. Even standing several metres away, Caramarin could feel the fierce heat from the inside of the shop. The roar of the fire was getting stronger.

The men had backed to the two sides of the Bistro's courtyard. They kept their distance from Caramarin. One of the coffin dodgers outside screamed something in his own language. Another made an obscene gesture.

Placid had backed the Opel to the edge of the road, the rear passenger door open, A safe haven. Caramarin ran to it just as Placid drove five metres down the road, the door swinging shut. Some of the men had stepped onto the pavement and one old man, must have been about seventy five if a day, looked like he was going to do something about it. Caramarin swore.

Caramarin raced along the road to the Opel. Oilfield pushed open the rear door as Caramarin threw himself onto the rear seat. Both were laughing fit to burst. Placid sped down the street.

“Had you going there,” Oilfield laughed. “Bet you were pissing yourself.”

Caramarin looked out the rear window. The men had spilled onto the street and watched the Opel down the road. Flames were erupting out of the door and the awning had caught ablaze, making a brief roof of fire.

The Opel van shot round the corner. Caramarin slammed into the window.

“What the fuck was that about?” he shouted. “You fuckin' amateurs.”

Oilfield and Placid were still howling with laughter. Now it was over, he supposed there was a funny side to it. But he still wasn't laughing.

Swapped cars at Maiorescu's warehouse and Placid and Oilfield left to start their shifts at the nightclubs. They were still in a good humour.

Caramarin went in to report to Maiorescu. His boss held up a hand. There was a news bulletin coming up on the radio. It mentioned briefly the arson attack on the Bistro. Didn't go into details but said the Militsia suspected that it was a targeted attack.

“Well done.” He tossed Caramarin a wedge of hryvnias. “Bit of advice. Get your clothes washed; get any petrol residue off. Even better, why not buy something decent to wear?”

He smiled as the radio continued with a comment from the Chief of Militsia about how these attacks wouldn't be tolerated.

“That's sent the bastards a clear message. They'll think twice before messing with me.”

Caramarin wondered about that. Thought it might just be the start.

His clothes were now in his landlady's washing machine and he was sitting in his room in his pants watching a frantic yet boring game show and wondering what to do. Felt tired and lethargic after the adrenalin rush of earlier. Banging on his door woke him from his drowsy state.

“All right, I'm coming,” he shouted.

Standing out on the landing were two Militsia. Their dark blue uniforms added to the menace. They knew they could do pretty much as they wanted. Caramarin knew that too. One shoved him back into the room.

The man showed him his warrant. It said Sergeant Grodzyk.

“Sit.”

He sat. Didn't make any comments. Didn't want to antagonise them.

The other one switched off the television. They stood in front of him.

“You involved in that arson attack on Transportnyi Lane?” asked Sergeant Grodzyk.

“No, I've been in all evening.”

He knew his landlady would back him up. As a child, she remembered the horrors of Stalin. When she was drunk, which was often, she would go on about her beloved Daddy who vanished one night, never to be seen again. She distrusted all authority. She especially hated all Militsia.

“So, you know nothing about it?”

“Only what I heard on the radio, earlier.”

The other officer was walking about the apartment, looking around as Caramarin was talking. He spotted the wedge of hryvnias on the table. The man picked it up.

“Where did you get this from, eh?” he asked.

“Just what I won at the casino the other night.”

“Easy come; easy go, eh?” The officers split the money and they trousered it.

“Wish I had time to go down the casino and win money.” said Sergeant Grodzyk.

“We're onto you, Nicolae Caramarin. Take this as a warning. A friendly warning. No more fire bombs. We want an easy life and you're adding to the problems.”

“Yeah, you're lucky. Our Lieutenant thinks it's a dispute between the fuckin' rag heads,” the other sniggered. “Doesn't have his ear to the ground like what we do.”

Their radios squawked. One turned away to answer. Seemed urgent as he tugged the sleeve of his Sergeant.

“Yeah,” said Grodzyk. “Personally, we couldn't care less if you barbecue a load of rag heads. Far as we care, they can send 'em all back. And you could do us a favour and fuck off back to Romania as well. But we don't want the paperwork. And we don't want the good name of this city dragged through the mud.”

They both laughed.

“Seriously,” said Grodzyk. “Tell Maiorescu to lay off. We won't tell you again.”

They slammed the door behind them and clattered down the stairs. Caramarin breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been lucky to get away with only losing some money. Might have taken a beating down at the station. Didn't want to go out now.

Poured a slug of vodka, drained it and then worked his way down the bottle.

CHAPTER 14. MONDAY JULY 20, 07:30.

A banging head didn't help. Drove down to the docks, couldn't take the noise this early in the morning so switched off the radio. He parked and waited outside the gates. A large van with the name of a Turkish florist painted on the side pulled up. Caramarin swung up into the cab. He shook hands with the driver and introduced himself. Not one of the Turkish gang's regulars but a new face, so he directed him over to Maiorescu's warehouse.

"You're very quiet, friend," said the driver, his Turkish accent very strong.

"Lot on my mind," said Caramarin.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you had too much last night," the man said with a grin.

They pulled up outside the warehouse and Caramarin unlocked it and swung up the shutters. The van drove in and Caramarin pulled down the shutters, plunging the vast space into semi darkness lit up only by light seeping in through dingy sky lights.

Caramarin snapped on the fluorescents. He was startled by footsteps coming from the offices. He wheeled round.

"What are you doing here, boss?" Maiorescu was rarely on site when smuggled counterfeit goods were delivered. Like most gang bosses, he'd lasted this long by having layers of people between him and anything that could take him to court.

"Paperwork," Maiorescu said.

But he looked even more shifty than usual. And there was a strangely eager look on his face that Caramarin had rarely seen. Odd, because as far as Caramarin knew, there was nothing to get excited about a load of knock off Chinese cigarettes. Yeah, nice money to be made out of them but when you've seen one box of hooky cigs, you've seen them all. Must be something else going on.

“The driver's gonna be here a while. Why not take a cab back to the docks and go see chase up some of our friends who've fallen behind on their premiums? You know what they say; the early bird catches the worm.”

“Who's going to unload the van?”

“Litovchenko's coming over soon.”

“If you're sure, boss.” Caramarin looked at his boss. Didn't like what he saw. Liked it even less than usual.

“Yeah, no probs. I'll give you a call later.”

Caramarin shrugged and left. Something was wrong and he wasn't a part of it. What was he left out of? Or didn't that greasy bastard Maiorescu trust him any more. In that case he was in real deep shit.

He ducked into the alley between Maiorescu's warehouse and the next. Although the structure was a bit dilapidated, he couldn't find any eye holes. Not surprising. Instead, he crouched behind a dumpster and waited. Concentrated on his breathing, like he'd been taught in sniper training.

Not long after, Placid showed up and drove into the warehouse. Pressing his ear to the siding, Caramarin heard the sound of boxes being moved, then muffled conversation, then laughter. Unusual to laugh over contraband cigs. Then Litovchenko's car started up.

Caramarin dived behind the dumpster just as the car pulled out and sped down Mala Arnouts'ka Street. Soon after, the Turk's van left in the direction of the docks. Finally, Maiorescu himself set the alarm, locked up and drove his Merc after Litovchenko.

Caramarin was no locksmith. No way he could break into the warehouse without taking a lot of time and making a lot of noise. Instead, he headed into the city to collect the 'premiums'.

As he stepped out from a newsagents with the money in his pocket, a black Opel swerved onto the pavement in front of him. Two Caucasian looking men in brown suits vaulted out of the car. Not about to find out what they wanted, Caramarin spun round and had it away on his toes down the road.

Heard them pounding the pavement behind him. He ducked down an alley, swung out a dumpster behind him, raced on. Leaped over a cat, skidded on a dog turd, recovered his balance. He was gaining on the two men. They needed to work on their cardio. Ahead of him was the next street. Then the entrance darkened. Another man stepped into the alley ahead of him. Caramarin recognised him. A tall skinny man with a lantern jaw. The man took up a fighting stance and held up a lock knife.

Caramarin pulled up. Looking about, he spotted a pallet propped against the wall. Caramarin picked it up and hurled it the man with all his force. The man dodged, but in the narrow exit the pallet struck him on the shoulder, knocking him back, staggering him off balance. Caramarin braced himself on a drainpipe and kicked out, catching the man full on the chest, forcing him back almost to the street.

But the other two behind him caught up. One grabbed Caramarin by the shoulder, spinning him round. He punched Caramarin full in the face. Caramarin's head slammed against the brick wall. He saw stars. Before he could recover, the second punched Caramarin full in the stomach. He doubled over, gasping with shock and pain. Again, he was punched in the stomach, He gagged, hot acid bile rising up.

The first man grabbed Caramarin by his long hair jerking him upright again. Once, twice, his fist slammed into Caramarin's face. Blood from his nose poured down his face. Caramarin gobbled full in the man's face. He shouted something in his own language and stepped forward. Caramarin butted him. Thought he felt the man's nose break, his blood mixing with his own.

The man fell back, his hands covering his face.

“You'll pay for that, Romanian shit head,” the lantern jawed third man said.

Caramarin said nothing. He punched the second, two hard hitting blows to the man's body. For a brief moment, he thought he might get away. But the third smashed the discarded pallet into him. Caramarin slipped off balance from the force of the blow. The second took advantage and scythed his leg away. Caramarin fell to the ground, fell into a mess of rotting food.

His knee cracked, a jolt of agonizing pain shooting through him, scrambling his mind for a second. And that was all it took. All the men needed. The pallet smashed down onto his head. He collapsed to the ground. A rotten kebab filled his sight.

The three men went into a frenzy of kicking. His body absorbed the punishment. Curled into a ball, trying to protect his head and vitals. Felt the pallet crashing onto his back. Felt like the beating had been going on for ages but was probably only a minute or so.

Then, through his haze of red pain, dimly heard an old lady shout something. No idea what she said but with a last kick, the three men ran off back down the alley. He dragged himself up, gasping for air, dragging himself back to awareness and life. Two old babushkas helped him stand. He smiled.

“Looks nasty. You want to get that seen to,” one said.

“Can't go anywhere in this city now. All these foreigners,” said her incredibly aged looking friend.

“You're right. Not like the old days,” her face scowling. Yes, better in the old days when Stalin purged them and sent them to the Siberian Gulags. Not.

“I'm okay. Nothing broken. But thanks for stepping in,” said Caramarin. He turned away and spat out a mouth full of blood. He'd been lucky those babushkas had helped. Most wouldn't and then he would have been battered. The two ladies looked at each other.

“Do you want us to call the Militsia?” the very old lady asked.

“No, it was only a mugging. They'll be long gone now,” said Caramarin.

The two ladies looked at each other. They knew he was lying but weren't going to get involved any further. He thanked them again and headed back down the alley.

CHAPTER 15. SATURDAY JULY 25, 23:00.

“Well, I was lying there in bed, feeling really nervous. Terrified in fact.” VCR said. “I mean, anyone'd be terrified about getting the snip wouldn't they?”

All the men winced. Belgian even slipped his hand down his pocket and clutched his knob.

“Anyway, I was feeling shit scared. But then the nurse came round and I heard her saying to relax, take it easy, it's a simple op. It's really rare that anything goes wrong.”

“Well, it's good she was so caring. You don't always get that now,” Caramarin said.

“True,” VCR said. “The only trouble was, the nurse was saying it to the surgeon, not me!”

The men laughed. They were standing outside the San Antonio Club on Arkadia Beach. A queue of clubbers stood outside the velvet ropes waiting to be let in. Caramarin lifted the rope for a young couple he'd seen several times before. The girl flashed him a smile of gratitude. He smiled back.

Just another evening until a black BMW 5 with tinted windows squealed round the corner. The three men stopped their banter and watched.

“Bloody drunks,” said Belgian.

The car slowed opposite the doormen and the rear window wound down several centimetres; two pipes stuck out.

“Down,” Caramarin yelled. His instincts took over; he threw himself onto the slack jawed couple at the front of the queue, hurling them to the ground.

Two blasts roared out of the car, the shots sounding as one. Immediately the black BMW 5 roared off down the street. Caramarin looked as it raced round the next corner. There was silence for a couple of seconds then screams. And not just from the women. As suddenly as violence erupted, it ended.

He stood up and helped up the young woman he'd squashed to the ground. Now some of the queue was running off down the street, others were standing there open mouthed, amazed at what had happened. You know what? They'd have something to tell their mates about later. All added to the reputation of the nightclub.

He turned to his mates. Belgian was kneeling over VCR.

“I think he's hurt,” shouted Belgian over the noise of the people.

At that range, there was no way the assassins could have missed. Caramarin stepped over. There was blood on his face. Caramarin ripped open VCR's suit and shirt. Underneath, he saw a bullet-proof vest. It was peppered with pellets.

“Fuck, that hurts, like someone kicked my ribs in,” said VCR, “Hurts like a bastard.”

“Just as well you had that on,” Caramarin said. “Saved your life.”

Now it was all over, the San Antonio Club manager hurried out. A short, balding man with a shaving rash on his throat and a twitch in his eye. Saw his non existent queue and his profits disappearing down the road.

Caramarin filled him in on what had happened.

“I'm going to have to look at my security arrangements if this sort of thing is going to happen,” the manager said.

Caramarin raised an eyebrow. “You want to take that up with Maiorescu, comrade?”

The manager went quiet. No he didn't want to take it up with Maiorescu.

VCR was back on his feet. He grinned but looked white and shaken underneath the blood on his face. “Nothing broken, I think.”

“Look, comrade, you need to get your face seen to. And you don't want to be here when the Militsia come.”

“Understood.” Caramarin called him a cab – a regular who could be relied on to keep his mouth shut if any questions came his way.

After that it was, as they say, a quiet night.

CHAPTER 16. SUNDAY AUGUST 2, 16:15.

Maiorescu looked up from his laptop. His face looked haggard, eyes bloodshot. Looked like he hadn't had a good night's sleep for a week and could do with buying a sharper razor. His tie was pulled down, showing a thick tangle of black hair. Sweat stains dampened his armpits and front of his shirt. The man lit up then poured himself a large Absolut and drained it in one swallow. Didn't offer the bottle around.

“Look. We can't carry on like this. This Abkhazian lot are causing me a bit more trouble than I thought. After that fire bombing the other week, I think it might be better to keep our heads down for a while.”

“What!” shouted Litovchenko, living up to his nickname. “What're you saying? That we should give up and let them foreign rag head bastards just take over?”

“Not at all. We just need to calm it down for a while before we can sort them out properly.”

Caramarin looked up. “You've had some pressure from the Militsia, boss?”

“That's right. They think it's getting out of hand and it's bad for the city's image.”

“Fuck the city's image and fuck these Abkhazian fuckers, too. Let's smash them now.”

“Can't do that. Not for the time being. Anyway, I've set up a meet with their boss, Timur Ozgan. I want you, Nicolae, to come with me.”

“That cunt? Thought I was your second,” Placid jumped to his feet, hulking over Maiorescu.

“You are. But you might be too... intimidating... for the meet. Anyway, I want you to put your feelers out and see if you can't round up some useful chaps who we can rely on in the near future. Capisce?”

He held Litovchenko's stare for a moment. It was the doorman who looked away first.

“Nicolae, pick us up at the villa at seven. And wear a suit. I'll see you later.” He stood and went to the door. The two doormen followed.

“Stay a moment, will you, Litovchenko. Quick word. I'll see you at seven, Nicolae.”

Caramarin left, felt dismissed. What were the two men talking about without him?

As the sun's rays spread and lit up the calm waters of the Black Sea that evening, Caramarin arrived at Maiorescu's villa outside of Yuzhne with half an hour to spare. He swung up the driveway and parked. Walked over to the pool. Rippled reflections danced on the surface. Natalya was resting on a recliner, a glass of vodka by her side. She looked up from her magazine.

She was wearing just her tiny white bikini, this late in the summer her skin now deeply tanned. The early evening sun caught her blonde hair, making it like molten gold. She slipped her sarong on and stood to greet him, her full breasts shadowing her stomach, her nipples very prominent under her top. They exchanged a chaste kiss.

“You look good, Nico. You should wear a suit more often. It suits you.”

“Eugen wants me to go to a meeting with him tonight.”

“I know. Wonder why he's not taking Litovchenko?”

“I think he's lookin' for a bit of discretion on this one. Not just beating someone to a pulp.”

“Yes, that man's getting worse. Too many 'roids.”

Caramarin shrugged off his jacket and helped himself to a beer and waited for Maiorescu.

Didn't have long to wait. Maiorescu hurried down. He was wearing a grey lightweight Bill Blass suit and a dark blue silk tie. The clothes were expensive but the man still looked like a furtive crook in a line up. He shot a look at Caramarin standing near Natalya in her tiny bikini. Caramarin stepped a pace away.

“Ready to go, boss?”

“Yeah. You look the part. C'mon.” Maiorescu tossed his wife a pack of cigs.

Natalya waved them off. Caramarin took Maiorescu's Mercedes saloon and headed back into Odessa. Maiorescu directed him to a sauna by Mala Station. Not too far from the fire bombed coffee shop which was now boarded up. Caramarin glanced up at the blackened ruins. Against the rest of the street it was like a rotten tooth in a mouth. Only his imagination but he almost thought he could smell the smoke from it.

He pulled up in a small car park near the sauna.

“Want me to come in with you, boss?”

“Course. Just keep your eyes open. There'll only be me and Ozgan and one of his men here. Discreet. The fewer people the better, capisce?”

Caramarin stepped out the Merc.

“You carrying?” Maiorescu asked.

Caramarin nodded.

“Well, leave it in the car. No weapons.”

“You sure, boss?” Maiorescu had always been obsessed with personal security.

“Sure.”

Caramarin hid his pistol in the glove locker.

The two men walked into the waiting room. Ignored the 'Closed' notice on the door to keep out the passing trade. Caramarin smelled perfume, steam and underlying that the sour odour of sweat and sex. Classy.

A dyed blonde woman spilling out of a pink bathrobe greeted them. She was maybe late thirties but tried to appear younger. In a way, she reminded Caramarin of Natalya except her hard face let her down. And Natalya was younger and now had the big advantages of money and an easier life.

She offered two glasses and bottle of champagne. Maiorescu grabbed the bottle and poured. Caramarin accepted a glass. Sipped it as he wanted to keep his wits about him. Maiorescu drank deep, refilled his glass and lit up. The two men sat and waited, Maiorescu smoking furiously.

“He's trying to show who's top. Don't worry about it,” said Maiorescu. He was clenching his fists, his knuckles showing white.

“I'm not,”

But Caramarin understood his man well enough to know that his boss was angry underneath. No wonder he didn't want a psycho nut sitting with him, egging him on. What worried Caramarin was that his boss must be weaker than he thought to put up with this treatment. Yes, he'd noticed takings were down and too many 'customers' were behind on their 'premiums'. But there must be stuff going on behind the scenes that he was not aware of.

The door opened and the hostess showed in two men.

You could tell immediately which was Timur Ozgan. Authority rode on his shoulders like an eagle. Medium height but broad. Built like a weightlifter. He had a neatly trimmed beard flecked with grey and deep set dark brown eyes and a prominent nose.

He was wearing a good Iranian style suit, no tie, and was holding a set of prayer beads which moved through his hand.

His bodyguard, Mehmet, had obviously been chosen for his imposing appearance. He stood a fraction under two metres and looked as if he spent serious time in the gym. He was dark skinned and wore mirrored shades. Like his boss, he wore a good suit but it barely covered his muscles. The backs of his hands had writing on them in some sort of strange foreign Cyrillic script.

Caramarin nodded politely. They undressed. No weapons and no wires, then wrapped towels around their waists. Maiorescu pushed on the door then the four men entered the sauna. The heat hit them in the chest like a sledge hammer.

Caramarin had no idea if Georgians or even Abkhazians had saunas in their own countries and couldn't care less. The two gang leaders sat at one end of the sauna and talked together in low voices. Sweat poured from Maiorescu but Timur Ozgan seemed to cope well. Maybe they do have saunas over there after all.

Mehmet either wouldn't speak or just didn't speak Ukrainian or Russian. He seemed content to glare at Caramarin. Started to get on his nerves but, remembering why he was there tried not to let it get to him. Glad he'd laid off the blow for a few days, though. Bit calmer without it. Concentrated on watching – and keeping the steam right.

When Maiorescu and Timur Ozgan had finished, they moved into the salon where a group of masseuses had set up four tables and waited for them. Relaxing mood music played in the background and scented candles lit the room with flickering shadows.

Interestingly, Maiorescu chose the older woman who had served them champagne earlier. Maybe she reminded him of his wife, too. Or maybe she was just more skilled than the young woman who massaged Caramarin. Nice body, great abs, but no skill.

No extras, though. Not at a business meeting. The only one who didn't seem to be enjoying himself was Mehmet. He stared at Caramarin. This man was setting himself up for trouble between them whatever happened.

CHAPTER 17. SUNDAY AUGUST 2, 22:15.

“You made a friend, there,” Maiorescu said after the two groups had finally shaken hands and separated. Caramarin was driving Maiorescu back to his villa after a few drinks at a nightclub. Late at night, the powerful car had the road to itself, the headlights cutting through the night, and Caramarin gave the Merc its head.

“Hope you did better.”

“Yeah, I think so. We're stopping the fighting – doesn't get us anything except trouble from the Militsia and we're setting up a joint business together.”

Caramarin glanced at his boss. Didn't sound like Maiorescu's style to go into partnership with someone he didn't know well. Someone he'd dealt with before and had the chance to weigh them up. On the other hand, he'd been successful by keeping an eye open for any business opportunities, so who knows?

“Well, you know best, boss. We still collecting the premiums, then?”

“Sure. Most of 'em. I've given some to Ozgan, as goodwill. But we're going to make a lot more from this new business. Surprised I never got into it before.” He thought for a while. “Could be very lucrative.”

“It's not drugs is it?” Caramarin asked.

“No, that's too much mayhem. And draws too much attention.”

Reassured, Caramarin knew better than to ask questions. Maiorescu would tell him when he was ready. He drove in silence back to Yuzhne whilst Maiorescu thought.

As he pulled up to the villa, Maiorescu invited him to stay the night. Unable to quickly think of a reason to refuse, had to agree.

Maiorescu shouted up the stairs for Natalya to come down and fix them a snack. She appeared, wrapping a bath robe around her. Even just woken from sleep, hair mussed up and bare faced, the woman looked good. Great legs. Didn't say anything but walked to the kitchen, whilst the two men went to Maiorescu's den.

Maiorescu flicked through the satellite music channels on and sprawled out watching the near naked dancers as music blasted out from his surround sound system. Caramarin sat back. Natalya brought in a tray of snacks and a bottle of Finlandia with three glasses.

She pushed Maiorescu to one side and sat next to him on the cream leather sofa with her legs curled under. She poured the vodka and handed it out. They toasted to success. Maiorescu refilled the glasses and drank deeply. Was already half way in the bag. Poured them all another vodka.

Caramarin was never sure how much his boss told Natalya but knew he didn't like to talk business unless Maiorescu started the conversation. So he didn't say anything, just watched the music whilst Maiorescu pulled Natalya onto him.

Difficult to keep your eyes on even the most beautiful, gyrating dancers on screen whilst on the next couch his boss was pawing away at his wife. Natalya kept pulling away, which only seemed to inflame Maiorescu's passions. His hand was on her breast and the other on her exposed thigh, As a display of ownership, Caramarin got the message loud and clear.

“Fetch us another bottle, will ya?” called Maiorescu.

Caramarin stood and fetched another Finlandia from the fridge. Whilst the cold light from the open door was on, he drank almost a litre bottle of water before returning. Cracked the vodka seal open and poured the drinks. Maiorescu took several large ones. Eventually Natalya managed to push him off and stood up.

“It's late, Eugen. I'm going up,” she said.

“Great,” Maiorescu said. Despite the amount he'd taken on board, he was still steady. Had to hand it to Maiorescu, the man could hold his booze.

“You can doss down here, Nicolae. See you in the morning.” He squeezed Natalya's bottom and guided her out.

