

**LOOKIN'  
FOR  
TROUBLE.**

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

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

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

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

Hannah Arendt – 1906-1975

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

Pablo Picasso 1881-1973

\* The devil made me do it.

Clerow 'Flip' Wilson 1933-1998

## **LOOKIN' FOR TROUBLE.**

### ***INTRODUCTION.***

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

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

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

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

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

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

## ***CHAPTER 1. TUESDAY NOVEMBER 17, 10:30.***

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His dark brown eyes widened.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

"Right," said Caramarin.

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

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

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

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

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

Caramarin nodded. That made sense.

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

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

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

Ozgan stood and opened the door.

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

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

"No, that's all right."

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

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

## ***CHAPTER 2. THURSDAY NOVEMBER 19, 05:00.***

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Easy.

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then he did the five knuckle shuffle before falling asleep.



### ***CHAPTER 3. FRIDAY NOVEMBER 20, 09:30.***

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

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

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

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

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

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