Caramarin switched off the television and rearranged the cushions. He needed a piss so crept to the upstairs wet-room. As he passed the master bedroom, he heard Maiorescu grunting away and Natalya sounding like she was in a seventh heaven of ecstasy what with her moans and cries. Faked, he knew. Natalya had told him that Maiorescu was strictly useless in that department.

All the same, he didn't like it and as he slipped back downstairs he wondered. Was this demonstration for him? No, if Maiorescu suspected the man would take more direct, and more painful, action. This was just to make it clear who was top dog round here.

He was almost asleep when the study door opened. Immediately, he was on the alert. Sat up. A slim shape slipped into the room and stood next to him.

“I'm sorry about that,” she whispered.

“Can't help it,” he said.

“But it's you I love, not him.”

Caramarin was startled. He thought they were just having some fun together. Yeah, playing with red hot fire but no real commitment emotionally.

“And I'm very fond of you, too.”

She slipped off her robe and sat by his side. Took his hand and placed it between her breasts, over her heart. He could feel it beating beneath, like a trapped animal. She lay down next to him.

“It's all right. He's passed out now,” she whispered.

What the hell? You only live once. Found a rubber in his jacket and had her on the couch. Nothing subtle, he was too tired for that, but managed to live up to expectations.

“You didn't say whether you loved me?”

Caramarin was too shagged out to argue or even to think. Take the line of least resistance.

“Of course I love you,” he said automatically, giving her a kiss. “I really love you.”

Natalya kissed him back, then stood and shrugged into her robe.

“I'll see you in the morning,” she said by the door.

Caramarin rolled over and thought. Did he love her?

Yeah, a great body but only... possibly. Sort of.

CHAPTER 18. MONDAY AUGUST 3, 08:00.

Annoyingly, Maiorescu seemed none the worse after last night. If anything, seemed brighter than usual. Like the weight of the world had rolled off his shoulders. He shook Caramarin awake and almost dragged him to the kitchen. No sign of Natalya. Probably for the best. Their housekeeper fetched enough to feed the five thousand. Well, at least five.

“Eat up, lots to do today,” Maiorescu said.

Caramarin picked at his food, kept it down, then brought the Mercedes round. Gleaming in the sun, even the Merc looked better than he did. Probably it felt better, the way his head was banging.

On the drive back to Odessa, Caramarin listened as Maiorescu laid out his plans.

“Don't know why I didn't get into this before. It's the future for us. Loads of money and none of the hassle you get with the drugs game. And the beauty is I can use some of my contacts from the counterfeit ciggies and booze runners.”

“So what is it then?”

“There's lots of people who'd do anything to work in the E. U. or the Middle East. What we'd do is help them with getting passports, getting through immigration and finding work visas. For a small fee. And maybe helping them find work in the West, as well,” he glanced at Caramarin to see how he reacted. Caramarin kept his eyes on the road and his features neutral.

“And then there's those that need medical assistance in the west. You remember, that charity we set up last month? There's lots of people who can't afford or obtain the treatments they need here in Ukraine, capisce.”

“In a nutshell, people trafficking,” said Caramarin.

“I wouldn't put it quite like that.”

“Will the people you'll be helping to move be women?”

“Mostly. At first anyway.” Maiorescu looked shifty, glancing away. His good mood seemed to be diminishing. “Thought you'd be up for earning more cash.”

“Yeah, could do with the money. But this is bad news, boss. Where we getting the girls from?”

“Women, I said, not girls. I'm not touching children. No way.” That was a relief.

“Timur Ozgan can send some over until I build up my own networks. Then I can cut him out.”

“Like I say, I think this is going to be bad for us, boss. I was in Bosnia and I saw things there...”

“That was years ago and different circs. No, this is genuine. Get them proper jobs as waitresses, dancers, cleaners, whatever. Those rich westerners are crying out for people to do that kind of work.”

Caramarin said nothing.

“Also, Nicolae, we're being leaned on by the Militsia over the insurance 'premiums'.
Need to diversify, capisce?”

“You told Natalya about this?”

“She's nothing to do with it. Don't you dare say a word to her.”

That meant no.

Parked at the office on Prokhorovs'ka Street.

* * * * *

There followed a week of hard work. Caramarin thought if he wanted an office job, he would have applied for one. His cell seemed welded to his ear. Arranged for some dodgy passports and work permits to be printed. Letters from western hospitals recommending treatments. Maiorescu was busy on his cell with his contacts within Moldova and Romania and further down the line, even as far as Germany and Britain. Also, he was scraping together a deposit for the women.

Caramarin felt sorry for the businesses owing insurance 'premiums' now that Litovchenko was collecting. They'd get no mercy from that thug.

Wednesday evening, Maiorescu handed him a well stuffed envelope with an address.

“Take that over to Ozgan's place, will ya? We'll be picking up some workers.”

Caramarin stuffed the envelope in his pocket and nodded. Drove a hired minibus over to Ozgan's warehouse and beeped the horn. The main gate swung open and he drove into the cavernous interior. The fluorescents flickered on, bathing the warehouse in hard light. Suddenly, he felt very exposed and wished he'd brought back up. Slowly, he stepped out of his mini bus, both hands in full view.

Ozgan, Mehmet and a couple of other men approached. One of them was the tall lantern jawed man he'd had a couple of run ins with before. His bruises were fading now, but still did nothing for his appearance. The two men glared at each other.

Slowly, with his left hand, Caramarin took the envelope from his camo jacket and offered it to Timur Ozgan, who nodded to lantern jaw. The man stepped forward still glaring at Caramarin and took it. Their hands did not touch, like he thought Caramarin had the plague or something.

He passed it to Ozgan, who flicked through the notes. He nodded a couple of times and said some gibberish in Abkhazian. Mehmet went into a back office and came back out with five young women. Even under the harsh lights he could see the women were all attractive. All looked bone-tired, one or two looked scared and one seemed close to tears.

But, looking closer, he saw a blonde had a black eye and another was clutching her ribs. They all carried suitcases or rucksacks. They looked apprehensively at Caramarin. Only one smiled at him, a large breasted, cheeky Turkic looking girl.

"They're yours now," Timur Ozgan told him. "I'll have some more for your boss soon."

Caramarin opened the mini bus's door and gestured for the girls to get in. They filed sheepishly on board. No giggling, no laughing, just silence. They stowed their bags as Caramarin reversed out. In his mirror he saw the Abkhazians watching in silence. He drove the girls over to Maioreescu's warehouse on Mala Arnauts'ka. Despite taking a roundabout route, he didn't notice a grey VW Polo always following several car lengths behind.

The warehouse door lifted up as soon as the mini bus arrived and closed as soon as it was inside. Caramarin stepped out. Maioreescu passed him a padded envelope.

"Passports and paperwork," he slurred. The man had been drinking. Heavily. Behind him, Placid and Oilfield climbed onto the minibus.

"C'mon, cunt. You're driving."

“What?”

“Slight... change of plan,” said Maiorescu. “You don't mind taking 'em onto, onto Constanta do ya? I've cleared it..., cleared it with customs.”

“You're joking, boss.”

“No, I need... need you to. These two thuds can't speak Romanian.”

Caramarin sighed and held out his hand.

“I'll need money for diesel.”

Maiorescu peeled off some notes and passed them over.

Caramarin swung behind the wheel and backed the mini bus out.

CHAPTER 19. TUESDAY AUGUST 4, 00:00.

“C'mon ladies. We've got a long drive ahead of us.” Not all seemed to understand him. He tuned into Prosto Radio 102.5 FM and headed south into the Bessarabian countryside.

Placid and Oilfield sprawled on the back seat. They had a couple bottles of vodka and were passing them round to the girls. Oilfield built a massive spliff and the heavy sweet smell of marijuana filled the minibus. Oilfield beckoned to one of the girls, a tidy looking auburn haired piece, and made her sit on his lap. Passed the spliff to her and after Placid took the joint Oilfield started fumbling with her clothes. She squeaked and tried to wriggle off but a few more tokes and vodkas calmed her. Placid took hold of another and dragged her down onto him.

“Hey, you, turn that shite off and put this on,” shouted Placid as he tossed a CD up. Caramarin sighed and sighed again as thrash metal blasted out from the speakers. It was going to be a bloody long journey.

Pulled up at a garage with a shop attached for diesel and to give the girls a comfort break. Placid came out the shop with more vodka. Caramarin took him to one side.

“Right, I've had enough, I'm not crossing no border with drugs. Got that?”

Placid blinked. “Who you telling what to do, cunt?”

“Listen. We get stopped with drugs we're going down. Got that? You wanna explain to the boss why we've fucked up? Why he's lost a load of money? That what you want?”

The two men looked at each other. Caramarin stood on the balls of his feet. Ready for action if it came. Adrenaline rushed through him. Who knew how Placid would react? Probably not even Placid knew.

Yet it was Placid who backed down. “Okay.”

“Good, and leave the women alone, capisce.”

“Why? They're only slags, who cares what happens to them?”

“I care, so lay off. And tell your mate the same. Unless you want me to.”

Only four women had boarded the bus. Couldn't see the cheeky looking Turkic girl. Feeling like he was in charge of a kindergarten, Caramarin re-entered the garage. He saw her looking at the food. The babushka behind the counter was watching the girl. Suspicion all over her creased face.

“C'mon, time to go.” He took her arm. She turned a tear streaked face up to him.

“I'm so hungry. I haven't eaten for two days.”

“What about the others?”

“No,” she burst into tears.

Caramarin scooped up as many rolls, cartons of milk, fruits, sweets as he could hold and peeled off some notes and paid for them. Back on the minibus he handed them

out to the women. Didn't give anything to Placid and Oilfield. Couldn't miss the evil look the two men gave him. Like he could care less. Whilst he was at it, ejected the thrash CD and back to the radio. This close to the border, he tuned into a Romanian language talk show. Just to wind them up even more.

The minibus quietened as the girls settled down to sleep. The two hoods at the back talked to each other. Caramarin knew they were ranking him to the dogs. But couldn't care less. The dark, flat Bessarabian country unrolled beneath the wheels. On the outskirts of Izmail, a town a few kilometres from the border, Caramarin pulled over.

The two hoods shrugged into wakefulness.

“Right. Anything I should know before we cross over? No guns, drugs, kiddie porn, dead bodies?”

“No, you cunt. Clean as a whistle.”

“Okay. Anything goes wrong, I'll let the boss know who fucked up. Got that?”

Turning his back on them, he walked up the gangway past the dozing women and drove up to the customs post. Despite the late hour, there was still a queue waiting to cross the Danube into Romania. Leaving Ukraine was no problem, just a question of showing their passports.

It was the crossing into Romania that was the difficulty. The minibus was waved over to the side of the brick built customs post. In the glare of the floodlights, the blue , yellow and red flag of his homeland fluttered over the building. A burly customs official with the beginning of a paunch and a heroic moustache climbed on board and flashed a torch around. His suspicions were raised by the sight of five half asleep young women and two over muscled men.

“Everyone off,” he ordered. Caramarin translated and they all stepped off, yawning and stretching in the chill air.

Caramarin handed over all their passports and visas and they all stood and waited by the minibus. In the very early hours of the morning, they all felt tired and scratchy.

Caramarin rubbed his jaw. Figured they'd a long wait ahead of them. And he was right. The customs official came out.

“We're searching this bus,” he told Caramarin.

They unloaded their bags and waited some more. A heavy set woman came out leading a spaniel. She released the dog and it bounded inside, sniffing about, wagging its tail. It was the only one that was lively and up for it at that time in the morning. It barked when it reached the back seat. The woman entered and found the roach end under a seat.

“It's a hire minibus. Didn't know it was there. Look at the paperwork, please,” explained Caramarin wearily.

The dog carried on its search and then was led past their group. It wagged its tail furiously at Placid and Oilfield and almost wet itself by one of the girls. The woman led the dog away and returned.

“I'm going to search these women. Tell them,” the big woman ordered. Caramarin explained. The girls looked frightened, one even started crying. They followed the woman over to the customs house.

The three men were taken over later. They stripped, their clothes were turned out and examined. Catching sight of Placid's acorn knob, Caramarin thought he should tell him to lay off the steroids for a while. Might not go down too well.

“Hey, might be a good idea to lay off the 'roids. Y'know what happens, don't you?” He wagged his little finger.

Litovchenko glowered, flexed his heavily tattooed hands, but even that psycho wasn't going to kick off in a customs house. Not when he was naked. And there were men with Kalashs standing about.

Of course, the humour vanished when one of the officers slipped on the plastic gloves and went prospecting. That was no fun.

Eventually, their clothes were returned. They filed back out and saw more customs officers searching their jacked up minibus. Cushions lay on the concrete next to some side panels. One had drained the tank and the diesel stood in jerry cans. The wheels had been taken off with the deflated tyres loose around their rims.

Caramarin stood next to the huddle of women. One was crying, but the others looked as disheartened and deflated as the tyres. Couldn't think of what to say to them.

One of the officials told Caramarin they'd finished. Caramarin picked up the wheel brace from the concrete and started to replace the wheels. Placid shrugged his shoulders and started making calls on his cell. In fairness to him, after a moment, Oilfield rolled up his sleeves and joined in with refilling the diesel. Most of it was still there. A couple of the girls sorted out the minibus's interior.

All the same, it was well into the morning and they were many hours late before they were ready to roll. Caramarin collected their papers and drove into the sun on the way to Constanta. He pulled in at the first diner he came to. Told Placid to pay for breakfasts as he was skint. Earned himself another black look, but the big doorman ponied up the folding.

It was late morning before they arrived at the port of Constanta. Placid moved to the shotgun seat and guided him to a lock up on the dock road. Caramarin was surprised at how quiet and dead the port was. Not like when he was last there, years ago. Cranes stood idle whilst dockers fished from the quays. Stacks of rusting containers shimmered in the sun. Very different from the hustle and business of the thriving port at Odessa. A strong smell of oil and fish filled the air.

He parked outside the lock up and the girls stepped out, blinking in the light and looking around them at their new surroundings. A slim handsome young man in a formal white shirt and black jeans stepped out of the lock up. He raised his shades and looked the girls over. Just behind him was an older woman, also smartly dressed in skin tight jeans and an embroidered white blouse with a red silk scarf.

She showed the young women inside. Last in was the cheeky Turkic girl. Caramarin pressed a scrap of paper into her hand as she passed.

“Call me,” he whispered. She nodded once and followed the others inside.

Litovchenko made a call on his cell, nodded, then handed the girls' passports and papers to the young man.

“Job done,” Placid said. “Take us home.”

Caramarin tossed him the keys.

“I'm shattered. You can drive for a while.”

Shouldn't have said he was tired. Back on went the thrash CD. Full volume.

CHAPTER 20. FRIDAY AUGUST 14, 21:15.

Mid August in Odessa is hot, every week seemed hotter and stickier than the one before. The sun so hot it bleached the blue out of the sky. Only the sea breezes of an evening cooling the worst of the heat away. Then the beautiful people came out and promenaded along the Black Sea front, up the Potemkin Stairs then through the crowded streets between the beautiful Italianate buildings of the city centre. But Caramarin had little time to kick back and enjoy the weather. And his nights were spent in sweaty sleeplessness with no chance of rest.

Caramarin was kept busy that week, collecting protection from the building sites and coffee houses and drinking clubs that Maiorescu controlled. Matters seemed to be getting back to normal. Or at least stability. Maybe Caramarin was quieter than normal – certainly he cut down the snow and vodka for a while and spent a bit more time down at the gym and sauna, sweating the toxins and his bad moods away. Kept his reflexes good, sparring with other doormen and fighters at the gym.

Sometimes, like in any business, things just tick over with no real problems. Even racketeering is a business of sorts. Until early on a hot Friday night. Caramarin was

thinking of going out later to one of the clubs, having a few beers, checking out the night life, maybe a woman. His cell rang.

“Do me a favour.” It was Maiorescu. Telling not asking. “One of my shipments has come in. Slip over to Zavods'ka haven and pick it up for us.” Maiorescu gave him the details. That was the evening finished. Drove through the evening traffic to the oil terminals. Prosto Radio 102.5 FM banging out the top forty hits, drowning out the noises of the city.

He bribed the guard at the gate a few hryvnias and swung in, pulling up behind a stack of containers near the front. One of the containers was open. Figured that was the one. Picking his way between the oily puddles he called out to the Turk.

“Munis Balioglu, how are you?” he greeted his old friend. The Turkish sailor wore a black beanie hat and the world's oldest pair of rigger boots. Caramarin pulled a thick envelope from his camo jacket.

“Problem, my friend.” tossing a cigarette into a puddle. The stub hissed and died.

Things had been going too easily this week. Should have known something was going to happen. Balioglu passed him a bound up tarpaulin. Felt like several rifles, AK-47s or AK-74s or their equivalents. Maybe a few pistols in there too. Caramarin raised his eyes. Gun running was another step up for Maiorescu. Either the man was raising his game or was getting desperate for a bit of extra fire-power.

“No problems here, comrade. What is it?”

“Come.” Balioglu said. The Turk took Caramarin to the rear of the container. His boots clattering over the metal floor. The last light of the day dimly illuminated the interior. He edged his way past the crates of Chinese made machine parts and tools. There was a foul smell of piss and shit at the back. Huddled at the back was a girl. The Turk roughly pulled her up, made as if to hit her. She cowered away.

“No need for that, comrade,” Caramarin said. He smiled at her and pulled the girl to the front where the light was better and the smell not so bad.

“You take her,” Balioglu said. “We don't want get involved with no illegal immigrants. Is too much hassle and money.”

The girl jabbered something in her own language. Caramarin looked questioningly at Balioglu.

“Kurdish?” said Balioglu.

“Well, what's she saying?”

“I dunno, do I? I'm a true Turk from Izmir. Don't speak no Kurdish.” He shrugged.

“You take her – she nothing to do with me.” Balioglu started to close the container doors.

“Well, what the fuck am I going to do with her?”

“That's up to you.” Balioglu leered at him.

The girl was only about fifteen or sixteen years old. She had an oval face, dark hair under a headscarf, deep brown eyes. Not too tall, only about one point six metres. Her skin was not much darker than Caramarin's but she was quite dirty. She was wearing a black padded jacket and dark trousers. She was crying harder now.

So, there was no help to be had from Balioglu. When in doubt, phone the boss.

Caramarin took her back to his Opel Combo. Maiorescu told Caramarin to bring her back to the warehouse. Which was fine but how was he going to get a crying girl out of the port and back through the crowded streets of Odessa?

He put the weapons in the back and gestured for the girl to get in and lie down. He was glad the Opel was a van and not a pick-up truck. Covered the girl and the guns over with another tarpaulin. He bribed the guard on the gates again and drove carefully back to Maiorescu's office. Obeyed every traffic light and speed limit. If he was stopped, he'd be looking at years on remand in some hell-hole prison. No way. Drove to the warehouse on Mala Arnouts'ka Street, just to the south of the city centre.

Maiorescu was big enough to keep away from drugs and guns himself. He wasn't going to be caught in the same room with them. His second, Dmytro 'Placid' Litovchenko, met Caramarin at the opened warehouse.

Caramarin stepped out and nodded to Litovchenko. He opened the back of the Opel Combo and threw back the tarpaulin. The girl cowered back. Caramarin could understand how she felt. In a foreign country where she couldn't make herself understood and now, in the dark in the back of a pick-up she had two large men standing over her. He smiled at her and held out his hand. She had nowhere to go so she wriggled out.

“What the fuck?” said Litovchenko, echoing Caramarin's thoughts.

“Stowaway in the container,” said Caramarin taking the guns out.

“Bonus,” said Placid. The huge steroid thug dragged the terrified girl into the warehouse. Caramarin followed and stashed the rifles in a hidden alcove in the wall. Placid shoved the girl into a secure cage and padlocked it.

“What you going to do with her?” asked Caramarin as Litovchenko passed him a thick wedge of hryvnias.

“Not my decision, pal. Up to the boss. Look, here's a bit extra. Have a good evening on me. I'll call Maiorescu but just do yourself a favour and forget her.” Placid smiled.

A look that did not reassure Caramarin. He walked back to his Opel Combo van. Had a really bad feeling as he watched in his mirror the doorman go back into the dark warehouse. This was not right but he couldn't think what else to do. Not like he was going to ring one of the Churches or a refugee centre, let alone the corrupt Militsia.

The bad feeling didn't go away as he drove back to his apartment in Moldavanka. The girl was unexpected. Not a bonus at all but a problem. He knew he shouldn't have left her with a man like Placid but what could he do?

Showered, changed into a white shirt and jeans. Took a couple of lines of coke to clear his head and help him think straight. Maybe Placid was right and he should have

a good night out. Called a cab and down to the Centurion casino. He knew he'd be welcome there as Maiorescu was washing even more of his money through it.

Also, his current girlfriend, Valeriya, still worked there on the roulette wheel. He'd been busy, hadn't seen her for a week or more so reckoned he owed her a visit. Threw in a few kopecks into the koi carp pool surrounding the Roman statue for luck.

He ignored the suckers glued to their slots and straight over to the roulette wheel. She saw him coming and smiled. Her wheel was busy – no surprise with a pretty woman as the croupier to take the men's minds off their losses.

There wasn't much space at the wheel so he called over a hostess for a Zibert Light as he waited for a space. Wasn't going anywhere else, no way.

She wore the casino's uniform of a maroon shirt and waistcoat which was stretched over her full breasts. Dark black hair – dyed and tied back. But she had the most amazing green eyes he'd ever seen, almond-shaped – a hint of the eastern steppes in her - high cheek bones and when she smiled, it lit up his heart and brightened his day. He'd missed that beautiful smile.

The Centurion Casino ran an honest wheel. He stuck to his usual outside bets – black or red, high or low, odds or evens. Figured that way he'd stand a decent chance of making money. Valeriya watched his stack of chips grow. Maybe she'd have a chance to spend some later. He wasn't greedy but he did more than all right tonight and his bad mood over the Kurdish girl started to drain away from him.

He'd had enough by one in the morning so cashed in his winnings, tooted another line in the gents, had a burger and a couple of Zibert Lights and hung about swapping jokes with the doormen until two when Valeriya's shift finished.

Didn't have long to wait before hailing a cab back to her new apartment and, as he helped pay her rent on this place, he knew he could stay over. The roads were much quieter now and she snuggled up to him in the back of the taxi.

Only downside of her place was they had to stay on the couch after her baby sitter left. No problem for him – he could get his head down anywhere but she had her kid in her bedroom which would take all the fun out of things.

He pulled her down to him, his hands fumbling with her clothes, hers pulling down his jeans and pants. He thrust rapidly, deeply into her, one hand clamped over her mouth to stifle her cries as he took her. Didn't last long. Yet it was visions of Natalya's toned porno trained body before him, not Valeriya's more womanly one. He collapsed, rolled over. Was asleep almost immediately.

Valeriya looked down on him as he lay there. A tender little smile on her face. Obvious he'd taken coke so found him some paracetamol tablets if he woke during the night and a blanket and left him there to his dreams. What can a girl do? The man was helping her afford a bigger, better apartment, much nicer than the old one, so she didn't have to live with Mum any more.

If he could only give up the coke he'd be ideal.

CHAPTER 21. SATURDAY AUGUST 15, 12:00.

Saturday was a great day. He got up late. Showered, read a paper. No coke – Valeriya was correct - she thought it wasn't right to take cocaine when there was a kid around. Well, only one little line. Just to give him a bit of a lift.

The skies blue and a gentle breeze off the Black Sea taking the stickiness off the hot day. Caramarin took Valeriya and little Vladimir over to Arkadia Beach. Caramarin had eventually prised out of her that she'd called her son Vladimir as she was a big fan of the Russian President Putin. She wanted the boy to be as tough and successful as him. This was before she'd met Caramarin.

Valeriya looked great in her white one piece swimsuit, drew lots of covert glances from all the men passing by. He was proud they were looking – as long as they

weren't too obvious about it. They played on the golden sandy beach, Caramarin building sand castles and paddling with Vladimir and they had a late lunch in a new Spanish restaurant by the beach front. Not one that Maiorescu was protecting; Caramarin did not want the chef gobbing in his food. Spent some kopecks in the amusement arcades. Eventually, carried an exhausted Vladimir home. Watched some TV with Valeriya and shared a couple of beers with her.

Sometimes, Caramarin could understand the attraction of being a working man with an ordinary job and being able to spend time with your family without having to look over your shoulder all the time. But he knew it wouldn't really do for him. He couldn't face the idea of working in an office all day, or in a hot kitchen or out on a building site. He'd never tried it but no, not for him.

Maybe the fresh air and relaxing day had worn him out more than he thought. His cell was ringing and he couldn't place the ring tone noise at first. He blearily dragged himself up from the couch, knocked the cell off the side table, and pawed the floor with his hand searching for it. It rang and rang. Valeriya stood in her bedroom doorway, clutching her robe to her throat. He found the cell, pressed the green button.

“Caramarin,” he announced.

“What the fuck took you so long?” Oh, shit, it was Litovchenko, the man they called Placid, and not in a calm mood. Caramarin started to explain but Placid cut him off.

“Get your shagged out arse over to Maiorescu's villa now. It's urgent so get your cock out of whichever whore you're screwing with and get over here.” In the background, Caramarin could hear Maiorescu saying something. He heard Placid put a hand over his mouthpiece, but he still heard him say, “Yeah, told the cunt it was urgent.”

Back to Caramarin, Placid said, “It's fuckin' urgent so bloody hurry up.” then Placid broke the connection.

Caramarin looked at his cell with distress. This was important. Whatever it was, an industrial sized quantity of manure had just hit the air-con. Placid was no charmer at the best of times but even he sounded more wound-up and angrier than usual. He glanced up at Valeriya.

“I'm sorry. Some thing's come up. I've got to go out for a bit.” She knew better than to ask questions, just watched as he pulled on his camo jacket, jeans and boots. She passed him his keys and pecked him on the cheek.

“Take care, love.” She went back to her room, not wanting him to see her eyes watering.

Caramarin hurried to his Opel Combo, fired it up and drove as quickly as he dared risk it up to Yuzhne. His mind turned over the possibilities. What could have gone wrong? Because they weren't inviting him over for the pleasure of his company. He was sure it wasn't him. Despite working for people like Maiorescu and Litovchenko, he'd always played it fairly straight.

Never skimmed off the money, always done as he was told, hadn't snitched to the Militia, kept his coke habit under control. Sort of. No, he couldn't think that he'd done anything wrong. So he was in a calmer frame of mind as he swung up the drive of Maiorescu's villa. The electric gates swung open as he drove up.

His headlights picked out Litovchenko standing by the door of the triple-wide garage. He was waving him over. Pulled up, killed the lights.

“What's up?”

“You'll see. Come in.” Litovchenko swung up the garage door and into the interior, lit by the hard, unforgiving light of several fluorescent tubes. Pulled the door down behind him, shutting in Caramarin to whatever awaited him. No escape. At first, all he saw was a couple of high-end cars. Maiorescu's favoured Mercedes, A BMW X5 4x4 SUV that Maiorescu had treated himself to recently. Couldn't see Natalya's new blue BMW M5 saloon she so loved.

Maiorescu himself got out of the back of the BMW X5 SUV. He looked rumpled and exhausted. As he came up, Caramarin could see the guy's red eyes and a sprinkle of Bolivian dust around his nostrils.

“What's up?” Caramarin said again.

“Good of you to come.”

“Like the cunt had much choice,” Placid put in.

Caramarin realised that Placid was dangerously close to the edge. Didn't retaliate. Let's find out what had caused this situation to come about.

Litovchenko took him to the far end of the garage. Maiorescu followed, sniffing and wiping his nose. Under an old tarpaulin was a hump. A human sized hump. Placid prodded it with his toe.

“There you are, cunt. You found her, now you deal with it.”

Not wanting to, but drawn down as if by an irresistible force, Caramarin knelt and drew back the tarpaulin. Under it was a body – the body of the Kurdish girl. She was naked and he could see she had been savagely beaten, maybe even tortured. Her oval face was blackened, her tongue out, her eyes bulging in her last horror. He could see hand marks on her throat and under her chin. Looking down he could see her small breasts had been badly bitten. Bite marks on her arms, too. Blood stained her torso but he could see where she had been whipped and gouged. Cruel lacerations lay under the red mask of blood. Blood covered her thighs and genitals. He thought he could see cigarette burns down there, too.

“Oh, sweet Jesus.” he murmured.

He knelt there, next to her poor mutilated body trying to compose himself. He'd seen as bad before but not for a long time. He'd been in Bosnia during the war and the Serbs; yes and his Bosnian friends too, had not shirked at atrocities. Yeah, he'd done some bad shit there himself. But this felt different, somehow.

Maybe he was older now; maybe because he was with Valeriya but he felt like he'd betrayed the girl. He'd handed the poor girl over to Litovchenko and Maiorescu knowing what both men were like. And then she'd just slipped from his mind. Living the life of the underworld. He'd just forgotten about her. Simple as that.

But he hadn't thought that they were capable of this, though. If anything, he supposed he thought that they might have moved her onto one of Maiorescu's mates who controlled street begging and the gangs of shop lifters or pick pockets who roamed the streets. But he'd not given her a second thought. Glad that Litovchenko had taken her off his hands.

But he had no idea that this was going to happen. None at all. Carefully, he covered her from their eyes. He stood, his knees popping and pulled himself together. Took deep breaths. Trying to round up his thoughts.

He faced the two men. He couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't result in a fight. One he would probably lose.

Maiorescu wiped his nose on his sleeve. Lit up another smoke and blew smoke to the ceiling. "Got a bit out of hand. She wouldn't do as she was told. Tried to get away."

Litovchenko looked at Caramarin, daring him to challenge this.

"Okay, let's sort it." said Maiorescu, his leadership taking over.

"Just one thing," said Caramarin. "Who else knows?"

"No-one. No-one knows she's here. The only people who're gonna miss her are her goat-shagging family in Kurdyland."

"Well, what I mean is, where's Natalya. Where's your house keeper?"

"Visiting her mother and I gave Olga, the house keeper, the evening off. She won't be back until early afternoon tomorrow, after church."

"Look, let's just fuckin' get on with it," said Litovchenko. "Make with the blow to give us a boost and then we'll sort it."

They all had a few lines. This time Caramarin thought he didn't want it but felt he had no choice. And it might give him the energy to get through this nightmare. Yet when the crystal, velvet sparkle lit up his nose and into his brain, he felt more powerful.

More in control. Better. He sniffed deeply, rubbed his nose and grabbed the chemical energy to do what he needed to.

“My boat's not far from here,” said Maiorescu. “As I said to Litovchenko before you come, we'll take it out to sea and I'll see you all right, capisce?”

Not wanting either of the others to touch the body, he picked up the tarpaulin and carried the girl out to his Opel Combo and gently laid the body inside. The others got in the Mercedes and he followed the Merc down to a small jetty. Moored to it was the motor yacht's dinghy.

He laid the body in the bottom and Maiorescu steered to his motor yacht further out. In the silence, the dinghy's two-stroke diesel sounded loud. He thought it must have woken up everyone for kilometres all around Yuzhne. But apart from a barking dog, nothing stirred.

Maiorescu's motor yacht was in deeper water a few hundred metres out. The gang boss tied up the dinghy to the motor yacht's buoy. It was a struggle to get the body's dead weight up onto the deck but Caramarin managed. He didn't want either of the other two to touch her. But he felt the Bolivian best gave him the extra energy he needed. It was little enough he could do for her now.

Maiorescu went up onto the flying bridge, the well-tuned powerful engines turned over then the motor yacht surged forward. He set a course south-south-east for much deeper water.

“Turn the lights on,” called up Caramarin. “Let's look like we're going night fishing or something, okay?” The steering lights came on. Also, his boss connected his MP3 player and cheesy Eighties pop blared over the water. Totally wrong.

One of the poor girl's legs had slipped from out of the tarpaulin. He covered it up. Went down to the galley but saw Litovchenko there helping himself to the vodka. At the moment, there were two men's company he couldn't take. Placid was most definitely one of them. Helped himself to some water from the fridge and went back up to the sun deck.

As they passed Odessa in the star light the glare from the port and city gradually fell behind. He saw the line of the now dark Stairs leading up to the city. Took longer than he expected for the brilliant tower of the Hotel Odessa on the marine terminal to fade away.

Then all that was left was the creamy white wake slicing through the dark waters of the Black Sea in a dead straight line. Maiorescu took the yacht up to about twenty kilometres an hour. The powerful engines sped the boat through the night. Caramarin found a deck chair and closed his eyes.

Suddenly, the motor yacht was flooded with harsh, white light drowning out the stars and the few lights from the shore. A powerful searchlight nailed them in its glare. Caramarin's hand went to shade his eyes. A voice, distorted by the loudspeaker commanded the boat to pull over. Behind him, he heard Litovchenko run up the stairs from the galley.

Glancing at him, Caramarin was horrified that Litovchenko was carrying an AK-74 assault rifle; one with a folding stock similar to what he had been trained on back when he was a Para in Romania.

“Oh sweet Jesus,” Caramarin murmured to himself. The situation was rapidly becoming a disaster. Placid plus stress, plus coke, plus vodka, plus Kalash was not good.

The extreme opposite of good. Very bad in fact.

CHAPTER 22. SUNDAY AUGUST 16, 00:45.

“Put that down,” Caramarin said, his hand on Litovchenko's arm.

Maiorescu had slowed his yacht, and it started to roll slightly in the swell as the speed tailed off. As the other boat got closer, Caramarin saw it was one of the Militsia's Customs vessels. Its pale grey hull loomed over the motor yacht. From the low

perspective of the motor yacht it seemed the size of a cruiser. The searchlight moved away slightly, cutting the glare.

“Where are you going?” the officer's voice boomed out over the loudspeaker, distorted.

“Deep sea fishing, Captain.” called out Maiorescu from up on the flying bridge.

“What was that?”

“Deep sea fishing,” he shouted.

“Oh yeah?”

“That’s right, Captain. We're looking for octopuses. It's easier to catch them at night.” Up above he saw Maiorescu wave a wicker basket and net in the air.

Caramarin knew fuck all about the habits of the octopus but figured that a man in charge of a naval vessel probably knew far more about deep sea fishing and marine animals than he would ever know. Maiorescu's story sounded pathetically thin. Even with the fishing tackle. Far as he knew, Maiorescu only used his yacht for fun and games involving vodka.

“Permission to come on board?”

His heart raced. Despite the cool air out to sea, the sweat stood out from him. Oh, now they were fucked. No way out of this one. Not with a mutilated dead body on board. They were too far from land for him to dive overboard and swim ashore. The Customs boat would round him up in minutes even if they didn't just shoot him dead in the water.

He saw Litovchenko look at the assault rifle on the deck nearby. If Placid started blazing away there would be no mercy. The Customs boat would blow them out of the water with its cannon.

Once again, it fell to Maiorescu to size up the situation.

“We're in a little bit of a hurry, Captain. My friends want to catch octopus before dawn. Maybe you could check it out later? Nicolae, send some drinks over? Only the very best for our gallant Ukrainian sailors.”

Caramarin couldn't take it in. Took a push from Placid to get him moving. He ducked his head and went down into the galley. In the fridge were several bottles of imported Finnish vodka. Finlandia. Excellent. Top gear – made with pure glacier water. If anyone knew how to make vodka, it was the thirsty Finns. He carried them up and carefully tossed the bottles over to one of the sailors on the Customs vessel.

“I've got your registration and I'll be checking up,” the officer's voice boomed over. “Take care out there, boys.”

The vessel turned, tooted its horn and accelerated away back towards Odessa.

“What the fuck?” said Caramarin. The adrenaline rush went. His legs trembled and he felt like he was going to throw up. Only a few minutes ago, he thought he was looking at many years rotting in prison if he was lucky and being riddled with gunfire if he wasn't.

Maiorescu laughed like a loon. The relief had got to him as well.

“They think we're smugglers or drug runners,” he called down. “But thought there's no point stopping us on the outward leg 'cos we'd have nothin' on board. But if we'd been coming back, they'd have been all over us like crabs.” He laughed again. “Bet you shat your pants there, Nicolae.”

“I can smell 'em from here,” Placid said.

“Can't say as I blame him. It was a close call. If we'd had someone willing to do the job our taxes are paying for, we'd all be on our way to the clink now.” Maiorescu started up the engine again and the motor yacht picked up speed heading further out into the expanse of the Black Sea.

About thirty kilometres out, Maiorescu cut the engines. Turned off the music. Sudden silence fell upon the yacht. It slowed then rolled gently in the swell. Placid came up

out of the hold with a length of heavy chain and the dinghy's anchor. The coke had well worn off and Caramarin felt jagged and tired and worn out. But he was not letting a monster like Placid touch her body again. No way.

"I'll do it," he said.

"Suits me." Placid sat back on the deck cushions, drank deep from his vodka bottle and watched. Caramarin tied the heavy chain around the dead girl's ankles and padlocked the anchor to the chain. He lifted her body as carefully as possible and took it over to the side of the low sun deck. Placid belched, scratched his balls then got up and picked up the heavy metalwork.

He nodded to the sea and Caramarin dropped the body over the side, for some reason trying to make as little of a splash as possible. Just seemed important, somehow. But couldn't have said why. Weighted down as her body was, the dark waters of the Black Sea closed over her instantly. Their crimes may be hidden from man, but would they ever have to account for this night's work sometime?

"Fish food," said Placid. He belched again.

"You know," called down Maiorescu, "They've found Greek and Roman galleys down on the bottom of the Black Sea. Maybe someone will find this little slag in two thousand years time."

A wave of fury swept through Caramarin. If he'd been holding the Kalash, he could have cheerfully gunned them both down. As quickly as it came, the anger went and he felt totally drained and unhappy.

Maiorescu turned the boat round and headed back to Yuzhne. This time Romanian pop over the speakers. Caramarin slumped into one of the deck chairs.

"Pass me that vodka," he said. Wanting to drink himself into oblivion now.

"Don't just sit there, you lazy cunt." Placid again. "Get the deck scrubbed clean. Don't want no fuckin' DNA on it, do we?" Not that he needed to, but Placid was

holding the cut down Kalash. Not aiming it at Caramarin, but not exactly pointing it away, either.

“Thanks. I'd appreciate that,” called Maiorescu.

Wearily, Caramarin got a bucket, detergent and a scrubbing brush from the galley. He knelt where the girl's body had laid and scrubbed the deck thoroughly. He thought about the poor girl and her end. And how his life had come to kneeling on a deck on a gangster's motor yacht.

As he did so, he knew he didn't want to carry on working with these two pervert bastards any more. Trouble was he couldn't see his way clear to leaving. Wasn't like it was the sort of job where you could hand in your notice and expect a farewell party and present.

“Okay, lads.” Maiorescu had come down from the flying bridge when Caramarin finished the deck. He was holding out a garbage bag and wearing only his trunks. “Put your clothes in here. There'll be DNA and stuff on 'em. Don't want nothing connectin' us to that little slag.”

Caramarin swore but stripped down. Placid's huge muscular torso was covered in prison tattoos – a huge Christ on the cross writhing in agony, blood red tears and wounds. How anyone with a Christ on him could do what Placid had done beat Caramarin. Maybe the clue was in the tattoos on his hands. The bag was weighted and slung overboard.

Maiorescu had timed their arrival for exactly seven in the morning. Thought the Customs Inspectors would be doing their shift change about then. As it was, they moored at his villa at Yuzhne with no problems. Back up at the villa, Maiorescu lent them some fresh clothes. Didn't fit too well but they'd do.

“I appreciate your help tonight. I know who I can rely on when the chips are down. Here, take this.” He handed Caramarin a thick wedge of notes and a small bag of blow. “You're the best, Nicolae. The very best.”

Except that Caramarin felt like hurling the money and coke back. But he couldn't do that and expect to live long after. Several times on the drive back to Odessa that morning he felt like throwing it out the window. It felt dirty and tainted the very air of the Opel Combo. But that would have been stupid. He'd done the work and here was the wages of sin.

He pulled up at Valeriya's apartment. No key. He knocked, waited and knocked again. She peered out, clutching her robe about her. She hugged him tight, squeezing the breath out of his lungs. She kissed him.

"I wasn't sure I'd see you again," she cried.

Caramarin couldn't speak. Too many conflicting emotions. He felt so sorry for the dead girl, anger and even hatred to Maiorescu and Placid and an overwhelming sense of despair and futility.

Valeriya was no fool. She'd seen enough in her life as a dancer and croupier. She could tell he couldn't or didn't want to talk about last night's work. Knew something had happened as he was wearing someone else's kit and was as down as she'd ever seen him. So she let him have his way and didn't push him. Caramarin sprawled out on her couch. She got a blanket and draped it over him.

When Caramarin woke that Sunday afternoon, he felt strangely refreshed and more clearly minded than he expected. Like his subconscious mind had worked overtime and come to some sort of decision. The roll of money was still in his pocket. He didn't want it but he'd earned it. He divided it and gave Valeriya half. Her eyes widened in surprise at the amount.

"What'd you do, kill someone?" she joked. She saw the look on his face. "No, don't answer that. I'm sorry. Forget it." She hurried into her kitchenette to brew tea.

Caramarin followed. He had a few hidden stashes where he hid money and papers in case his world fell in and he needed to escape. Had a safety deposit box at the First Investment Bank downtown, one hidden under the floor at his place in Moldavanka, another buried out in the woods next to a lightning blasted tree and one with Valeriya.

Couldn't trust many people but felt she wouldn't let him down. He emptied out a coffee tin, added most of his half to the roll inside, glanced at the phoney blue Moldovan passport and refilled it and resealed the tin. The tea had brewed by now and he sipped it gratefully.

"Can't go on like this, love" was all he said.

CHAPTER 23. TUESDAY AUGUST 25, 09:30.

"Wait here," Maiorescu ordered.

Caramarin had driven them over to an abandoned sanatorium in the run down suburbs to the south of Odessa. Gone were the beautiful pastel coloured classical buildings of the city centre. This was the part that the tourists never came to. Grim post-War Soviet era buildings crumbled and peeled in the sun. Many of the buildings were empty. The people looked as down trodden and defeated as the buildings around them.

Caramarin knew Maiorescu had only recently bought this sanatorium. He was converting it into a massage parlour on the first floor and a recording studio on the second floor with an office for an internet dating agency he was thinking of setting up.

"We may be some time, cunt." Placid grinned at him.

Caramarin watched as they opened the steel shutter and let themselves in. He caught a glimpse of builders' tools as the shutter opened. He settled down in the Merc's leather seat and switched on Prosto radio 102.5 FM.

Poking out from under the passenger seat, he saw Maiorescu's laptop bag. This never left Maiorescu's side these days.

Caramarin prided himself on being good for his age. Yes, he was in his very late thirties but he looked younger. He worked out, kept in shape. Had a great tan. Okay, there were a few grey streaks in his dark hair and more lines about his eyes than he

liked. When he looked in the mirror, his eyes looked tired and burned out. But he was trim and didn't have much trouble with the ladies when he put his mind to it.

But computers made him feel like an ancient Jurassic fossil. He'd never had much to do with computers. Kept away from that side of things at Maiorescu's business. Knew they were the future and he was being left behind but there was a part of him that hoped he could get away with ignoring them.

However, he'd seen Maiorescu on the laptop enough times. Frowning with concentration he switched the damn machine on. A host of icons materialised on the screen. Some he knew were business documents and spreadsheets. One was for the internet. He knew enough that some were for watching DVDs or videos. There was one folder marked 'Dog food'.

'Dog food?' Caramarin thought. Apart from a few rottweilers as guard dogs back at his villa, Maiorescu had nothing to do with dogs. The man wasn't even into dog fights. Never heard that Maiorescu even had any business interests in dog food factories, even as a money laundering front.

He clicked on the icon. It flashed up a password request. Fuckshitfuckshitfuckshit. He glanced at his watch. On past times when Maiorescu and Placid had been at the sanatorium, they'd been at least an hour or more. Plenty of time. He reckoned this chance wouldn't come again. Fuck it, let's do it.

Fired up the Merc and headed south west. Just because he was out of his depth didn't mean he couldn't find some techy whiz kid geek who knew what to do.

Pulled up at an internet cafe. Didn't seem to do much in the way of food or drink but it did do computers. Pushing open the door, he saw several Afghan men hunched over their screens and one or two Africans and Indians. Guessed they were here on their way to trying to break into the E. U. They looked like they were in touch with their families back home.

One lad who couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty was playing some on line war game. He seemed to be playing a Taliban Mujahedeen warrior killing epic

amounts of U.S. Marines in a dusty village. The graphics amazed Caramarin. If war was really like that, there'd soon be no marines left.

He waited a minute for the slaughter to stop. The young man sensed Caramarin watching and turned with a look of annoyance.

“Speak Ukrainian? Want earn a little money?” he rubbed his fingers together.

“Yes to both, actually.” His voice was soft and cultured. Not what Caramarin expected. He pulled over a spare chair and sat next to the lad. Caramarin showed him the laptop.

“Can you copy these files? One of them has a password. That's the one I probably need.”

“Did you forget your password, then?”

“Err, yes. Sort of.”

The lad looked at Caramarin with shrewd eyes.

“I'm afraid it won't be cheap. Go and get a DVD and I'll make a start.”

“Why do I want a DVD? I don't want to watch a movie.”

“I need to download the copied files onto it, don't I?”

Feeling like a fool, Caramarin bought a blank disc from the Chechen behind the counter.

Grinning, the young Afghan was already working on the laptop. He was totally engrossed in his work, his fingers rapidly moving over the keyboard as he delved into the guts of the laptop. He was bringing up screens that Caramarin had never seen before.

As the geek worked Caramarin asked how he spoke such good Ukrainian.

“I should do. I've lived here all my life. My Dad was a translator for the Soviets back in the Eighties. When they left, he came with them. Some of his mates were from round here so he came to stay. He didn't fancy living somewhere cold. Now he's a professor of languages at the university.”

“Couldn't have picked a better spot then.” Caramarin was surprised. He'd taken the lad for a homesick refugee but, like Caramarin, he had chosen to live here.

“Can you do it, then?” A glance at his watch. “How long will you be?”

“Easy-peasy, lemon squeezy.”

“What about the password?”

“Anyone could get round that. Especially as you had it written down in another file?”

“Oh, did I?”

Caramarin felt old and foolish. Not a good feeling. He was looking at the future and he wasn't part of it.

A sudden gasp. Caramarin saw a young girl on the screen, a naked Placid standing over her with a chain. She looked like she was maybe sixteen or seventeen. She was tied down onto a pallet. Another man in a gimp mask was sporting a boner like a baseball bat.

“Bloody hell. It's not your lappy, is it?”

“No,” Caramarin confessed. “It's the man I work for. But I guess you knew that before, didn't you?”

“Yes. If you're going to blackmail this bastard, cut me in.”

“No. Not blackmail. I'm going to bring those bastards down.”

He paid the young man, took the DVD and shook hands.

“Good luck and take care with what you're doing. If I can help you any, let me know. I'm here most days.”

Caramarin jumped in the Mercedes, slid the laptop back under the seat and tried to arrange it into the exact same spot as before. He slipped the DVD into his breast pocket. His cell rang. Maiorescu. Headed back to the sanatorium as quick as possible, only to find Maiorescu and Litovchenko standing on the pavement.

“Where've you been?”

“Yeah, cunt. Told you to wait, didn't I?”

“Sorry. The Militsia were nosing about. Didn't want to draw attention to myself, did I?”

Maiorescu glanced at the laptop resting in the foot well.

“No, you did right. C'mon, let's go.”

“Cunt.”

That evening, Caramarin told Valeriya he had a headache and wouldn't go down to the casino later on. He scored points by saying he would stay over at her place and look after Vladimir.

She kissed him. “Get better soon, love. I'll be back the usual time.”

After she left, he read a story to little Vlad. As soon as the boy was asleep, Caramarin booted up Valeriya's old laptop and loaded the DVD.

It was worse than he thought. He'd always reckoned he was a hard man. Seen bad things in Romania and worse in Bosnia. Done bad things, too. But this cruelty for entertainment pure sickened him. He'd seen enough after a few minutes but carried on.

There were many video files on the disc. Mostly, it was Maiorescu and Placid with teenage girls and young women, none older than their early twenties. There was often

a third man always wearing a gimp mask; another bouncer with a massive prison tattoo he knew worked on the doors of the Arkadia clubs; a short tattooed thug; occasionally a huge African.

But the poor girls. Tied up, chained, whipped, flogged, and beaten with what looked like a car aerial. Violated with anything they could ram in, raped, gang raped, sodomized. Burned with cigarettes, pinched with pliers. Their screams echoing in his head. He poured a big slug of vodka and knocked it back. He'd seen enough. His mind felt violated and dirty and unclean. He took out the disc and hid it in a book. Then he sat at the kitchen table, drank vodka and thought.

Midnight came and went. Caramarin was more than half in the bag when Valeriya came home from her shift. She saw that something was wrong as soon as she saw the vodka as Caramarin wasn't one for drinking alone. She checked on Vlad then pulled out a chair and sat down next to him. She rested her head on his shoulder.

He turned bleak, bloodshot eyes on her.

"You know when you were a dancer, before you met me, did you ever have to do stuff. I mean bad stuff you didn't want to do."

"You know I don't talk about that time, love. I needed money to get by. Times were hard back then, remember."

He looked at her. Eyes still searching for answers. From her or elsewhere.

"I wasn't a virgin. I've been around the block a few times."

"But I mean real bad. Y'know; video nasties, bondage, sadism, hard core stuff."

"No. I never did that. I knew a few girls who got into that scene but they didn't last too long." She frowned. "What's all this about, Nico?"

"I can't say. Oh, what's it come to? I can't carry on like this much longer."

Valeriya knew Caramarin better than he thought.

“Is it that man Maiorescu? He getting into porno now as well?”

Caramarin jerked in alarm. He grabbed her arm.

“Don't say nothing. Not to anyone. Not to the girls at work. You don't know what these guys are capable of. They'd wipe you out without a second thought.”

Now she knew.

“I've been around. I know enough to keep my mouth shut.” She stood and tugged on Caramarin's arm. “You've had enough, love. Come to bed, please.”

He followed her to the bedroom and climbed in after her. After what he'd seen and the amount he'd shipped, he wasn't in the mood. He held her tight, soaking in her warmth and softness. She was good for him, didn't want to lose her, needed her life and love. Eventually, he turned over and fell into dark sleep.

CHAPTER 24. MONDAY AUGUST 31, 00:00.

Over the next few weeks, Caramarin made several more trips to the lock up at Constanta docks and once, a longer journey to the beautiful city of Lviv near the Polish border. He saw why it was called the 'Florence of the East'. Green church domes and Italianate red tile roofs, but surrounded by grim Soviet era apartment blocks. Wished he could have spent more time there.

All the people he drove were young, attractive women. If you looked beneath the exhaustion and messiness from long distance travel, some were beautiful. All were drained, all were either frightened or at least apprehensive. All clutched their bags close to their bodies.

Some were Ukrainian, some Russian, some from the Central Asian countries and some from further east. One or two spoke no language that any member of the gang

understood. From his time in the Caucasus, Oilfield thought one was speaking Kalmyk but he wasn't sure.

He never heard again from the Turkic girl, nor from the couple of other girls he passed his cell number onto. Wasn't flattering himself, figured they knew he wasn't after their bodies. But would have liked to hear they were safe. And so the worm of disquiet bored deeper into his mind. But the money was good and the booze and coke buried it deep.

Towards the end of the month, his brain was scrambled with the amount of chemicals floating about in his body. Getting hard to know what day it was. Didn't need to know, only that it was another trip down to Constanta.

This time, only three women waited at Maiorescu's new salon for collection. One, a slim, fair girl maybe only eighteen or nineteen, was clutching her stomach, her face a mask of pain. Instead of the usual minibus Maiorescu had hired a VW Passat. This time, only Oilfield was going with Caramarin.

Tense and edgy, coming down from his coke jag, his red eyes gritty and staring, Caramarin drove out of the city. The street lights flickered past monotonously. Oilfield settled down in the front passenger seat and quickly nodded off.

He turned round to the back seat.

“Can't you shut that girl up?” he snapped.

“She's in pain,” one of the others said.

“Well, she's doing my head in. Keep her quiet, or else.”

They cuddled the girl and held her tight and made soothing noises.

“And you two can shut up as well.”

The car lapsed into sullen silence, broken only by the occasional moan from the back seat. He could feel the waves of animosity washing over him. Like he cared.

He stopped at the usual garage in Romania to give them a comfort break. By now, he'd calmed down a bit although still tired. He parked and opened the rear door for the girls.

"I'm sorry I shouted," he apologised. "Stress, but I'm sorry." He pointed to the lavatories then unscrewed the gas cap and unhooked the nozzle from the pump. He watched as the three girls walked across the forecourt, the two still supporting the teenager.

"Bad time of the month, that," he said to himself.

Paid for the gasoline, bought a few celeb magazines for the girls by way of apology. Had a can of soda. Where the hell were they? Looked at his watch. Gave them a few more minutes, then strolled over to the Ladies. He rapped on the door and opened it a few centimetres.

"Sorry to trouble you but we need to go soon. Everything okay in there?"

"No we're not. She's still bleeding."

Figured that out, he thought. "Look, we've got to go soon."

"Not yet, we can't."

"Do you need me to get anything for her? Y'know."

"No..."

"Well, hurry up then."

For fuck's sake. Women. He waited a few more minutes, looking at his watch every few seconds. Then knocked on the door again.

"I'm coming in, okay."

He ignored their protests and pushed open the door. The girl was crouching on her heels, leaning against the cubicle wall. One of the others was standing in front of her, holding her, trying to cover her from his sight, the other tried to push him out the door.

“What's going on?” Confused.

“You bastard, you fucking bastard, the lot of you,” the woman pushing him shouted.

He looked at the woman, she was strong for her size. Her face was twisted with rage and fear. Caramarin shoved her off him. She reeled back into the toilets, slipped on the wet floor but stayed on her feet. The other two turned to face him but cowered away in terror.

Caramarin spread his arms wide, smiled, and tried to appear as non threatening as possible.

“Look, what's going on?” he repeated. “Tell me what's the problem, please.”

“You bastards raped her. That's what happened.”

He hadn't expected that.

“What! Who, when?”

“Don't tell me you don't know what's been done to her! You're part of the gang. How many have you raped, you bastard?”

“No-one. Who did this to her?”

“That old man with black hair and the big bald one with the goatee and tattoos.”

Maiorescu and that psycho nutter Litovchenko. So that was what they were doing now.

“I had no idea. I'm only the driver.” Sort of true. “What does she want to do?”

“She's still bleeding, you bastard, they really ripped her up inside. She needs a doctor.”

Caramarin felt a draft behind him as the door opened.

“We'll get her seen to, when we get there, okay.” Another voice. Oilfield stood there with his hand in his pocket. “We haven't got far to go and she'll be looked after.”

“No, you bastard,” said the woman. “She needs to go to the police, she needs a doctor.”

“Yeah, when we get there,” said Oilfield.

“We're not going with you.” The other two girls looked up at their leader.

“No choice, bitch,” Oilfield's fist slammed into her face knocking the woman down. She cried out. Blood now smeared her face from her cut lip.

As she struggled to recover and sit up, Caramarin turned to Oilfield. Saw that he was holding a small pistol, maybe a point three eight and was covering the women. The pistol wasn't exactly pointing at Caramarin either, but its barrel was sort of in the same general direction.

Caramarin offered his hand to the floored woman. She pushed it away and stood up. Wiped away the blood with her hand and spat between his boots.

“Hurry up, girls. Back to the car.”

Oilfield held open the door and motioned them out with his gun. Caramarin stepped to the crouching teen who was moaning to herself but she shrugged off his hand like it was diseased and managed to stand without help. The other girls helped her over to the car.

“Nice ass,” said Oilfield following behind. “Bet that was a nice tight slot. Should've cut myself a slice of that, too.”

Caramarin felt like slugging him, but as the man had a pistol and a hair trigger temper he just kept silent. The girls got in the back again. Caramarin drove through the rest of the night, aware of Oilfield's pistol only just hidden under a map on his lap. Shortly after they left the garage, Oilfield sent several texts, but never said who they were to.

In the dark hour before dawn, when tiredness is at its peak, they drew up at the Constanta lock up. Caramarin beeped the horn. This time two women came out of the lock up, the smartly dressed older woman he'd seen every time before and a younger one with a round, friendly face. No sign of the young man this time.

“Don't say, anything, okay,” Oilfield told Caramarin. As the man was still holding the pistol, Caramarin just nodded.

He opened the rear door, but looking at the disgust on the girls' faces he just stepped away. The teenage victim stood bravely, holding her head up. In the headlights, she still looked in pain but some of the horror had now left her face. Caramarin opened the trunk and passed them their bags.

“Good luck,” he said. The girls ignored him and followed the older woman into the lock up.

“Job done. Let's go,” said Oilfield. Caramarin fired up the Passat, swung round, the headlights arcing through the night and headed back up the dock road.

“Wish I'd had a piece of that. Nice and tight,” said Oilfield. “Should've asked the boss...”

“Shut up.”

“Touchy, aren't you?”

Caramarin wasn't about to start a row with Oilfield, especially not when the man had a pistol on him. And, if his boss was into raping girls; what could, or would, he do about it? Also, he was exhausted from the long drive. Instead he concentrated on the road. But this wasn't what he'd signed on for.

Wished he had some coke on him to help him think.

CHAPTER 25. TUESDAY, 1 SEPTEMBER 21:00.

“Heard you weren't too happy last night?” Maiorescu asked. His feet were up on his desk, his tie undone and he was tapping away on his laptop. An ashtray overflowed onto the desk. The room reeked of stale smoke and sweat.

“Could say that,” replied Caramarin.

“So, what's the problem? Want more money?”

“No...,”

“Maybe want a slice of some pussy for yourself?”

“No,” he shouted. “You and that bastard Litovchenko raped that young girl.”

Maiorescu looked up.

“No we didn't. She was gaggin' for it. And we paid her good money, too.”

“You mean an eighteen, nineteen year old girl wanted you two to shag her until she bled? C'mon!”

“Maybe Litovchenko got a little out of hand. But she wanted the money. Desperate for it,” he leered. “In all senses.”

He looked down and carried on typing.

“Bet she never mentioned the money? No, thought not. Anyway, what does it matter? She'll get over it.”

Caramarin stood to go.

“Look, you're a good man to have around, Nicolae. Better than most of the thuds workin' for me.” Maiorescu peeled off some paper and passed it over.

“But if you have a problem with working for me, I can always replace you. What do they say? Something like the graveyards are full of indispensable men? Capisce?”

Caramarin nodded. Left Maiorescu on the phone to some bank in Lichtenstein. Took the money and let himself out. Felt like he needed a long shower.

Caramarin couldn't get out of driving women over to Constanta. He was the only one, apart from Maiorescu himself, who spoke Romanian. Also, he held a genuine

Romanian passport. Maiorescu paid him more and the next run went smoothly. Barely held up at customs and he picked up a nice bonus. This time, none of the women were crying or seemed knocked about. Yes, they were quiet and subdued, but they'd already had a long journey and faced another.

After that, it went quiet until Maiorescu called him in for another trip. Let himself into the warehouse to find a much larger group of eight or nine women standing about the minibus. As always, all were young and attractive but one girl, a tall statuesque strawberry blonde with incredible blue eyes stood out. She was one of the most beautiful young women he'd ever seen. And this was in Odessa, a city famed for its beautiful women. Yeah, she looked tired but nothing could hide her beauty.

Maiorescu drew him aside with a big grin plastered over his face.

“See that one? Last year's Miss Ukraine.”

Caramarin remembered some scandal. Something to do with drugs and a government Minister's party in a museum? Didn't she have an abortion and was stripped of her title? Something like that.

“Drive carefully. Make sure she gets there in one piece.”

“Not me you have to worry about, boss.”

Caramarin loaded their bags. He smiled at ex-Miss Ukraine but she ignored him. Like he didn't exist. Just the driver as far as she was concerned.

Swung up behind the wheel. Maiorescu had paired him with VCR this time. No sense provoking him further by putting him with Placid or Oilfield.

The long night drive to Constanta went smoothly. Even the customs inspection at Izmail was briefer than usual. Caramarin suspected more money had changed hands. Arrived at the lock up on time and the well dressed woman and younger man took charge of the half asleep women and showed them inside.

“Easy money,” said VCR. “A drive in the country and a nice bonus. Do that again.”

“Yeah,” grunted Caramarin. If you closed your mind to what was almost certainly going on.

Half way back to the border, Caramarin took a call on his cell. Maiorescu. And not in a good mood.

“Get 'em back. The wire transfer's not come through.”

“How am I gonna do that, boss? Didn't take a shooter through the border, did I?”

“Well, do your best. Those bitches cost me a shit load of money – I'll sort you out a bonus, okay.”

Caramarin sighed and swung the bus around. He shook VCR awake and explained.

It was past dawn by the time they returned to the lock up. In the cold light of early morning, the place looked even grimmer and more run down than it did by night. A few down and outs sprawled in door ways and stray dogs nosed through piles of garbage.

Caramarin swung down and knocked on the rusting metal door. No response. He hammered on the door, rattling it in its frame. Eventually, the young man opened it a fraction. That was all the opening he needed. Caramarin booted the door wide, hurling the young man back into the dark interior.

“Where's the girls?” shouted Caramarin.

“Gone. Half way to Austria by now. Why?”

“My boss says he hasn't been paid.”

The young man dusted down his jeans. He spread his arms wide.

“Sorry, that's nothing to do with me, mate. I just send them onto the West.”

“Well, get them back then.”

“Sorry, I can't. They're all going separately. I don't have no numbers for them.”

Caramarin looked into the young man's eyes. Felt sure he was lying. He raised his fist.

“Look, you piece of shit. My boss hasn't been paid. Money, now.”

“I haven't got any. I think it's all done electronically anyway.”

Caramarin shoved past the lad and looked through the back rooms of the lock up. A stinking squat toilet, a grubby kitchen with a kettle and some packets of dried food and a loaf, a small office with two scarred metal desks pushed together and a girly calendar on the wall.

Caramarin looked through the desk drawers. Most were empty, one contained bits of junk like cable ties and plastic bags. And that was it. Unless they had a hidden safe or something. The place was obviously just a pit stop on the girls' route.

He turned back to the young man who had followed him into the office.

“Give me your phone,” he ordered. The young man handed his cell over. Caramarin scrolled through its index. All the data had been wiped. The young man shrugged.

“Sorry, had to do it.”

Caramarin raised his fist. Then lowered it. Just felt too exhausted without snow racing through his bloodstream.

“Yeah, I suppose you did.”

What would be gained by beating him up? Nothing as far as he could see. Maioreescu could take the hit, not the young man who was also a pawn in the game.

“Piece of advice. Get into another line of business. There's people out there who'd kill you without thinking about it.

“You're lucky I'm not one of them.”

He pushed past the handsome young man and out into the bright sunshine. VCR was leaning against the minibus, lobbing cigarettes at the nearby vagrants to make them dance.

“Boss won't be happy,” said VCR after Caramarin had explained.

“Not looking forward to calling him.”

No, Maiorescu wasn't happy but called them back to Odessa. VCR mostly drove whilst Caramarin napped on the back seat.

CHAPTER 26. WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 2, 23:00.

That evening, Maiorescu, Caramarin, Litovchenko, Oilfield and VCR sat around a table on Prymorsky Boulevard. The evening sun filtering through the leaves fell on the crisp white tablecloth and sparkling glasses.

Looking around, Caramarin felt the contrast between the beautiful people walking arm in arm between the sun warmed classical buildings and what Maiorescu was saying. But at the end of the road a parked Ferrari proved Maiorescu wasn't the only big shot in this city.

“You've heard what happened? That fuckin' Abkhazian shafted us. The wire transfer never come through and now he's got his phone off. Want us to go pay him a visit later.”

“A visit, boss?”

“Y'know what I mean. I've fixed up alibis if we need 'em.”

“With the whores in the massage parlour?”

“Sort of. I've paid for a couple of Militsia officers to be there, so there'll be no comeback.”

The food arrived and the men fell to. Caramarin enjoyed the meal, felt like he hadn't had a proper meal for ages but wasn't looking forward to later. Had a few Zibert Lights but took it easy on the vodka.

Night fell but the number of people promenading along the boulevard and up and down the Potemkin Stairs had not gone down. Can't beat Odessa for night life. Maiorescu pushed his chair back.

“Let's go.”

The others stood and made their way to their cars. Caramarin swung into Maiorescu's Merc and turned the key. The powerful engine growled into life.

“You sure about this, boss? Couldn't it have just been a mistake?”

“What do you think?” Maiorescu replied.

No, his boss was probably right. It made sense. Let a few little deals go through and then shaft him on the big one. And Maiorescu hadn't reached his level by letting things go. Especially when some Abkhazian toe rag thought he could rip him off.

They drove south, the city gradually becoming scruffier and more run down. No tourists came this way. They pulled up outside Timur Ozgan's warehouse. Placid popped the boot of his Merc and they drew out guns. Placid took a folding stock AK-47 assault rifle. Caramarin took his favourite CZ-75 pistol.

Maiorescu tried his cell again, but after a few rings it went to voice mail. He shook his head and pointed to the warehouse door. Caramarin hammered on the door. Seemed to be spending a lot of time trying to beat in warehouse doors lately. Paused; nothing. Hammered on it fit to burst.

He looked at Maiorescu.

“No reply, boss.”

“Think we've worked that out, you stupid cunt.”

“Easy, Dmytro,” said Maiorescu. “Okay, shoot the lock off.”

Caramarin gestured to the others to step back in case of ricochet then let Placid empty half a magazine from the Kalash into the lock. In the quiet street, the noise was

deafeningly loud. No way could anyone nearby think that was a backfiring car. Cordite smoke swirled until the breeze blew it away. Placid booted the metal door open. It swung open then crashed back into place again.

Inside, the warehouse was empty. Just one great empty space. The fluorescents showed a few oil stains on the painted concrete floor and recent scratch marks and tyre tracks. Startled by the noise and sudden lights a few pigeons flew about the roof space. At the back was the usual offices and toilet.

“No one here but for what it's worth, search those rooms,” said Maiorescu, lighting up.

Caramarin and VCR walked to the back. A metallic smell grew stronger. To his credit, VCR turned his head away before he was violently sick. The stench of blood and faeces was like hitting a wall with your face. Caramarin felt his meal rising up his gullet, burning his throat before he was able to force it down.

In the office, in several parts, was the mutilated body of a woman. Her head had been placed on the desk, some internal organs in a bloody heap in front of it. Her arms and legs were piled in a corner. Her torso had been split down the middle, possibly with a chain saw and the ribs pulled apart like a grotesque parody of a rack of ribs at a barbecue. White bone showed through the red gore. Blood covered the walls in horrible fans and sprays and puddled on the wall. Looking down, the blood was only starting to coagulate. This atrocity must be recent.

Caramarin hoped death had found her quickly.

Maiorescu and Placid had wandered over, hands in pockets.

“Bit over the top,” said Placid. There was a note of admiration in his voice. Caramarin turned to him. Opened his mouth. Closed it again.

“I can hear sirens,” called Oilfield from the warehouse door. “Coming this way, I think?”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” swore Placid.

Too obvious now. A bunch of gangsters with shooters and a Kalash with a butchered girl? They'd throw away the key. And that was if they were lucky.

“Out, now!” shouted Maiorescu. No idea who was first out the door. Caramarin fired up the Mercedes and was half way down the street, doors flapping wildly before he had time to draw breath.

“Fucking close call that, boss,” he dropped the car into third, slalomed the Merc around the industrial estate. Back into fourth when he reached the highway. Placid followed a few metres behind.

“Hope your alibis are still good after this,”

“Better had be. Fuckin' hell, they'll cost more than enough. And I'm a bit skint at the moment.”

Came out on the highway just above Promyslova Street. Slowed down and merged with the traffic. A line of Militsia squad cars hurtled down the highway. His heart skipped a couple of beats but they sped past and swung into the industrial estate, A few minutes later an ambulance blew past, sirens and lights drilling into his head.

“Where to, boss?”

“Drop us at the office, okay. I've some calls to make. Then get yourself off the streets.”

CHAPTER 27. THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 2, 00:01.

Prosto Radio 102.5 FM. Midnight News.

“News just in. Militsia sources have confirmed that a young woman's body has been found in a warehouse near Leninhrads'ke Highway. Rumours that the woman was

tortured and mutilated have not been confirmed nor has her identity been released until next of kin have been notified.

“However, the initial investigation by the Militsia leads them to believe there is a gangland connection and are pursuing all possible leads at this time.

“In another disappointing night for Chornomorets Odessa FC...”

Caramarin switched off the radio. He held his head in his hands. If he had any left, he'd get drunk.

There was a pounding on his apartment door. Warily he stood to answer it. No prizes for guessing who was on the other side. He stood.

“C'mon in, officers.”

The two burly uniformed Militsia officers shoved past him into the small apartment and looked around. One flashed his warrant card, not that he needed to. His friend, Sergeant Grodzyk. Grodzyk placed a hand on his chest and pushed him down onto his sofa whilst the other opened drawers and dropped his stuff onto the floor. Walked all over it. Not that he had much. Caramarin didn't say anything. Just sat with a slight smile and tried to look non threatening.

“What's it about, officers?” he asked.

“We'll tell you when we're good and ready, you Romanian dirt-bag.” said Grodzyk.

Didn't take them too long to go through his little apartment. They didn't find his emergency stash. But they'd have to take the place to pieces before they found that.

“Where were you tonight?”

Knew this was coming.

“Ate at Havanas up on Prymorsky Boulevard. I was with Eugen Maiorescu, Dmytro Litovchenko, Serhiy Bilokin, a couple of others.”

“Fine upstanding citizens, all.”

“He's a respected businessman. I know he's friends with a number of senior officers in the Militsia.”

“Don't try to be funny. We know who you mean.”

“When did you finish eating? Then what did you get up to?” said Grodzyk.

“Finished about nine, nine fifteen? Then we all went over to Maryana's Massage over on Mala Arnouts'ka for a massage...”

“And I'm sure those whores, sorry, highly trained masseuses, will verify that, will they?” said Grodzyk.

“Sure, go and ask them. I was seen by a girl called Yulia. She's very good at a deep muscle massage. You should try her.”

“Don't try to be funny. You left when?” said the second officer.

“Maybe eleven thirty or so. Then Eugen Maiorescu dropped me off here about midnight. And I've been here ever since. By the way, I think I saw a couple of your guys at Maryana's. Can't be sure of their names but I'm sure I've seen 'em before.”

“Anyone saw you come home?”

“My landlady. She was still up. I saw her watching television.”

“We'll check all that. If you're lying you can put your head between your legs and kiss your ass goodbye.” Grodzyk said.

“So you've never been anywhere near the industrial estate off Leninhrads'ke Highway, then?”

“This about that dead girl?” he said incredulously.

“We'll ask the questions.”

“No, like I say, had dinner, a massage and then come home. That's all.”

“So, if I said Maiorescu's Mercedes was seen coming out of Promyslova Street?”

“Then I'd say whoever saw it must be mistaken. We were nowhere near there.”

Sergeant Grodzyk grabbed Caramarin by the lapels and dragged him upright. He shoved his face within centimetres of Caramarin's and shouted.

“Listen, you Romanian dirt-bag. Some poor girl was brutally killed this evening. I know Maiorescu and his shitty little gang is involved. I know that bastard's into people trafficking now. What was it? She wouldn't do as she was told? You all fancied a gang bang and she objected? Wanted to send a message to the others? Or are you all just psycho nutters?”

“I wasn't anywhere near the warehouse...”

Sergeant Grodzyk shouted him down with a cry of triumph.

“Who said anything about a warehouse, dirt-bag?”

“It was on the radio. Honest, that's all I know.”

“We found footprints in the blood. Let's see your boots, dirt bag.”

Oh shit, thought Caramarin. He took off his boots and handed them up. The two officers looked at each other and shook their heads then dropped them.

“I've half a mind to take you in for further questioning, anyway. But I'm gonna check out your laughable alibis and if anything doesn't check out, we're coming back.”

Grodzyk said.

“Yeah, don't go anywhere without informing us.”

“Oh, by the way, have this on account,” suddenly Grodzyk slammed his knee up into Caramarin's crotch. Red-white fire filled his body. He doubled over and collapsed to the floor in agony.

“You filthy pervert.” said the other.

Caramarin looked up from the floorboards.

“Nothing to do with me,” he managed to gasp out.

“There's more where that come from 'cos I know you're involved in this clusterfuck somehow. When I get the proof, you're gonna be a senile old man by the time you get out.”

“A very old man with an arse hole the size of a bus,” said the other.

“Listen,” Grodzyk said more quietly. “I'm getting fed up coming to this shit hole. I'm coming for you. Unless you do us all a favour and fuck off back to Romania. Am I coming through loud and clear?”

They had another look round before leaving. As their footsteps clattered down the outside stairs, Caramarin breathed a sigh of relief. Hauled himself onto his sofa, clutching his aching nuts. Just as well he hadn't accidentally stepped in any of the blood splashed around or he'd be in for several beatings down at the station. He'd put his clothes in the wash to rid them of any fibres or DNA when he'd got back but he'd forgotten his boots.

A stupid mistake.

CHAPTER 28. THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 3, 09:30.

Maiorescu sat in his office, his chair swivelled to face the window. The sounds of traffic filtered up from below. Caramarin waited until his boss had finished on his cell. He closed the call.

“I think we should go easy for a bit, boss,” said Caramarin. “The Militia suspect we're involved with that girl's death and they're gonna be watching us for a while.”

“You losing your nerve, Nicolae? You going soft on me?”

“Not at all. But we had a good thing going before we got involved with this Abkhazian crew and people smuggling. You remember I said no good would come of it.”

“I'm not letting this go, capisce? That bastard tried to drop us in it. He wants war, he can have it.”

“That wise? Like I say, the Militia are gonna be all over us.”

“Cost me a bit in bribes. Trouble is, gotta bit of a cash flow problem now. But the people smuggling is way too lucrative to let go. In a way, that bastard Ozgan did us a favour, opening my eyes to the possibilities.”

“I don't like it, boss.”

Maiorescu stubbed out his cig, then lit up another. Carried on like Caramarin hadn't spoken.

“I just need to build up my own contacts in the east, arrange for them to send us some likely girls. Then we're sorted. Easy money.”

“But...”

“But in the meantime, let's take the war to Ozgan and his Abkhazians. I know you're tired. Look, here's a bit of money, why don't you take the rest of the day off. I'll catch you tomorrow.”

As Caramarin left, he heard Maiorescu calling Litovchenko. There was a man who was always up for violence whatever the reason. Or without any reason.

As he crossed the hot car park to his Opel Combo, Caramarin was deep in thought. Only one possible way he could think of to stop this shit storm blowing up in all their faces. And that was doubtful. He dialled Natalya and asked her to meet him in town.

Caramarin stopped by his apartment in Moldavanka and changed into his suit. Splashed on some cologne then headed uptown. He bought some flowers and gave

them to his old landlady as thanks for her alibi and any hassle she'd had from Sergeant Grodzyk.

He waited for Natalya in a rear banquettes of a chic restaurant just off Prymorsky Boulevard. Heard the place was going for a Michelin star. The dark panelled back room was mostly empty; nearly all the lunchtime customers were out on the street side tables enjoying the sunshine and fresh air. Not his sort of place but it was discreet and out of the way.

Checked his cell for messages and read the local paper. Chornomorets Odessa F.C.'s latest defeat took up the back pages. The front pages were dominated by the mutilated girl's discovery last night. Photos of the warehouse and one very pixellated image of the crime scene. No name had yet been released but a gangland connection was mentioned.

There was speculation about a feud between gangs. No prizes for guessing where that information had come from. He turned to the editorial. The usual demands for the Militsia to clamp down on the gangsters ruining the city and that the crime rate was out of control. He tucked the paper away as Natalya came in.

It was like she brought the sunshine in with her. The light from the doorway shone off her blonde hair and lit up her short, white Versace dress. It was like a candle in the dim light. She lifted up her shades and smiled, then dropped them in her clutch bag.

The waiters stopped what they were doing and stared. The manager stepped up and showed her over to Caramarin's table. The man was either a chutney ferret, or just very well trained – he didn't look once down her front. Unlike every man she passed.

Caramarin stood and kissed her on the cheeks. The manager tucked in her chair and passed over her napkin. Caramarin ordered wine and looked over the menu. He ordered mussels in garlic to start. Natalya raised her eyebrows.

“Garlic? Bit of a passion killer?” she said.

“Sorry. Didn't think. But to be honest, passion's not on my mind, at the moment.”

“I dressed up special for you. Look.” She wriggled her boobs at him.

“You look gorgeous. Appreciate it. But I need to speak to you.”

“You could try and show more enthusiasm,” she pouted.

They ate their mussels. He could feel her eyes burning questions at him. He waited until there was nobody in earshot.

“Listen, I hope I'm not speaking out of turn but you need to have a word with Eugen.”

“Why?” she asked. “I can't leave him for you. At least not until after he trades me in for a younger model.” She smiled sadly.

“No, no, not that,” he stammered. “He's looking to start a gang war, the way he's going. The Militia guess he's involved in people smuggling now so if he starts anything there's going to be a lot of heat coming his way.”

She shrugged.

Caramarin was never sure just how much Natalya knew, or suspected, about her husband's activities. Maybe she just grabbed the good things in life without worrying about where they came from. But the woman wasn't stupid. If he had any chance of heading off Maiorescu, he had to lay everything out for her.

“Did he say anything to you about the girl's body last night?”

“No! What body?”

“Keep your voice down,” he whispered.

The trolley with the main course came. The chef opened the silver dome on the trolley with a flourish. A rack of lamb with potatoes and raspberry jus. The chef served it, bowed and wheeled the trolley away. The wine waiter poured burgundy into crystal glasses. Caramarin toasted Natalya.

When Caramarin was sure nobody was taking notice of them, apart from those furtive glances at Natalya's boobs, he passed her the paper.

“Sorry, what's last night's game got to do with me?”

“The front page.”

She read the article, her upper lip curling with horror and disgust, showing her teeth.

“You saying that Eugen did that?”

“No, I think an Abkhazian gang killed her then tried to frame us with her murder. But Eugen's going to start a war. Fair enough, but not at the moment.”

“And you want me to tell him that?”

“He's not listening to me much any more. He's more into consulting that psycho, Litovchenko, now.”

Natalya shuddered.

“That man gives me the creeps,” she said.

“He should.”

They ate their lamb. Fully deserved a Michelin star in his opinion.

Natalya leaned forward, giving Caramarin a great view of her boobs. Her dress had slipped down slightly, revealing part of her lacy brassiere.

“Not like you. You give me the shivers.

“Nice shivers down there.”

CHAPTER 29. THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 3, 14:30.

Caramarin protested but Natalya wasn't listening. She picked up the tab on her gold card. Explained that as far as Eugen was concerned, she was having lunch with one of her girlfriends. She took Caramarin by the arm and led him upstairs.

The room was as smart as the restaurant downstairs. Summer light flooded in from the balcony windows. Natalya closed the blinds then kicked off her sling-backs. She turned around.

“Help me with this,” she asked over her shoulder with a toss of her hair.

Caramarin unzipped her Versace dress and shrugged it off her shoulders. Natalya let it slip down her body. It pooled on the floor and she stepped out of it. Had to admit, the woman looked gorgeous. She ran her hands down her body and gave a sexy little wiggle.

Caramarin took off his jacket and slung it over the armchair. He kicked off his shoes and sat on the end of the bed. Natalya crossed to the mini bar and bent over, deliberately showing her tanned bottom through the lacy panties. He could just see the slight bulge of her mound.

“Zibert Light, if they've got it,” he asked.

He heard the crack and hiss then Natalya passed him a beer. He took a long swallow.

“Needed that,” he said.

Natalya came over with a vodka and put it on the side table. She stretched out on the bed arching her back, showing her body in its lacy underwear to perfection. She leaned up, untied her hair and spread it out over the pillow like a halo. She looked at Caramarin who was still sitting there holding his lager.

“Come over here,” she said.

Caramarin lay down next to her. With practised hands, she unbuckled his belt, unzipped his flies and pulled down his trousers. She knelt on the bed then unbuttoned his shirt and helped him take it off. Natalya kissed his chest, nibbled his nipples. Finally, she hooked her fingers into his boxers and tugged them down.

“Is that the best you can do?” she asked.

“I’m sorry.”

Natalya took his musket in her hands and primed it to half cock. But no way was it ready to fire any love bullets.

“You all right, Nico?”

“Fine.”

She stopped loading his musket.

“I know just the trick,” Natalya said. She opened her clutch bag and returned to the bed holding a couple of things. She lay back down and poured sparkling white powder into her navel. She handed Caramarin a violet fifty hryvnia note.

“A Hrushevsky? Times must be tough,” he said. “Last time it was a two hundred Ukrainka.”

Caramarin knelt over her outstretched body and snorted up the coke. The rush hit him almost at once.

“Wow. That’s good!” he rocked back on his heels.

“So it should be. It’s the best you can get. Special reserve. Now come here, big boy.”

She sprinkled more powder over his musket, moved down the bed, then took him in her mouth. Caramarin lay back as the familiar pressure built up along his barrel. But he still wasn’t ready to fire his load. After a while, Natalya sat back. She couldn’t find his trigger. Gave up cocking the gun when there was no powder in the pan.

“What is it?”

Caramarin thought. Be honest?

“I'm sorry. Like you saw in the paper; last night I saw the body of a girl, a young woman. She'd been raped and killed. There was blood everywhere. I guess it's affected me more than I thought.” He wiped his eyes at the memory.

Natalya looked him full in the eyes.

“Y'know what, Nicolae, In a way I'm glad. Despite all you've done you've still got a heart in there. Eugen never said anything last night. He just came home, had a few drinks and then had at me.”

Natalya looked sad. “He was rough. Seemed to enjoy it more than he has for ages.”

Caramarin didn't know what to say. He rolled over and faced the wall. Natalya snuggled up against his back and draped her arm over his body.

All of a sudden he was crying. The sobs racked his body. Natalya let the agony flood out of him, just held him, supported him, comforted him. Eventually, his hurt quieted, his body stilled. He turned to her.

“Thank you,” was all he said.

“Nicolae. Deep down, you're a good man. But I've been thinking about what you've said. The only question is what are you going to do?”

“I don't know. But I can't go on for much longer. And please tell Eugen to cool it.”

“I will,” Natalya said. “But whether he'll listen...”

“Do your best, anyway. It's important.”

He stood up and dressed without looking at Natalya. He patted his suit down, checking everything was there.

“Sorry about that,” he muttered. “I'll see you soon if you want.”

“Of course I still want to see you, Nicolae. I love you.”

Caramarin let himself out and down through the hotel lobby and into the late afternoon sunshine. Adjusted his shades and walked along the street, looking at the smartly dressed young couples walking together arm in arm. Did they have his problems? Probably not. When had his life been so simple?

Not for a long time.

CHAPTER 30. TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 29, 20:15.

If Caramarin had been listening in whilst Maiorescu was on his cell, he would have been very frightened.

Maiorescu was sitting with his feet up on his desk in his office on Prokhorovs'ka Street. The office was in darkness except for a circle of light from the desk lamp and the dull red glow from a cigarette. He didn't recognise the number on the screen. But only a handful of people knew his cell number. He jabbed the green button.

“Yes?”

His feet slammed onto the floor when he heard the voice on the other end. He jerked upright. Major Balashov. Maiorescu licked his lips. During the conversation, Balashov told him several things. Some things he didn't know. Things that blew apart his world like a stick of Semtex. Then Major Balashov told Maiorescu what he wanted Maiorescu to do.

And Maiorescu agreed.

Maiorescu waited until Major Balashov finished the call before he closed the smart phone. He breathed deeply, then pulled open a desk drawer and poured himself a slug of vodka and lit a fresh smoke. He inhaled deeply and tried to control his rage. Yes, and his fear, too. The smoke added to the blue haze. Less than a minute later, his phone beeped with an incoming message.

The gang boss stabbed the button and looked at the pictures on his screen. He flicked through them all, scrolling faster and faster with each one. Some were grainy and out of focus. Some may have been taken with a long lens. But all were clear enough to leave no room for doubt.

For a moment, he wondered if these images were genuine. Bit beyond his skills but he knew you could do almost anything with computers these days. But, no, he had little doubt. If they were fake, Balashov would have made them clearer and anyway it all tied in with some niggles at the back of his mind.

Maiorescu drank some more and then went through the pictures more slowly. They all showed that fucking swarthy bastard Caramarin with Natalya. Kissing in that new blue BMW M5 he'd bought her. And not a peck on the cheek.

A clearer one of Caramarin leaning over her recliner by their pool, his hand on her boobs. Another of them sharing lunch together at some restaurant, her breasts overflowing a low cut dress. Yet another by the pool, that bastard rubbing tanning lotion into her buttocks.

Another beep from the phone. This time an icon for an incoming video. Maiorescu drank more vodka and lit yet another smoke. He touched the icon and waited for it to play. Far, far worse. Beyond the pale. Totally clear, no margin for error or the benefit of the doubt. A hotel room, a bed, a man he trusted shagging his wife. No sound but you needed no sound for what he was watching. He flung the vodka glass across the room where it shattered.

He called the number the images had come from.

"I'll do it," he said, choked. "I'll do as you say and stop fighting with the Abkhazians if that's what you want."

"Good, it is. I'll let you decide how you deal with Caramarin. Don't call this number again." The connection was cut.

Maiorescu sat back. Rage surged through him. He smoked furiously. When he felt he could speak, he made a call to Dmytro Litovchenko. A man with the most inappropriate nickname Placid.

A man who also really hated that back stabbing piece of shit Caramarin.

CHAPTER 31. TUESDAY OCTOBER 6, 01:00.

After seeing Belgian at the Skorpio club on Arkardia beach, Caramarin drove back back north to Videnov's office just off Prymor'ska Street.

Could do with a few answers. He pulled up at the far end of the parking lot in the deepest shadows he could find. Fortunately, the night wasn't cold. He pulled his combat jacket around him and settled down to watch and wait and see if there was any activity at the accountant's.

After an hour, he still could see no lights or movements. He slipped out of Videnov's Merc and keeping to the shadows and using what cover he could he sneaked up to the office. No sounds, no nothing from inside. Only the never ending noise of traffic from Prymor'ska Street. He peered through the office blinds. Couldn't see much but felt happy with the situation. He didn't have that prickle from his sixth sense – that strange feeling you get when something is wrong. He trusted that sense as much as he trusted his other five.

He crouched by the door away from the frame and unlocked it. Grasped the handle and threw it open, being careful not to expose his silhouette to any gunfire from within. None came. A glance showed that the only occupants were still strapped to their chairs. Videnov, had toppled over, obviously trying to free himself. The heavy weight was still slumped. Caramarin had hit him harder than he'd thought. Glass jaw, he thought. No wonder he'd never made it big time. Just a fairground bruiser.

Caramarin shut the door behind him and flicked on the light. Videnov blinked and squinted in the sudden brilliance. Even the thug stirred and muttered something. Caramarin sat Videnov up. He ripped off the gag and whilst Videnov was swearing he fetched him a cup of water from the cooler.

“Answers, comrade. And get them right first time. I don’t want to have to use this.” He showed the accountant his combat knife. If possible the man went even paler than before.

“Right. First things first. Where’s the girls’ passports?”

“Second drawer on the right. In the orange folder.”

“Good man,” said Caramarin fetching them out.

“This may surprise you, but Maiorescu never told me who you work for. I thought it was gonna be a straight forward deal so I didn’t need to know. Who?”

The accountant trembled. His eyes watered, looked like he was going to cry. “Please, don’t tell anyone you got it from me. Please.” At least he wasn’t wasting time pretending he wasn’t going to tell.

“Well, I already figured you’re not working for a bunch of nuns. Come on, comrade.”

Even then, Videnov seemed reluctant to tell. He watched Caramarin playing with the point of his knife.

“Don’t tell. I’ve got a family, you know.”

“OK.” He sighed. “I s’pose I could find out on the streets so it won’t have come from you.”

Even in the privacy of his own office Videnov’s voice sunk to a whisper. Maybe he was worried if his heavyweight wasn’t as out of it as he seemed.

“Major Balashov.”

This information literally rocked Caramarin back on his heels. Of all the gang bosses he'd expected Videnov to name, he'd never thought he would come out with Major Balashov. Knew of him but thought he was currently expanding internationally, well beyond Ukraine's borders. Didn't know he was still into sex workers from Odessa. Thought he was frying much bigger fish by now. This put a different face on things.

So far in Odessa, Caramarin had not personally come up against Major Balashov. Guessed he was too small fry for that. Knew of him by reputation, of course, and had, occasionally, seen him out on the streets. But passing off a kilo of baking powder and taking those two girls without paying would put him dead centre of his radar.

Didn't think it would do any good but had to try anyway.

"Listen, comrade, I didn't know the brown was fake. I don't know why Maiorescu did that to us but I had nothing to do with it. I'm gonna find out, though. Look, do me a favour and tell Major Balashov I'm good."

Maybe the accountant had recovered a bit of his courage sensing the fear in Caramarin's voice.

"Give us the girl back," obviously he didn't know Caramarin had found Yulia in the trunk, "and maybe he'll just break your limbs."

"Kiss my arse." Caramarin pushed the accountant back over onto his face and left. He was in deep trouble. Only question was how he was going to keep alive long enough to deal with it. Drove back to Bohdana's place in his beat up Combo. Thinking, thinking all the time.

Major Balashov. The Cossack Fiend they'd called him. His evil reputation went before him. He must be in his fifties now but still acted with the ruthlessness of a young gangster rising through the ranks with everything to prove.

Caramarin knew the Fiend used to be in the Spetznaz, the old Soviet Special Forces. He already had a taste for violence but his character had hardened in the hell hole of the Afghanistan campaign back in the Eighties. His idea of pacification was to slaughter entire villages. No witnesses, no talk. He'd personally killed dozens of men,

women and children and enjoyed torturing anyone he thought might have information. His speciality was the blowtorch and pliers.

If he'd stuck to that he'd have come away with a chestful of gongs but there were rumours he supplemented his salary with importing Afghan heroin through military channels. He must have greased enough palms because this carried on for years.

He'd been in Yeltsin's First Chechen war back in the early Nineties. The atrocities carried on, got worse if possible but there was less to loot and maybe his backers cut him loose. There'd been talk of a possible court martial. Major Balashov must have known where the skeletons were buried – in all senses - because nothing came of it.

However, he'd had to resign from the army. Caramarin didn't know what Balashov had done next. He'd next shown up with the Serb forces during the Yugoslav Wars of the mid Nineties. Caramarin had come up against him during the siege of Sarajevo and didn't want to meet him again. Ever again. And now the man would be interested in him.

Not good. As far from good as Vladivostok.

CHAPTER 32. TUESDAY OCTOBER 6, 09:00.

The morning dawned brighter than his mood. A half formed plan was taking shape. Sort of. As with anything, it comes to first things first. No sense trying to get everything done at once because that meant failure.

Didn't want to leave them at Bohdana's place. Not if Major Balashov was looking for them. He drove the two girls over to the huge outdoors market on the Seven Kilometre road. He'd heard it was the largest outdoor market in the whole of Europe. To an outsider, it was a sprawling, chaotic jumble. You could get anything there. He knew some of the right people there, if they were about.

Caramarin pulled up in a field of cars. He reached into his pocket and peeled off some notes from his bankroll.

“Get yourselves some clothes and shoes and toiletries and whatever other stuff you need. Is that enough? Like I said earlier, I think it’s best if you two get out of Odessa.” He pointed out a coffee shop at the end of a line of nearby shipping containers. “I’ll meet you there in two hours, okay?”

Caramarin watched the two girls head off to a container full of clothes. There were thousands of people at the market and that was just the part he could see. He thought there was little chance of the Militsia or Balashov's men picking them up. They were just three faces in a crowd of thousands and thousands. That said, he wrapped his black and white keffiyeh about his lower face and kept to where there were plenty of people.

There seemed to be people from all over the world at the market. Were more Afghans, Africans and Chinese than there used to be which added to the flavour and diversity of the place. He grabbed some rolls to eat and searched for a man he knew. Caramarin hadn’t heard he was out of business so hoped he was still around.

In another container, he found the printers. A stack of letter heads awaited collection, a few boxes of gaudy fliers for a night club stood on a table, rolls of posters stacked next to a photocopier.

“Hey, Hetsko,” he called. A tall, thin, stooped man straightened up. Adjusted his glasses and stubbed out his smoke.

“Nicolae. Thought you’d be calling round soon.”

“You heard?”

“Heard that idiot Maiorescu is in the shit. Don’t let him drag you down with him, mate.”

“I won’t.” Bit late for that, he thought. He had. “Need a big favour. Couple of passports for a couple of girls if you can do them.”

The printer raised his eyebrows. "Course, I can. Only question is how quickly do you want them?"

"Yesterday."

"In that case, won't be genuine ones. Not enough time to do the complex biometric stuff. Wouldn't get you into the U.S. or the E.U. legitimately but good enough for day to day use for round here."

Caramarin nodded. That would have to do.

"I'll need the usual. Photos and money to oil the machines." Caramarin passed over the girls' internal passports and a large part of his bankroll. They shook hands.

He walked back to the car park and, as he thought, there was no shortage of old Opel vans and pick-ups in various stages of dirt and decay. He looked for one which he thought the owner would not want to tell the Militsia when he found the plates had been swapped over.

He saw one with beads and Arabic writing on a CD dangling from the rear view mirror. That would do. Glanced around, nobody in sight at the moment. Knelt and quickly unscrewed the plates with the little Swiss Army knife still in his pocket.

Then he decided to go find the two girls. He saw Ekaterina outside the coffee shop container. She looked beautiful standing in the sunshine. She'd changed into a sleeveless floral dress and it showed off her toned figure to good effect. She startled when she saw Caramarin.

He looked around. "Where's the other one? Where's Yulia?"

"I don't know. I lost her in the crowds." She looked frightened. She was out of her depth. He knew the feeling.

"It's all right." He glanced at his watch. "I'm sure she'll be here soon." He bought Ekaterina a coffee and waited. There was no sign of Yulia.

“I don’t want to be here too long,” he said. “Let’s find her.” Not easy in a huge, crowded place like Seven Kilometre Market. Too many people, and he didn’t even know what she was wearing now. Keep calm.

It was only pure luck that he spotted her. She was behind a container on the edge of the market blowing some Afghan or Tajik guy. Her hands about her punter, pulling him forward into her mouth. He was about to rush forward, then thought. No, he couldn’t risk a scene, especially if the Militsia or Balashov's lot were looking for them. He waited a few minutes until the man zipped up his trousers and left, a look of pleasure on his face like the angels had already shown him the direct way to Paradise.

Caramarin stepped forward. Yulia looked up. He saw her pin point pupils and glazed expression.

“You want one, too, big boy?” He felt like punching her. Instead, he pulled Yulia to her feet. She swayed. He rolled up the sleeve of her blouse. Wasn’t surprised to see fresh needle tracks along her veins.

“Bloody junkie whore.” He swore. “I’m trying to help you here. Or do you want me to just leave you? Let your friends stick you back in a trunk and rip you apart gang banging you and sell you on? That what you want?” He was angry, having trouble getting his words out.

Ekaterina stepped forward. “It’s my fault. I should’ve stayed with her. You’re a good man, Nicolae, Bohdana told us what you’ve done. I know you’ve got in big trouble now. Please help us.”

Thought about what Videnov had said last night, this girl was a virgin. She was young enough to be his daughter. Hell. They both were. One a virgin; one a junkie. Both to be sold on around Europe for years and years of living hell as prostitutes. What a fuckin' lousy world. He felt sickened by what he’d become involved with.

He pushed Yulia forward. She nearly fell in the dirt. Ekaterina helped her stay upright and looked at him reproachfully.

“Give her a break, please.”

“I have done. C’mon. Photos next and let’s get out of here.”

Drove them back into Odessa. All of them deep in thought. The only sound in the cab was the hit music station Prosto Radio 102.5 FM. He booked them into a cheap room for the night. Noticed his bankroll was getting very thin now. Gave Ekaterina strict instructions not to let Yulia out of her sight. Not for a minute. She nodded, then leaned up and kissed him on the lips. Unexpected.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We’re still deep in the shit.”

“I know. But you’re a good man, Nicolae. Thank you.”

He felt embarrassed. A confusion of emotions boiled in his mind. He hurried away and back into his Opel Combo.

Caramarin needed to know whether Maiorescu had made a mistake or had set him up. No point asking any of the gang. Needed to hear it direct from the gang head himself. As he drove back through the lunchtime traffic, his cell rang. Natalya Maiorescu.

“We need to meet,” she named a small hotel on Deribasovskaya Street in the centre of Odessa where the attached restaurant was small and discreet. He pulled a U-turn in the street, giving the finger to the horns from the other cars and parked a few streets away.

Bunged a few hryvnias to the maitre d’ to take no notice of his attire and sat down in a booth in the back of the dimly lit restaurant. Natalya was already there. She was wearing a cream linen trouser suit and Ray-Bans. Seemed a shame to be sitting inside but knew neither wanted to be seen together. While he waited for the food, he looked at the old fashioned portraits of long forgotten dignitaries hanging on the dark wood panelling.

He smiled. “What’s with the shades? Become a Hollywood star?”

“Maybe I’ll tell you later. Look, Nicolae, what’s going on? It’s not often I’ve seen Eugen so angry. He had that psycho nutter Dmytro Litovchenko round last night. I’m scared.”

In a low voice, Caramarin filled her in on what had happened to him whilst they ate. Even she looked terrified when she found out her husband was mixed up with Major Balashov.

As he expected, after lunch she took him up to the room she’d rented. He kicked the door shut behind him and took Natalya in his arms. He hugged her close and kissed with passion. Her shades got in his way so he unhooked them. He should have suspected because he saw she had swollen black eyes. Tears flowed from them, leaking out from her swollen lids.

“Eugen.” He said. She nodded. “He went berserk last night. Like a madman.” She pulled away from Caramarin and stepped out of her trouser suit. Her lacy underwear couldn’t hide the purpling bruises and strap marks that seemed to cover her belly and legs. She turned around. Her back was even worse.

“He really laid into me this time,” she wept. “He’s been bad with me before but never like this. It just went on and on. I thought he’d kill me.”

Caramarin kissed her and carried her over to the bed. But his desire had gone. He lay down next to her.

“Does he know? About us, I mean?”

“No, I don’t think so. It seemed like he lost his rag over losing some girl and now you’ve told me having Balashov against him.”

“Did he set me up, do you think?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t know why he would. Not if he doesn’t know about us. And he’s never said anything.”

Caramarin thought. Doubted if Maiorescu told his wife everything. He certainly wouldn’t have told her anything about that poor Kurdish girl at the bottom of the

Black Sea. That information would have been like handing her a loaded gun then asking her to pull the trigger.

“It’s all gone wrong, love.” She pulled him to her. “I’ve got a really bad feeling now. Oh, help me. I need you now.” She unhooked her white bra and tossed it over the side of the bed. She raised her hips and slid down her panties.

Caramarin looked at her poor battered body.

“You sure about this? Honestly?”

She shook her head. “Yes I need you, you’re what I need. But it’s all going wrong.” She tugged at his jeans and took his penis in her hand.

“Don’t you want me?” she asked after a while.

“Yes, but...I’m sorry. It’s seeing you like this.”

“I’ll get over it,” she said with a tired little smile.

She opened her handbag and took out a small bag of powder. She sprinkled some over her vagina and pressed his head down. His tongue found her most sensitive place, lapping in and out, all around; the taste of her natural juices mixing with the salty taste of the cocaine. The drug helping his passion rise, getting harder.

She squirmed in ecstasy as he licked her. Before she could climax, he moved up her body, kissing the bruises and weals. He entered her powdered vagina and took her to orgasm, quickly coming himself, exploding deep inside her, the release draining his stress.

Lying worn out, watching the afternoon shadows moving slowly over the walls. He dozed a little, forgetting their problems and pains.

He was jerked out of his sleep by the jangle of his ring tone. Maiorescu himself. He put a finger to Natalya’s lips and sat up.

“What’s going on,” Maiorescu demanded. “Why haven’t you called me so far?”

“I’ve been thinking. I want to know what you’re playing at, what’s going on, too. Why did you set me up?”

“I never set you up, you know that. Listen, can’t talk now. Come out to the villa.”

“No, not your villa. Meet you at the Red Star at eight. Just you. Not Dmytro Litovchenko or any of the others,” said Caramarin.

Maiorescu blustered but agreed. Caramarin broke the connection and turned to Natalya.

“I’ll find out tonight. Are you going back to him?”

She nodded, slowly.

“What else have I got? He said he’d never do this to me again.” She kissed him. “I think I love you, Nicolae, but I can’t leave Eugen. He’d kill me. You know he would.” She wiped her swollen eyes and tried to smile. “What a messed up world.”

Caramarin got dressed. He tucked his shirt into his jeans as he stood. He still had no real idea whether he’d been set up or if Maiorescu had just messed up. Felt sure that Natalya was not in on it, so he trusted her as much as he trusted anyone.

“I’m going to sort this balls-up out. And he’s not going to knock you about no more.”

“Good luck. You’ll need it,” said Natalya.

They chopped and shared a few fat lines together before he left. More than enough to give him a boost for the evening. Took him high enough to feel confident again.

CHAPTER 33. TUESDAY OCTOBER 6, 19:00.

Before meeting Maiorescu, he swung by the Centurion Casino. Two of the doormen were talking outside. He knew them both; they were good lads in a pinch. As he walked up, one shook his head and put his arm out to stop him.

“No way, Nicolae,” Tallboy, the larger one, a giant of a man – even taller than Placid-said.

“Why not?”

“You’re trouble and you’re a mess. I’ll do ya a favour, I’ll tell Valeriya you’re here. Just wait over there, okay.” Caramarin shrugged, did as he was told. Tallboy spoke into his radio mike.

He didn’t have long to wait. Valeriya came out of the staff entrance and looked as if she was about to hit him she was so angry.

“You bastard,” she cried. He led her further down the alley, away from the two doormen. “Why didn’t you call? Where’ve you been? I’ve been so worried about you.”

“I’m sorry, I’ve been busy.” He took her wrists in his hands before she could strike him.

“With some woman, you bastard.” He opened his mouth. “And don’t you deny it. You’ve been doing coke with some slag, haven’t you?”

“No,” Didn’t think Natalya was a slag.

“Why are you bleeding then you liar?” She wrenched a hand away and touched under his nose. Her finger came away bloody.

“Shit.”

“You’re fucked up, Nico.” She burst into tears. “I love you, you know that, but why are you treating me like this? I love you, little Vlad loves you but you’re throwing it all away.”

He felt at a loss. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want to see you for a bit, don’t come back, Nico. Sort yourself out and get clean. Like you were.” She sobbed and looked up at him, tear stained. He thought his heart would break.

“I’m sorry. I’ve got some shit to sort out. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.” It felt weak to his ears but he had too much going through his mind at the same time.

“You’re better than this.”

A pit boss stepped out of the staff door into the night and beckoned. She followed him in, looking back at Caramarin. Her face sad.

She was right. He’d let Valeriya down too often. If he survived this crisis the coke wasn’t the only problem in his life he’d have to sort out.

The two doormen watched as he drove off. One made a call on his cell.

Stopped off to clean himself up. The evening traffic from the casino was heavier than usual and he didn’t have time to scope out the Red Star and see who was there. He saw Maiorescu’s Merc nearby but that didn’t mean anything. The coke confidence was wearing off big time and he felt nervous, antsy, like his skin was crawling. The bad feeling was back.

Caramarin looked into the Red Star. The windows had been thrown open to catch the evening breeze. The coffee shop was full like he knew it should be. A folk band was setting up on a small stage near the back, tuning up. A happy buzz of people enjoying their evening. Mostly students and a younger crowd but there were all ages in there. Saw Maiorescu had got a table to himself. No obvious thugs or heavies in the coffee shop.

Pushed open the door, stepped into the steamy atmosphere. Sat down, ordered an Americano. If possible Maiorescu looked even worse than usual. His jowly face glistened with sweat and his eyes were bloodshot and weary. He hadn’t shaved and his grey stubble made him look older. Neither offered to shake hands.

“You set me up?” asked Caramarin.

“No. I had no idea the brown was phoney. Think I want to upset Major Balashov?”

“No, I guess you don’t. But the amount of gear you take, you must’ve known.”

“Didn’t test it did I? Also, my supplier never let me down before. Anyway, I’m like you. I don’t touch heroin.”

Caramarin couldn’t tell if the other man was lying. Maiorescu always looked shifty and furtive at the best of times.

“I’m nothing like you, Maiorescu. I realise that now.”

“Where’s the girl, Caramarin? Balashov wants her back as we didn’t pay for her. You need to give her up.”

“No way.”

“What are you going to do, then? We’re both in deep shit now.”

“Give him another couple of kilos of heroin or coke and apologise. I’ll take the gear to him myself, if you want.”

“We’ll need to go to my warehouse then. I’ll be able to sort something then.”

Maiorescu smiled. A glimpse of the old days in his smile.

“No tricks.”

They finished their coffees and left just as the band was starting up. He followed Maiorescu over to his Mercedes. Suddenly he heard footsteps running up behind him.

Too late he started to turn round. A weight cracked against his skull, knocking him forward off balance. Red black fire exploded in his brain. Dazed, he stumbled.

Maiorescu’s fist punched into his stomach expelling his wind, another huge pain in his middle. He fell to the floor. Maiorescu kicked him hard, twice in the stomach.

Caramarin threw up, the last of his lunch vomited on the side walk.

He was jerked to his feet. Felt a pistol jammed into his ribs.

“Hello, cunt.” Dmytro 'Placid' Litovchenko. The last man on earth he wanted to see.

He knew better than to struggle. Not with a pistol against him and a huge, coked up psycho thug holding it. Some laughing students passing looked at the three hard men, stopped laughing, unsure what was happening.

“Can’t take his booze,” called Maiorescu. They went into the coffee shop, only one looked back.

Placid pushed Caramarin into the back of the Merc and got in beside him, the pistol never leaving his side.

Maiorescu drove fast through busy streets over to his warehouse on Mala Arnauts'ka Street. Caramarin sat and tried to compose himself. He was in a tight spot. Not for the first time but any time could be the last.

Maiorescu pulled up in front of the warehouse and opened the gate. It had never looked so dead and deserted as it did now.

“Get out, cunt.” Still no chance to get away. He was shoved to the warehouse. Maiorescu flicked on the overhead lights and in the harsh lights, the two men holding him looked like demons. In the office, Placid pushed him in a chair and bound his hands.

“You’re fucked, cunt.”

Caramarin didn’t say anything. Just sat there with a tight little smile. Waiting his turn.

Maiorescu sat down behind his desk and poured out a couple of shots of vodka. Clinked glasses with Placid. He dialled a number on his cell. It was answered straight away.

“I’ve got the rat here.” He paused. “Yes, yes, pick him up when you’re ready. Yes, I’ll make sure you get the genuine product. Thanks.” He broke the connection.

“You fucking rat. Shag my wife?” Maiorescu’s face was a mask of hatred. Spittle flew from his mouth, landing on Caramarin’s face. “I should kill you myself but Balashov will do a better job.” He drew back his fist and punched Caramarin full in the face. His head rocked back, blood flew from his nose. The pain knocked reality out of his mind for a moment. He punched him again knocking him over. Blood clogged his nose, making it hard to breathe.

Placid stepped up, kicked him several times in the head, hatred filled his voice as he shouted “Cunt, cunt, cunt,” over and over again, the noise filling the office as much as the hurt filled Caramarin’s head. Stamped on his head dazing him.

Maiorescu dragged Placid off.

“Enough. Major Balashov wants him alive.”

They pulled the chair upright again. Caramarin slumped forward, blood leaking from his nose, down his camo jacket and staining his keffiyeh scarf. His strength of mind came back as his senses gradually recovered.

“I need a piss,” he said thickly.

“Fucking do it in your pants, cunt.”

“I do, it’ll make this office smell worse than it usually does. You want to see Major Balashov in a pissy smelling office?”

“Fucking fine with me, cunt.”

“You the boss now? Just making sure.” Caramarin goaded, spitting out a mouthful of blood.

Maiorescu looked up from his cell.

“You can handle him. He tries anything, hurt him. But don't kill him.”

Placid grinned and untied Caramarin and hauled him up. Gave him a shove towards the door and punched him on the back of the head.

“Mind how you go, cunt,” he jeered.

Placid pushed Caramarin down the corridor leading to the fire exit. It led past a few more offices and storage cupboards to the toilet and the thug opened the door with Caramarin’s head.

Caramarin stood there, head down, knees bent, blood down his front. Looking weak and vulnerable, smaller than he was.

“Well, go on then. Have your piss.”

“Do you want to get it out for me then? Would you like that? Hold it in your hand?”

Litovchenko swore. He turned Caramarin round, cut the cable ties and took a small pistol from his pocket. Before he could cover Caramarin with it; Caramarin slammed himself back into Placid.

The speed of his attack took his enemy by surprise. Placid staggered, knocked back against the tiled wall. Caramarin drove his elbow into Placid’s stomach, knocking the wind out of him. He turned around. Placid’s head was bowed. Caramarin butted him, felt the man’s nose break. Blood poured down the big man’s front.

Placid started to bring his pistol to bear. Using his trained paratrooper reflexes, Caramarin grabbed his wrist and slammed it against the tiles, shards of ceramic falling to the floor. Placid held on like grim death, trying to bring it to bear.

At such close quarters, Caramarin could smell the alcohol on the other man’s breath. He knew he had to finish this quickly before Maiorescu got worried. The trouble was, Litovchenko was larger and stronger than him. But the man's muscles were mostly from weightlifting and steroids – not trained fighting muscles like Caramarin’s.

He brought his knee up into Placid’s crotch. Litovchenko made a coughing grunt, a deep animal sound. Taking a huge risk, Caramarin let go of Litovchenko’s wrist. He doubled his two fists together and clubbed Litovchenko full in the face, his head smashing back into the tiles, shattering several. Blood now covered the tiles.

Litovchenko reflexively dropped his pistol. Caramarin saw it on the floor and punted it away over towards the squat toilet.

Caramarin saw Placid's eyes glaze over. Not giving the big man any time to pick up again, he swiftly planted two more punches to his head. Litovchenko started to sag forward, like he was going to embrace Caramarin.

Caramarin side stepped and punched Litovchenko on the ear as he fell forward, knocking the door man sprawling on the urine stained floor. He kicked the big man several times in the head until he lay still in a puddle of blood.

"Cunt," he spat down at the bloody figure before him. He picked up the man's knife and dropped pistol. He saw it was a Czech made CZ-75 automatic. Small and handy. He stepped out of the toilet and made his way to the fire exit door.

"You!"

He heard a shout behind him. Maiorescu was in the passage. His boss lifted his arm and fired. Caramarin felt the bullet pluck at his sleeve. In the enclosed space the bang deafened him. Caramarin raced forward and knocked down the securing bar of the fire door. Another bullet followed him out, ricocheting off the metal door. Caramarin raced out of the exit and swerved round the side of the building.

He dived down a dark alley between the next warehouse and dodged behind a couple of dumpsters using them as cover. He heard Maiorescu following. Another bullet whanged overhead. Caramarin knew you couldn't run and expect to hit anything. This was not like blazing away with a Kalash in the forest.

He came out onto Mala Arnauts'ka Street and kept running, dodging from shadow to shadow as much as possible. Didn't seem to be much traffic this time of night. He could feel the adrenaline still rushing through his bloodstream. He figured he must be gaining on Maiorescu – the man was much older and out of condition. Didn't stop him taking another shot at Caramarin. The shot went wild. He ran on.

In a lay-by over the road, a blue Volkswagen Polo was gently rocking. The fat man with a look of pleasure; the woman was kneeling down in the foot well giving head.

The look of horror on the middle aged brass's face as she looked up and saw the bloody mess of Caramarin's face and clothes.

She was a second too slow to lock the door before Caramarin yanked it open. The man opened his eyes too late. Looked on with bewilderment as Caramarin grabbed his jacket and threw him out of the car.

Caramarin pointed his pistol at the woman.

"You too," he said. She scrambled out in disarray, her lipstick smeared over her face. Caramarin snatched her handbag and pushed her away towards her punter.

Over the road, he could see Maiorescu still following. Caramarin rested his arms on the VW's roof and snapped off a shot. Took a deep breath of night air. The second hit the gang boss. He spun round with a scream and fell to the road. In this light Caramarin had no idea how badly he'd been hurt. Behind him, the man screamed again. Caramarin jumped into the VW Polo, fired it up and sped away. Behind him, the prostitute screamed gutter curses at him.

He aimed the car at Maiorescu but the man rolled away with millimetres to spare. In the rear view mirror, could see him get to his feet. Caramarin went through the woman's handbag as he drove. Kept the cash and her cell then tossed it out the window.

As he pulled onto Nova Street, past the Spartak Rugby Stadium, he saw another big Mercedes with tinted windows turning into Mala Arnauts'ka Street. Major Balashov?

Who else would be driving a big limo round here this time of night?

CHAPTER 34. TUESDAY OCTOBER 6, 22:00.

So, now he knew. Maiorescu had set him up. There was no going back after tonight. He had to get the girls out of Odessa before they were found and sort out the mess he

was in. Also, what worried him was Natalya. He was fond of her, maybe even loved her.

He dialled her cell several times but the call always diverted straight over to voicemail. Had Maiorescu hurt her bad or even killed her? He called Hetsko, the forger, and then drove over to the girls' apartment block and leaned on the bell push.

He was starting to get used to the look of fear and horror that women gave him now when they saw his battered and bloody face and clothes.

“Where’s Yulia?”

“In the bathroom.”

Caramarin hammered on the door. “C'mon. No time to waste.” A pause. “I'll break it down if you want.”

The toilet flushed. Yulia stepped out. He looked and wasn't surprised to see her pupils pinprick small and glazed over. She was wearing a low cut top and short skirt and a pair of cheap, red heels.

“You look like a whore. A cheap street walker. I don't know why I'm bothering.”

“Please,” said Ekaterina.

“I'll clean myself up a bit and then let's move out.”

He sponged the worst of the blood off, then picked up their bag and hurried to the VW Polo. Swung round and through light traffic to Hetsko's place. Hetsko was up and waiting for them. The forger handed Caramarin two blue Moldovan passports then took most of the rest of Caramarin's cash.

Flicking through the pages, Caramarin saw the forger had done a good job with the limited time available to him. As he said, they wouldn't get you into the U.S. But they would do for now. He nodded his thanks and took them back to the girls.

As soon as the Polo had turned the corner, the forger made a few calls on his cell.

“What's the use of that? I can't speak Moldovan.” said Yulia.

“Romanian actually. Don't worry, it's quite easy. I picked it up by the time I was three.”

“Thanks anyway. I'm sure you've done your best,” said Ekaterina.

“There's a lot of Russian speakers in Moldova, you know. Especially in the Transnistria area. Anyway, we're going on to Romania. I know a man, a good man, who'll take care of you and get you on your feet.”

A grimace of sorrow crossed his features.

“He's my brother-in-law. Well, my ex brother-in-law really. He works for a church charity and he'll help you.”

Caramarin fell quiet and wouldn't say anything more. He put on Prosto Radio 102.5 FM and listened to the chart hits filling the silence in the car.

He filled up the tank with gas at a garage on the outskirts of Odessa and headed southwest along the M15 free way. Yulia said she needed to use the rest room again so he asked Ekaterina to keep an eye on her. Back in the car, Ekaterina sat next to him so Yulia could sleep stretched out on the back seat.

“It's about two hundred kilometres,” he told Ekaterina. “You might want to grab some rest as well whilst you can.”

The little Polo sped through the outer suburbs of Odessa and out into the flat farmland of the country. This time of night, their headlights were often the only points of light to be seen. There were few villages and the farms were sleeping. They passed a number of lorries and tankers on their way to or from Romania or Moldova but it felt so different from the hustle and bustle of the city.

On their left, the expanse of the Dniester estuary opened up, a black emptiness with very few lights bobbing on it. Caramarin rarely came this way and the depth of darkness and sense of isolation alienated him. He settled down to the drive. Could

have done with a little snort just to lift his mood, but best not to. Needed to cut down on it.

A long hour later, a beep from the back seat jerked him to full alertness.

“What the fuck was that?” Twisting round in his seat to look at Yulia.

“Nothing.”

“Who are you texting, you stupid whore?”

“A mate.”

“Ekaterina, get that fucking cell off of her.”

Ekaterina turned round and held out her hand. Yulia looked like she wanted to throw it out the window, but it was closed. Reluctantly, she handed the phone to Ekaterina.

“Who's she called? D'you know?”

Ekaterina looked at the number.

“Sorry, I don't know her friends. I never saw her before the other day.”

“Well, what's the text say.”

“It's private!” Yulia screamed. “Don't look.”

The dim glow of the screen lit up Ekaterina's long, worried face.

“Oh, no. It says we're going down a free way to Romania and we're in a blue VW and there's only you with us and you've got us passports.”

“You stupid fuckin' bitch. What the fuck did you do that for? I'm trying to get you away from all this.”

Yulia burst into tears.

“He made me.”

“Who made you?”

“Yevhen.”

“Who the fuck is Yevhen?”

He felt like leaning over and slapping her hard.

“My dealer.”

“Your pimp, you mean. And your dealer gave you gear to rat us out? Even though I'm doing you a favour?”

“I didn't ask you to, did I?” Yulia screamed over the music. “He said he'd sort me out with the big boys if I grassed you up to him.”

“And you believe him?” Caramarin was incredulous at what the girl had done.

“They'll just sell you on again.”

“No they won't. He promised he'd take care of me. Fucking let me go, you cunt.”

This time Caramarin leaned over and slapped her. Yulia started screaming and hitting the back of his head. Their car swerved over the white lines, the Polo's interior lit up. A blast of a horn. Caramarin hauled the VW back over just in time to avoid an oncoming Audi. The Audi's driver flipped him the finger.

“Stop it, both of you,” screamed Ekaterina, pushing the two away. With the din and his rage, Caramarin thought his head would explode.

Caramarin pulled over. He opened the door and dragged Yulia out. He balled his fist. The girl leapt at him, trying to claw his face off. This time he punched her face, knocking her to the edge of a field. He stood over her, looming up in the country dark. She curled up into a ball, expecting a kicking.

In the headlights, her skirt had ridden up and he could see her white thighs and panties. She was so vulnerable. His rage ebbed. A truck sped past, washing them in light. The driver either did not see or ignored the scene.

“You stupid bitch. Go back to your friends and good luck to you.”

He climbed into the car. Thumped the horn several times to relieve stress, swearing.

“Let's go,” he said. He pulled away and drove. In the mirror, he saw Yulia give him the finger.

Getting used to that now.

CHAPTER 35. WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 7, 00:30.

The flat Bessarabian country was dark under the night sky. Large fields stretched away as far as the eye could see on either side of the Freeway. The ventilators brought the smell of manure into the car. He did not mind the stench. Had other things to think about. There was no break to the sameness apart from the rare farmhouse or wood. He turned down the radio when he saw Ekaterina nodding beside him.

Almost an hour later, he could feel the tension drain out of his muscles and was just beginning to relax as they neared the small town of Bashtanivka. His good mood vanished immediately when he saw a car rocketing up fast behind them.

He put his foot down and the lights dwindled behind the little Polo. But not for long. He overtook a tanker and pulled back in again. A black Mercedes E320-class saloon passed the tanker. Caramarin looked left. He recognised that car. Maiorescu's. With the tinted windows, he had no idea how many were in the car. It drew up alongside the Polo.

The front passenger window lowered. Litovchenko leaned out and fired at their tyre. Caramarin was glad to see that Placid looked even worse than he did. He looked pulped. Caramarin stamped on the brake and the Merc shot ahead. The air horn of the following tanker blared behind them.

Accelerated again and moved into the passing lane, about fifty metres behind the Mercedes. Caramarin leaned out and fired his piece at the saloon to let them know he was not defenceless. Not expecting to, purely by luck, he hit the rear window, shattering it into a net of opaque lines.

The big Merc swung over; he threw the Polo back into the inside lane. Caramarin tried to keep directly to the rear of the Merc. Thought directly behind Maiorescu's car was the safest.

The two cars sped down the Freeway, leaving the tanker behind. Tyres squealing, engine racing, the Polo's agility helped it swerve from one lane to another always keeping more or less behind the Mercedes.

A boot from the inside of the Mercedes kicked out the shattered rear window. It fell to the road. Caramarin swerved round it. He saw one of the men inside lean out over the trunk and fired off a burst from a Kalash. In the night, the bullets ripped past like tracer rounds.

He shouted for Ekaterina to get down. She cowered down in the foot well, making as small a target as possible, covering her head in her hands. Caramarin knew the second rear passenger was just an amateur. He fired one long burst at the Polo, probably the entire magazine; the Kalash's recoil jerking the weapon upwards, the bullets wasted in the air.

Caramarin saw stars from the flashes, blinked to try and get his night vision back. Still too much. One CZ-75 pistol against at least two gangsters with Kalashnikovs? Only one way this could turn out. With him and Ekaterina dead. He decelerated, still swerving across the road, trying to throw off their aim.

Behind him, the tanker was getting closer again. Another burst of fire from the Mercedes. A bullet hit the hood, another ripped off a side mirror, tearing it from the car. Caramarin veered in again and let the tanker overtake. He followed immediately behind it.

A couple of seconds later, the Mercedes was beside him. Litovchenko's window already down and a Kalash resting on the sill. The idiot smiled and said something but

Caramarin was too fast. He stretched across Ekaterina and snapped off a shot into the Mercedes's interior. No idea what happened next.

Again, he stamped on the brake, the Mercedes speeding past. Unable to believe his luck, he threw the wheel over. They hurtled down a side road as the tanker and Mercedes sped down the Freeway. He snapped off the lights. The road was too uneven with too many pot holes for Caramarin to continue at such high speed. He had to slow down. Behind him, he could see the lights from the Freeway receding in the distance.

The road was better than a farm track, but not by much. Had to slow further and he strained to see even a few metres ahead of him in the country dark. Hedges hemmed them in on both sides. Ekaterina pulled herself up into her seat. He looked at her. She wasn't crying or screaming as he'd expected. She gave him a small smile.

“How far have we got to go?”

“About thirty kilometres, more or less.”

Behind him, a kilometre away, he saw the Mercedes turn onto their road, its headlights searching the night for them.

“We've got no chance when they catch us. Get out when I say, OK.”

She nodded.

A hundred metres further on, in the shadow of a clump of trees, Caramarin saw a gate into a field.

He stopped the Polo and pointed. “Open that.”

Ekaterina jumped out and wrestled the gate open. He turned into the ploughed field and parked the car behind the hedge. A water logged ditch ran along the field side of the hedge. He caught Ekaterina's hand and, stumbling, ran further along the hedge. He threw her down and pressed her to the ground as the Mercedes drove past on the other side of the hedge.

They carried on for a while, crossing into another field. The muddy, furrowed land was hard going but he forced the pace, looking for a farm or village. Anywhere he could steal another car.

Later than he expected, he saw headlights ahead. As they drew closer, Caramarin saw it was the Mercedes on their back trail. He dragged Ekaterina down into the ditch and covered them with dead leaves and litter. They lay still as the cold mud and slime oozing like slugs penetrated their clothes and he heard the Mercedes drive slowly back down the road. If Maiorescu's men were careful, they would eventually spot the Polo.

“C'mon.”

He helped Ekaterina up and they jogged further. Into a third field.

“Over there.” He pointed at the skyline where a roof looked over the next hedgerow. He pulled her arm, trying to see what the Mercedes was doing behind them.

Panting, Ekaterina was out of breath when they got to the smallholding. A run down cottage, an open barn and a few sheds stood around a filthy yard littered with worn tyres and bits of abandoned machinery. A dog barked furiously at them. Caramarin tripped over an empty vodka bottle, dragging the girl down with him sending other bottles spinning and clinking. On his hands and knees in the mire he saw plenty of empties. He felt just a little safer then.

They made their way over to the barn. In the near pitch black inside, he made out a vehicle. An ancient ZAZ pick-up. Hadn't seen one that shape for ages. Caramarin hefted a piece of iron and smashed the driver's window. He felt under the dash and fumbled with the wires. The old engine spluttered and coughed and eventually chugged into life. He swept out the worst of the glass.

“Get in.”

He backed into the yard, sending more bottles over the cobbles. With the dog barking fit to burst, there couldn't be any more noise if he tried. So much for stealth. An old man appeared at the farmhouse door. Caramarin waved at him as he drove off.

The old pick-up was a wreck. Probably hadn't seen a mechanic since the Orange revolution. The inside was littered with old bottles, sweet wrappers, newspapers and it stunk of wet dog and manure. A little icon dangled from the mirror. But it went. Maybe it was held together with string and chewing gum but it still moved.

“Look,” said Ekaterina. “A shotgun.”

She pulled it from its resting place by the passenger door.

“Some old blunderbuss, probably. See if you can find any shells in this mess.”

He drove out of the farm and back onto the narrow country road. The immensity of the flat Bessarabian landscape swallowed them up. They could have been the only people for kilometres in any direction. Except he knew that somewhere, out there, was a Mercedes filled with gangsters armed with Kalashnikovs whose only interest that night was their deaths.

Ekaterina turned in her seat.

“How much further d'you reckon now?”

“Not too sure, I've never been down this far before. We must be getting close to the Danube now.”

They drove several more kilometres. He was relieved that he could not see any headlights in the distance.

“Keep your eyes open to your right. If we start sinking, we've gone too far.”

She smiled at his attempt to cheer her up.

Could have done with a Sat-Nav as Caramarin was starting to think he'd taken a wrong turning somewhere in the tangle of country roads and farm tracks. Until Ekaterina clutched his arm and pointed.

“Over there!”

He looked. Must have been driving over a slight ridge because he saw the broad, dark gleam of the Danube. The border between Ukraine and Romania. He'd crossed the border dozens of times but never had the river been as welcome as now. Everywhere was dark, like time had not moved on here. The only modern distraction was a set of headlights patrolling the river bank in the distance.

“Yes.” He punched the air and turned towards the river.

Then Ekaterina screamed. Hurtling down the road was the Mercedes. Its beams slashed the air, twin searchlights bringing death.

“Shit.”

A long salvo from a Kalash caused him to swerve sharply down a cart track, bouncing over a ploughed field. He switched off the lights but this time there was no escaping from the Merc. Looking back he saw Placid lean out and fire a burst. The bullets drilled into the back of the old ZAZ pick-up. The rear tyres blew and he couldn't control the pick-up. He aimed it towards the nearest hedgerow and stamped the pedal to the metal.

The beat up old vehicle crashed into a tree and stopped. He flung open the door. Ekaterina followed, bringing the shotgun.

“Out!” he shouted and pulled Ekaterina into and through the hedge. A branch cut his face and he fell over a root. Regaining his feet, he forced her along in the direction of the river. Looking back as they ran, he saw three men jump out of the Mercedes. The driver backed the car around and headed out onto the road.

One of the men fired a ragged volley at them. Wasting ammo at this range at a moving target with an obstruction between them.

He thought quickly as they ran. He had one advantage, one card to play. He was combat trained and they weren't. However, they held all the other cards including three aces. They had three Kalashs.

Beside him, he heard Ekaterina gasping for breath. She was running with one hand pressed to her side. Knew she wasn't hit. If she had been hit by a bullet fired from a Kalash, she wouldn't be moving now. She'd be on the floor with her guts spread over several metres of field.

It was plain she couldn't go much further at the moment. Came to the edge of the field and another ditch. He saw a concrete culvert or storm drain. He stopped.

“Get down,” Caramarin hissed. He pushed her head down. She looked up. Trusting him, she passed him the shotgun, lay on her belly and wriggled into the wet drain.

“Stay there. I'll be back soon,” he promised.

CHAPTER 36. WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 7, 02:00.

Caramarin threw himself into the ditch. He rubbed mud over his hands and face. Then crouching, made his way through the tangled undergrowth back towards the three gangsters.

He had to give it to them; they'd seen enough war movies to know not to bunch up together. They were moving in a ragged combat line down the hedgerow. Placid and another man in this field and a third in the field with the pick-up.

He lay face down in the ditch, with the shotgun under him. He stilled his breathing as much as possible. Flat, shallow breaths only. Above the sound of the vegetation moving in the night breeze he heard the hunters' footsteps pass above him.

Caramarin waited. Not too long as he couldn't let them reach the culvert. He raised his eyes above the lip of the ditch. All three men were between him and the storm drain now. He aimed his shotgun at the lone man and pulled the trigger. The hammer fell uselessly. The click sounded loud in the near silence. He pulled the second trigger.

No misfire there. The boom crashed deafeningly on his ears. The man staggered and fell forwards. Dropping the now useless shotgun, Caramarin was up and out of the ditch instantly with a single leap through the gun smoke. He raced the few steps to the fallen man. Diving to the mud, he used the man's body as cover as he snatched up the fallen Kalash. Now the odds were a bit better.

The prone man writhed. Caramarin didn't think the man had long left. His blast had made a mess of his neck and shoulder. Gore poured onto his suit and to the muddy ground. He could've cared less.

Two bursts from the other field scythed through branches and trees and dug into the muck near him. Caramarin did not waste ammo like the two gangsters. He fired a couple of single shots to keep their heads down. He felt through the dying thug's jacket but found no more ammunition. Disappointed but not surprised the amount they had been wasting. Took his bankroll, though.

“Hey, Cunt, we're still going to fuck you over.”

He aimed a couple more shots at the voice in the other field. Now Placid and the other man knew Caramarin also had a Kalash, they seemed reluctant to engage. The dying man spasmed once, twice then lay still. Not raising himself, using his elbows, Caramarin wriggled on his belly back towards the culvert.

A burst of fire slammed into the corpse behind him rolling it over, jerking into the mud. Caramarin pressed his face to the earth, the dirt working its way into his mouth and nose. He wriggled forward again, getting as far as possible from the shooting.

Caramarin thought rapidly, remembering his training from years ago. Didn't want to fire and give away his position with muzzle flashes. Knew that if he moved slowly and carefully in the dark, he didn't think the others would see him. On the other hand, how long could Ekaterina lie in a concrete pipe with gunfire going off? He trusted her, she seemed sensible, but didn't want to leave her too long.

Caramarin continued his slow crawl. Breathing silently, through his mouth, his ears straining at every noise. He approached the hedgerow again, higher up than before and nearer to the storm drain. He peered through the branches and undergrowth.

He got to his knees, the Kalash held out before him, finger resting on the trigger guard. Couldn't see the others anywhere. He pushed further into the hedgerow, moving slowly, easing the branches aside, ignoring the sudden sting of nettles on his hand, the scratch of bramble thorns snagging his camo jacket.

Where were they? He looked back over his shoulder. Shit, they'd separated. One thug must've followed him through the hedge and was now in the field behind him. He was crouched by the body, turning it over. Dunno what he expected to find out there.

But where was Litovchenko? A glimpse of white shirt. Oh shit, he was by the culvert itself. Had he heard Ekaterina? Did he know she was there? The good thing was Caramarin now knew where the two men were but the bad thing was he was between them like the meat in a sandwich about to be eaten.

He breathed deep, steadied himself. He pivoted around behind him, breathed out and on the exhale shot a burst at the thug behind him. The bullets zipped across the field slamming into the hood, knocking him back several metres, a spray of gore fanning out into the night. If the man screamed, Caramarin didn't hear it above the blast. Instantly, he spun round and fired a burst at Litovchenko.

Except he didn't. Fired one, maybe two shots and then the firing pin fell uselessly.

Placid roared out "Cunt." Sprang towards Caramarin firing from the hip like he'd seen far too many Red Army soldiers do in far too many war films. Caramarin hurled himself into the ditch. A root or boulder punched him in the back. A red tide of agony washed over him. He lay back as shredded leaves and branches fell into the ditch around him. Caramarin felt in his pocket for his little CZ-75 pistol.

There are no words to describe the ultimate sinking feeling of horror when he couldn't feel the pistol. He groped in the other front pocket. Not there.

Another burst of fire above him from the assault rifle. Caramarin started to his feet just as Litovchenko appeared on the lip of the ditch.

“There you are, Cunt.” Placid aimed the Kalash straight at his chest. A grin spread over his face. He slowly lowered the assault rifle dragging the moment out, pointing it at his groin.

“The boss would love me to blow your fuckin' balls off.”

“Funny, didn't know you were that way inclined. Thought you only got it up for little girls.”

“What!”

A movement behind Litovchenko. The big man started to turn his head and then toppled forward into the ditch.

Ekaterina stood on the edge holding a bloody rock. She dropped it and shuddered. Caramarin picked up the Kalash and smashed the butt down onto Litovchenko's head. He held up his hand and Ekaterina helped pull him out of the ditch. He clutched her tight and kissed her. Now he felt the CZ-75 tucked into his jeans waist band.

“Thank you.” Her body felt warm and soft and tender after the horror of the last few minutes.

She looked up at him. Her eyes were dry but she must be shocked by what she had just been through. He couldn't let her brood on it. Gave her a little shake.

“C'mon, tough girl. We've still got to get out of here. Not too far to go now.”

Together, they crossed a road and staggered across the next field in between rows of poly tunnels, making their way towards the far line of trees that marked the Danube. They clung to each other for support and comfort. Caramarin was impressed. This was one tough cookie. If she got through the night in one piece, she'd make out all right.

The poly tunnels were empty now. Empty of crops but there was still the staging along the sides and stalks and remnants of the harvest scattered about. The breeze rattled the plastic sides and shadows loomed up on all sides. Ekaterina held

Caramarin's hand for security as they walked between the tunnels, starting at almost every sudden noise.

Behind them, on the road a splash of headlights and a squeal of brakes.

“Come on, hurry up,” said Caramarin pulling Ekaterina forward.

A burst of automatic fire raked the plastic behind them, shredding it to pieces. There was a shout and another burst. Caramarin dragged Ekaterina into an opening of the tunnel alongside. He threw her to the ground and covered her with his body.

He heard running footsteps approach, come closer, and then pass them by. In the near pitch darkness of the poly tunnel he wasn't surprised the man had missed them.

They stood and made their way down the middle of the tunnel, hands stretched out in front of them. Stumbled several times but couldn't get lost in the dark. Not in the middle of a tunnel. Up front, more dark shadows and the dark of not knowing where their enemy might be. That was the worst, the doubt, the uncertainty, the not knowing if a burst from a Kalash would rub them out at any time.

Maybe the wind shifted direction because now Caramarin could smell the river before them, that flat, vaguely metallic smell. The plastic sides rattled and rustled. But the wind brought voices from up ahead. Couldn't tell what they said. Then the reflected glare of a powerful torch or searchlight darting from side to side.

Once again, Caramarin's combat trained reflexes took over. He flung Ekaterina down. Up front, shouting. Then a burst from a Kalash blasting above the rattling of the tunnel. Instantly, a fusillade from several more assault rifles replying to the first.

“What's going on?” whispered Ekaterina, her voice tickling Caramarin's ear.

“I dunno, but I reckon our friend's playing with the border patrol.”

A few more shots shattered the night. Then, after a pause one single shot.

“That good or bad?”

“Bad for him. No doubt about that. But I don't want 'em to find us. Especially if he's hurt any of them. They might just gun us down thinkin' we're part of the same gang. They're the sort who shoot first and ask questions later. C'mon, girl.”

Caramarin helped Ekaterina to her feet.

“We'll try and keep our distance.”

Fetches out his knife and slashes the side of the poly tunnel and led her over to the next tunnel. Cut that side and into the deeper darkness inside. Forgets the staging and fell flat on his face. A section of the shelves fell over with him knocking plants and irrigation pipes to the floor. The crash sounded very loud in the night. Ekaterina giggled as he picked himself up.

She stopped giggling as the powerful torch shone their way. Once again, Caramarin dragged Ekaterina to the earth. The torchlight shone closer, reflecting off the transparent sides of the plastic, breaking up into dozens of different points of light. Caramarin gestured to Ekaterina and they crawled away from the light under the staging.

Heard voices. A shout summoning the rest of the patrol to the cut in the side.

“Down,” he whispered. He peered behind him and saw one, two, three men enter their poly tunnel through the cut. The patrol flashed their torches around and then walked up the centre of the tunnel. Within a minute, the men were up to where they were hiding under the staging. If Caramarin had put his arm out, he could have touched their boots as they passed.

“We'll never find anyone in these tunnels,” Caramarin heard one of the patrol moan as they passed.

“Might of been an animal knocked those shelves over, corp.”

“An animal cut that hole in the sides, did it? I'm telling you there's more fucking smugglers around. Keep your eyes open. And keep careful,” said the man in the lead.

The patrol passed by, torches swinging from side to side as they continued down the tunnel to the far end. As soon as they were out of sight, Caramarin stood and cut a hole in the opposite side of the tunnel and out.

The strain was starting to tell on Ekaterina now and she was shivering, whether with cold or fear he didn't know. Caramarin cut his way through the next two poly tunnels, going more carefully this time, taking care to make as little noise as possible.

When he thought he'd put enough distance between themselves and the border patrol, he headed through the poly tunnel in the direction of the river. Couldn't see their torches or anything but didn't want to hang about in case they called up a dog unit or a helicopter with thermal imaging.

They pushed through the birch trees and came to the Danube. Caramarin had originally intended to cross much higher up, nearer the border town of Izmail. He didn't know this area of farmland on the edge of the nature reserve so well. On the far side of the river was Romania. His old homeland. He thought about crossing with her but Odessa was home now.

At this point, the river was about eight hundred metres across, broad and slow moving. Birch trees lined both banks. In the day it would look beautiful but at night, he thought the blackness looked sinister. Too many hidden dangers. Apart from a container barge heading up river it was deserted.

He drew breath.

“Think you can swim that?”

“I don't know. Perhaps.”

“Look for a float – a branch or a pallet or something to support you.”

They walked upstream along a footpath. Couldn't help but notice the worried looks she was giving the river. Maybe a hundred metres further on she spotted a large white object on the bank. Pulling it out from the mud, Caramarin blessed their stroke of luck.

Only litter but possibly life saving litter. It was the polystyrene packing off a fridge freezer or washing machine.

“Right,” he said, taking a plastic bag from his camo jacket. “Time to go.”

He dropped her passports and some money into the bottom of the bag. She stripped to her bra and pants and put her clothes and shoes in. Caramarin sealed it.

“You've got the numbers I gave you?”

She nodded.

“Why don't you come with me? You can't go back there. Those gangsters will kill you.”

“They haven't managed yet. And I've got business to sort out.” Also, he couldn't face seeing his brother-in-law. Ekaterina flung her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“Thank you. Oh, please please come with me.”

“I can't. Now get going before that patrol comes back.”

He watched as she pushed the polystyrene float into the Danube and lay on it. She kicked off with her feet and out into the river. The gentle current pulled her downstream.

“It's freezing.”

“Keep going and you'll get warm. Good luck and take care.” He blew her a kiss then watched her push off. He was glad she couldn't see the tears in his eyes. Watched for a minute and then made his way back through the fields.

CHAPTER 37. WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 7, 08:00.

Prosto Radio 102.5 FM Breakfast announcements. Eight A.M.

“And in breaking news, Militsia have found the bodies of three men in fields by the Danube delta. They suspect smugglers were interrupted last night. One of the smugglers fired at the Militsia officers and was killed in cross fire. Fortunately, none of the Militsia officers was injured. More in our next news flash at nine.”

“And now the weather report. Ivana?”

Dawn found Caramarin sitting on the bed of a truck carting a load of sugar beets in the direction of Odessa. Tried eating one, he was that hungry but it was too woody. He watched the flat landscape unroll beneath him and thought about what he had to do. He jumped off when the truck turned off the highway.

Looking as he did, he knew he'd have to walk the rest of the way. Also, he didn't want to answer any questions about the AK-47 shaped object in the sack he was carrying. As the day warmed up, he took off his camo jacket and wrapped the sack in it.

Needed money, needed a change of clothes, needed a place to stay. Mostly, needed to finish with Maiorescu.

Money was no problem. Caramarin walked over to the long distance bus terminal off Balkivs'ka Street a couple of kilometres out of town. Looking as beat up and worn out as he was he fitted in with the dossers and alkie hanging around.

In a bin, he found an empty vodka bottle. Just what he needed. He slumped in a doorway with the bottle between his knees and a polystyrene cup in front of him. Kept his head down, sat still but watched what was going on. Reminded him of his sniper course from long ago. Concentrated on his breathing.

A white coach arrived. A group of western tourists stepped out and milled around. He could tell they were western from their expensive hiking clothes. They were only young, maybe on a gap year from university. Couldn't tell from their language where they were from, but that didn't matter. Mixed boys and girls. Ideal.

An athletic blond lad in a plastic Viking helmet was holding up a map and getting in the way of other passengers. They looked confused by all the Cyrillic writing and the Ukrainian announcements over the tannoy.

Marvellous. Circling like a jackal was Radu. One of the pickpockets and sneak thieves who hung about the terminal. Liked to prey on foreigners after a long journey as they were dopey and slow and didn't know how to raise the alarm. He was usually long gone by the time his mark knew they'd been robbed.

Caramarin liked to watch an expert at work. Even watching, Caramarin couldn't see how the boy did it but knew he'd come away with something. His fingers dipped like a flash into the westerners' pockets. Watched as Radu slipped the gear to a friend and they both melted away.

Caramarin was on his feet and followed the two lads out of the terminal and down a rancid alley behind a coffee shop. Had to act quickly before they passed it on. They'd stopped by an overflowing dumpster and had two wallets spread open.

"Sorry guys," said Caramarin in Romanian. They jerked their heads up. "Tax time. Pass it over."

"Fuck you, Caramarin."

"Yeah, you must be in shit to have to be robbin' us."

"I'm not arguin'. Just give." He smashed the vodka bottle against the side of the dumpster. "Now."

The two lads backed off.

"Sorry about that. Better luck next time."

He stuffed the cash into a pocket. Not as much as he'd like. One of the tourists had obviously heard about Odessa's reputation and had hoped to get lucky so had put a few condoms in his wallet. Caramarin took them too then buried the rest of the wallet in the waste.

His life had gone downhill. Not long ago, he was eating caviare and riding in a top of the range BMW M5 next to a beautiful woman. Now he was dressed like a down and out and robbing scum bags to survive. But what did it matter?

Until he'd sorted Maiorescu, his life wasn't going anywhere anyway. He jumped a minibus into town. Bought himself a holdall for the Kalash and a fresh combat jacket and jeans.

CHAPTER 38. WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 7, 08:00.

Treated himself to a shave and a sauna. Also to a hand job off the masseuse. Quick and clinical. Next please. However, he felt like a new man after that. As he got dressed, Tailpipe came in.

“What're you up to, Caramarin? Maiorescu's lot are lookin' all over for you.”

“Thought they were, comrade. I'm here now, aren't I? If he wants me for anything, he's got my number.”

“It was good knowing you, Caramarin. You want my opinion, get out now. Go back to Romania. Or Iceland or Australia or somewhere a million miles away.”

“I'm not leaving. Tell him that, comrade.”

“You can tell the old bugger yourself. See you around.” Tailpipe pushed past Caramarin into the dim, steamy sauna.

The early October sunshine dazzled him. He slipped on his shades and took a cab over to

Deribasovskaya Street. Sat out at a table on the tree lined boulevard and watched the world go by. The pastel buildings looked great in the sun. The smartly dressed young people all looked like they belonged to the in crowd. A people who knew how to

enjoy themselves and live life to the max. At times like this, Odessa was the best place to live in the world.

He felt tired but wired. Nervous energy fizzed through his bloodstream. Knew it was essential if he was going to live here to show that he wasn't afraid. And he wanted to live here.

Ordered the good healthy Ukrainian food he liked for lunch. He dialled Valeriya but she wasn't answering. Maybe she was sleeping. Wasn't concerned but when she still wasn't answering an hour later, he felt a clutch of worry around his heart.

Paid for lunch and left a decent tip for the pretty young waitress. Then he took a trip out to Seven Kilometre Market. Bought ammunition for his Kalash and CZ-75 pistol from a man who charged double the usual rates. Picked up a couple of other items.

Had to pay more than he expected and the dealer seemed unwilling to sell. Word about him was definitely getting around. Caramarin dialled Valeriya several more times but it always went to voice mail. The worry was turning to fear by the time he got back to Odessa.

His cell rang. Wasn't surprised to see Maiorescu's number on the display.

“You bastard, Caramarin.”

“And good evening to you, too, comrade.”

“Cut out the funny stuff, shit head. You've cost me a load of money.”

“I know. You went too far with this sex trade stuff, you pervo. I didn't mind doing the money laundering, the protection, the extortion, even the gun running but what you were doing...”

“Listen,” Maiorescu cut in, “I'm not fuckin' interested. There's good money and if a few slags get burned, who cares. Now listen good.”

Valeriya's voice on the cell.

“They've got me, they've got...” The sound of a blow.

“Yeah, we've got your whore and her lad. They're safe with us now.”

“Don't you dare touch them!” Caramarin shouted, making several people nearby turn to look. But one look at the angry man in a camo jacket on a cell and they looked away instantly.

“We need to meet. At the warehouse at eleven, capisce.”

“No way. Not going into that death trap. No, I'll see you on the Potemkin Stairs at six. Nice and open and public. Okay, comrade.”

“I give the orders. Why the fuck should I see a low life loser like you there?”

“Because I've got a copy of your laptop's hard drive. Remember when you forgot it in your car? Want me to make several copies? Want me to send them onto your friends, the papers, the Militsia? That what you want?”

There was a pause at the other end; he could hear a whispered conversation.

“And you'd better bring Valeriya and Vladimir, too, that's if you want the disc.”

“How do I know how many copies you've run off?”

“You don't, pervo. But if you want to find out, you'll be there. With Valeriya.”

Caramarin closed the call.

Now he had to get off the street. Would be too easy for Maiorescu's thugs to rub him out before he had a chance to get Valeriya back. And he needed to settle with Maiorescu once and for all. No way was the gang boss going to let him get away with screwing his wife.

Caramarin took a mini bus to Moldavanka. He knew where his landlady hid a spare key under a flower pot so let himself into her apartment. Knew he had a few hours free because she always went to her social club most afternoons to catch the latest of which of her friends had died or been admitted to hospital.

He sat at her kitchen table and methodically stripped down and oiled the Kalash and CZ-75 pistol. Emptied and refilled the magazines. The long remembered skills kept the fear at bay as he concentrated on the task in hand. He looked up at the clock. Time to go. Slipped the pistol into a pocket and the Kalash into a sports bag then let himself out.

He made it to the Potemkin Stairs with time to spare. He leaned on the shady side by the statue of the Duc de Richelieu and looked down the Stairs. At this time of day, the Stairs were full of people coming and going. Tourists peering about them, locals in a hurry, sharp suited businessmen on cells, children laughing and playing. No way would Maiorescu start anything with so many witnesses.

Hoped it would be a simple exchange but expected anything to happen. He glanced down at his watch. Six p.m. exactly. He watched the people walking past. No-one he knew, no-one he recognised. Ten past. Easy, Maiorescu maybe running late. Twenty past. Maybe playing with him, showing him who was boss. Now half past.

A vagrant in the tattered remnants of a suit walking past, noticing Caramarin still standing there, put the bite on. Caramarin gave him a handful of change and the dossier shuffled off. Caramarin stretched and walked round the statue. Still no-one there.

Seven p.m. came and went. Startling him out of his watchfulness his cell burst into life; he pressed the green button.

“Still there? I'm changing the meet to three a.m. in the morning. Same place. Okay? You want to see your bitch and her boy again, you'll be there. Capisce?”

“Let me speak to her! I need to know they're all right.”

Valeriya's voice came over the air.

“Nicolae! Don't go! Don't...” her voice was cut off.

“Maiorescu. Is she all right? Tell me you bastard,” shouted Caramarin.

“So far. But if you want them back, you'll be at the Stairs with my disc at three. No tricks, you bastard.” Maiorescu cut the call.

Maiorescu and no tricks? Not bloody likely. Caramarin wanted to walk away from this meeting.

Didn't want his bloody body rolling down the Stairs at five minutes past.

CHAPTER 39. WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 7, 19:30.

Caramarin looked around. He picked up his sports bag and walked over to Deribasovskaya Street. In the alleys behind the restaurants, amongst the black bags and dumpsters, he found what he was looking for. The vagrant in the wrecked suit, or another very like him, was standing on a box rooting through a bin looking for scraps. The stench of rot made Caramarin gag. Yes, he'd do. Was about the same height and build.

Despite his drunken state, the tramp's street survival skills meant he quickly became aware of someone watching him. The man looked down at him.

“Whachhoo wan'?”

Caramarin held up a twenty hryvnia Frankel.

“Want to earn this?”

“Whachhoo wan, missr? A blow?”

“Fuck off.” Caramarin shrugged off his camo jacket and held it up. “Do you want this? Better than what you're wearing. Warmer, too.”

The derelict stepped down with his hand out.

“Yeah, shure, missr.”

Caramarin stopped him. “I want to swap clothes. Everything. That all right with you?”

“Yer some weird pervo, missr?”

“No, call me a mysterious benefactor.”

“Wha'?”

The tramp pulled off his jacket and hung it over the edge of the dumpster. He kicked off his shoes and let his trousers fall down. His filthy, sweat stained shirt and tie was the last to come off. Underneath, his sunken chest was decorated with a prison tattoo even Placid would have admired. The tramp was about to drop his piss stained boxers before Caramarin stopped him.

“Not those, comrade.”

Caramarin emptied his pockets, threw the camo jacket to the vagrant and then undressed. Hoping the dossier didn't have lice or anything infectious, his skin crawling with disgust, Caramarin dressed in the sweaty shirt and beat up suit. The shoes pinched his feet.

“Hey, missr, worra'bout me munny?”

Caramarin handed over the Frankel.

“Hey you want to earn more?” The tramp nodded. “You want more, be at the Duc de Richelieu statue at three tonight. Got that, comrade? Understand?”

The tramp peered at him, his eyes goggling with suspicion, confusion and greed.

“It's okay, comrade. No blow jobs required. Three this morning.”

The tramp shuffled out of the alley to buy rot-gut booze. As soon as he left, Caramarin smeared filth from the dumpster over his hands and face and, if possible, dirtied up the suit some more.

Found half a glass of soured wine at the bottom of a bottle and poured it down his front. Picked up a piece of cardboard and wrote with his left hand, in ill formed letters 'Homeles and Hungry Plese Help'.

Lurching out of the alley and weaving his way down Deribasovskaya Street. Furtively looking around, he was pleased with the looks of disgust the beautiful people gave him. His disguise was working. Weaving his way to Prymorska Street, past the statue of the Duc still with his hand out cadging for change.

Staggering part way down the Stairs where he could clearly see the Duc then sat down with his cardboard sign propped in front of his sports bag together with a polystyrene cup. He tossed in a few kopecks and waited.

Slumped down, with his long hair in front of his face he could see nearly everything going on the Stairs. He concentrated on controlled his breathing and his thoughts as he had been taught on sniper training all those years ago. Live for the moment, let nothing distract you.

As the hours passed, the crowds thinned. Most ignored him, many looked down with contempt. Some tossed coins into his cup. Did best with men trying to show their caring side to their girls. If he survived tonight, maybe he could take up begging as a living. Maybe he'd have to.

The Militsia looked down at him. At first, they took no notice of Caramarin as he wasn't actively panhandling for change. But later, one more aggressive than the rest roused him on. Caramarin mooched around for a while before returning to a different spot higher up the Stairs.

After the sun went down, the evening chill gnawed into his bones and his thin trousers were no protection from the cold concrete. First Venus, the bright evening star, and then the moon came out. Caramarin crouched in the deepest shadows. Wished he still wore his combat jacket.

After about one thirty in the morning, the Stairs were deserted. Occasionally, the odd passer by walked past, but now he had the Stairs to himself. Concentrate. Breathe. Live in the moment.

Now it was time. Three in the morning. When the body is at its lowest ebb and the blood runs slow. Still nothing happened. Then, staggering up to the Duc's statue, his vagrant. The lure of a bit of extra money too strong to turn down. The man rested an arm on the statue's base, looked like he was going to piss against it.

Stepping out of the shadows at the top of the Stairs. Oilfield. Even in the darkness, Caramarin knew it was Oilfield. The gangster stepped up to the vagrant. The man started to straighten up just as Oilfield placed what looked like a white bottle to the back of the man's head. It was so quiet now, even from where he was sitting Caramarin heard a dull pop. So that was how it was meant to go down.

The vagrant collapsed like all the strings holding him together were cut instantly. Oilfield knelt and rolled the body over then recoiled. Caramarin heard the gangster speak into his cell.

“It's not him, it's some fucking tramp, boss.” a pause. “No, I've no fucking idea where he is.”

Caramarin slid his CZ-75 pistol from out the sports bag. Oilfield started down the Stairs. As the man came near Caramarin's position, maybe his sixth sense kicked in.

“Huh?” he said. Started to raise his silenced pistol. Caramarin's first shot ripped out his throat, his second punched a hole straight through his heart. The man fell back and died before he hit the ground. The gunshots and smoke filled the air, filled his ears and nose.

Caramarin plucked Oilfield's cell from his pocket. Quickly pressed the last number on the calls dialled menu.

“Everything all right up there? I heard...” Maiorescu's voice.

Caramarin cut in. “No it isn't. Listen you bastard. Last chance. Send Valeriya and Vladimir up now or you're all dead.”

“Tough words, shit head. You've got five minutes to get down here before I kill 'em both, capisce?” Maiorescu killed the call.

Caramarin pulled his Kalash from the sports bag then dived over the low wall into the park behind the Stairs. He Paratroop rolled and finished up behind a bush. No response to his actions. He crouched and ran, ducking and weaving, moving from cover to cover down the slope. Paused to catch his breath and assess the situation.

The park was still and quiet, the only movement from branches swaying in the sea breeze. Light from the buildings on Primorskaya Street below filtered up through the park's trees. Caramarin couldn't see much of what was happening on the Stairs, so moved closer, gripping the Kalash tighter.

He carried on down the park's slope, maybe half way down now, keeping to cover, keeping one eye on the Stairs. From below, a sudden burst of automatic fire shredded branches. Shit, at least one of them had a Kalash as well.

A dog, a rail thin stray, raced up the slope, ignoring Caramarin. He looked for the muzzle flash but couldn't spot it. Even at this time of year was still too much vegetation. The enemy must be jumpy.

He distantly heard Maiorescu's voice calling up from below. Couldn't tell what he said but sounded angry.

Holding his Kalash in the ready position, he crept downhill. Another burst of fire, this time much closer. The bullets chewed up the ground only a few metres ahead of his position. The muzzle flashes came from behind a small beech, maybe fifty metres away, although it was hard to accurately judge distance in this light. Another burst followed. Yes, definitely from behind the beech.

Caramarin threw himself prone, unslung its stock and wedged the Kalash tight against his shoulder. He wriggled forward on his belly, using every scrap of cover and deeper shadow available. The other man stepped out from behind the beech tree. Was that VCR? Could be. Same height and build.

“Amateur,” Caramarin whispered to himself. He fired, sending the slugs ripping into then out of the man's torso. The man had time to scream, a horrible yell, before he staggered backwards, then crashed to the earth. His scream ended instantly in a dull thump.

“Should have stayed at home, comrade.”

CHAPTER 40. THURSDAY OCTOBER 8, 03:00.

Caramarin rolled away back towards the Stairs. Didn't want to fire again until he had a better target. He fetched up against the low white wall. Took a big risk and vaulted over it back onto the Stairs. A longer burst chased him over.

Laying flat, face pressed tight against the larger stone landing separating the flights of steps. Breathing heavily. Caramarin knew that, due to the optical illusion of the Stairs, those at the bottom couldn't see him. But anyone left in the park to the side would be on him any time now. He belly crawled along the landing working his way along to the other side where the cable car tracks lay.

Carefully, he avoided dislodging a cola can. He fetched up against the wall separating the tracks. Sitting up, he glanced behind him. Nothing yet. With the glow of the lamps, he couldn't get true night vision. Saw movement in the bushes over the way.

Raised his Kalash and sent a short burst over that way.

Now his position was compromised, he hurled himself over the low wall and onto the cable car tracks. Immediately picking himself up, Caramarin moved in a low crouch downhill. Behind him, he heard someone walking down the Stairs.

Some man, no-one he knew, weaving his way downstairs, well dressed. Holding onto the wall for support. Some drunk businessman, maybe making his way down to the Hotel Odessa. Couldn't believe it. How had the man not heard the fire fight going on around him?

“Fuck off, go back,” shouted Caramarin. “Go back up!”

The man looked around owlshly. Looked like he was going to sit down for a rest.

“Go! Go now!” screamed Caramarin. He fired one shot into the air. That caught the fool's attention. He turned and lurched at top speed back up the Stairs shouting incoherently. Like most drunks, when he needed to, the man had a remarkable turn of speed.

Fucking hell. What next? The way this was going, he half expected to see a woman pushing a baby in a pram down the Stairs. Wouldn't be a big surprise. In the relative quiet, now the drunk was half way back up to the Duc de Richelieu, Caramarin heard the distant wail of sirens against the background noise of the city. Not much time left.

Caramarin crouched and picked his way down the cable car tracks. Eyes everywhere, searching every scrap of cover, every dark shadow which could hide a man. Sirens wailing louder now; sounded like more coming along Primorskaya Street below. Not much time left. Caramarin picked up the pace.

Vaulting over the low wall from the park, now on the Steps themselves. Dmytro Litovchenko. Holding another folding stock Kalash. Caramarin grinned, a terrible grin which would have frightened those he was trying to save. Placid raced in a low crouch across the expanse of the Stairs, eyes fixed on the other side. He reached the opposite low wall behind which Caramarin hunkered.

Caramarin stood with his Kalash at his shoulder.

“Hey, Cunt,” he shouted.

Placid stopped. A horror of recognition on his face wiping out his steroid rage.

A seven point eight gramme round fired from a Kalashnikov's barrel leaves with a muzzle velocity of over seven hundred metres a second. Its muzzle energy is over two thousand joules.

At a range of a few metres, the bullet disintegrated the top of Litovchenko's head. One instant his skull was whole, the next there was just red oblivion. One instant the man was alive. The next he was burning in the fires of Hell. Or so Caramarin hoped.

The body crashed to the stone Stairs, sprawled half over one of the larger landings. No other shots coming at him. Caramarin stepped over the wall and kicked Placid's body. It rolled down several steps before coming to rest again.

Had to hurry. The sirens were definitely louder now. Keeping to the shadow of the low wall, Caramarin worked his way down the last few flights of the Stairs. No one fired at him or challenged him. At the foot of the Potemkin Stairs, he saw a couple of cars. Recognised Maiorescu's Mercedes and BMW X5 SUV.

No one about, Where the fuck was Maiorescu or any more of his hoods? Where was Valeriya? Caramarin peered into the Merc but couldn't see in because of the tinted windows. Heard some sort of noise coming from the back seat. Aware time running out quickly now, he tried the door handle. Locked. No surprise there.

Lifting his Kalash, he smashed its butt against the window. The window shattered into a thousand tiny squares. He smashed it again, harder, and this time the window glass fell into the car letting in some light. Saw Valeriya and Vladimir on the back seat, huddled together. Raised the lock then flung the door open.

Valeriya's face was bloody from her nose. Her eyes were swollen shut and her blouse had been ripped down, exposing her breasts. Blood spotted her blouse and breasts. Caramarin saw the grey gleam of duct tape over her mouth. She was struggling to draw breath into her lungs.

This side of her, Vladimir looked unharmed. But he also had been gagged and the poor boy looked terrified, his eyes staring in the dark interior. Both were sitting with their arms behind them.

Caramarin pulled his Swiss army knife from his pocket, opened it and knelt on the back seat. Vladimir backed away, pressing himself against his mother. With difficulty, Caramarin leaned over Vladimir then cut the cable tie binding Valeriya's hands. The cruelly tightened plastic dug deep into her wrists.

Cold metal pressed against the back of his neck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Out you wife-shagging piece of shit.”

Caramarin gradually backed out of the Mercedes and stepped away from it. Slowly raising his hands, he turned around.

Maiorescu's face was a mask of anger. Worse, he was holding a Makarov pistol with the barrel jittering in his hands. Less than a half kilo of pressure on the trigger and Caramarin reckoned he'd be joining Litovchenko in hell.

The sirens' howl much closer now. Endgame. Whatever happened now it would be quick.

Maiorescu shouted a word. Not what Caramarin expected at all.

“Natalya!”

The BMW SUV's passenger door opened and in the interior light, Natalya stepped out. She was wearing skin tight black jeans, designer no doubt, and a light-coloured jacket against the evening chill. Her blonde hair was done up in a high pony. Her mouth a tight slash of lipstick. Even under these circumstances, she looked good. Natalya took a few steps towards them.

Caramarin glanced to his side. Valeriya had left the Mercedes and stood by his side. She was rubbing her wrists where the cable ties had bitten into her flesh.

“Listen, your problem is only with me. Let Valeriya and her boy go, please.”

“Shut your whining, shit head.” His senses on full alert, Caramarin saw a bandage poking out from under Maiorescu's short sleeved white shirt.

“They've done you no harm. They're innocent. Only me, okay.” Caramarin spread his arms wide. Tried to brace himself for the pain and then black oblivion.

Valeriya slipped her arm around Caramarin's waist. Felt her warmth against his side. Her head only came up to his shoulder but thought the woman had more courage in her little body than he had in his.

Maiorescu handed his Makarov pistol to Natalya.

“Prove what you said earlier. Shoot the fucking bastard,” he said.

Natalya looked at her husband, her mouth down-turned. The pistol wavered in her hands.

“Don't make me! I can't,” Natalya cried out. Natalya took a step to the side away from both Caramarin and Maiorescu. Looked like she was now covering both men with the pistol. Her eyes filled with water, tears streamed down her cheeks.

Round the curve of Primorskaya Street, Caramarin saw blue and red lights strobing off the buildings. The Militsia.

“Hurry up,” barked Maiorescu. “The fucking Militsia'll be here any second now.”

As if called by his words, the first squad car hurtled round the corner. The siren's howl now louder and more insistent. The car driving fast towards the group.

The gun was still wobbling between the two men. She swung it from one to the other. Her face was a crumpled wreck of turmoil. Natalya's trigger finger tightened. Valeriya threw herself forward at Natalya, knocking the pistol to one side. The gun fired, a blaze from the muzzle, the crack blasting above the siren's sound.

Maiorescu fell back, coughed, covered his chest with his hand, looked at the blood trickling out from under his palm. He coughed again, or made a choking sound, then fell to his knees. His eyes looking up, puzzled and disbelieving. The man collapsed face first to the floor. His body twitched.

“I was going to shoot him anyway. I just couldn't do it,” pleaded Natalya. “It's you I love, Nicolae.”

“I know. Now come on. Quickly.” He grabbed her arm and pushed her towards the BMW SUV.

“Start it up,” he told her.

Valeriya plucked Vladimir out of the Mercedes and held him tight whilst Caramarin scooped up the Kalash from the pavement. The couple raced to the BMW and dived in moments before the squad car drew up to the Stairs.

“Floor it,” said Caramarin.

THE END.

If you enjoyed this story, Nicolae Caramarin returns in the next books in the series:

* **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 third story in the series:

* **Two Ways Out:** Having fallen on tough times, hardbitten 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 Nico Caramarin get out from under and clear his name?

*** Snow Bird:**

You can connect with the author, Morris Kenyon, on Facebook and follow on Twitter where you will find regular updates. Thank you.

[CHAPTER 1. MONDAY OCTOBER 5, 20:30.](#)

[CHAPTER 2. MONDAY OCTOBER 5, 20:50.](#)

[CHAPTER 3. SATURDAY JUNE 27, 14: 00.](#)

[CHAPTER 4. FRIDAY JULY 3, 22:00.](#)

[CHAPTER 5. SATURDAY JULY 4, 02:30.](#)

[CHAPTER 6. FRIDAY, JULY 10, 19:30.](#)

[CHAPTER 7. SUNDAY, 12 JULY 19:15.](#)

[CHAPTER 8. SUNDAY JULY 12, 20:30.](#)

[CHAPTER 9. WEDNESDAY, JULY 15 18:30.](#)

[CHAPTER 10. FRIDAY JULY 17, 18:30.](#)

[CHAPTER 11. FRIDAY JULY 17, 21:00.](#)

[CHAPTER 12. SATURDAY JULY 18, 13:00.](#)

[CHAPTER 13. SUNDAY JULY 19, 21:45.](#)

[CHAPTER 14. MONDAY JULY 20, 07:30.](#)

CHAPTER 15. SATURDAY JULY 25, 23:00.

CHAPTER 16. SUNDAY AUGUST 2, 16:15.

CHAPTER 17. SUNDAY AUGUST 2, 22:15.

CHAPTER 18. MONDAY AUGUST 3, 08:00.

CHAPTER 19. TUESDAY AUGUST 4, 00:00.

CHAPTER 20. FRIDAY AUGUST 14, 21:15.

CHAPTER 21. SATURDAY AUGUST 15, 12:00.

CHAPTER 22. SUNDAY AUGUST 16, 00:45.

CHAPTER 23. TUESDAY AUGUST 25, 09:30.

CHAPTER 24. MONDAY AUGUST 31, 00:00.

CHAPTER 25. TUESDAY, 1 SEPTEMBER 21:00.

CHAPTER 26. WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 2, 23:00.

CHAPTER 27. THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 2, 00:01.

CHAPTER 28. THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 3, 09:30.

CHAPTER 29. THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 3, 14:30.

CHAPTER 30. TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 29, 20:15.

CHAPTER 31. TUESDAY OCTOBER 6, 01:00.

CHAPTER 32. TUESDAY OCTOBER 6, 09:00.

CHAPTER 33. TUESDAY OCTOBER 6, 19:00.

CHAPTER 34. TUESDAY OCTOBER 6, 22:00.

[CHAPTER 35. WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 7, 00:30.](#)

[CHAPTER 36. WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 7, 02:00.](#)

[CHAPTER 37. WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 7, 08:00.](#)

[CHAPTER 38. WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 7, 08:00.](#)

[CHAPTER 39. WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 7, 19:30.](#)

[CHAPTER 40. THURSDAY OCTOBER 8, 03:00.](#)