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The Searcher

Written by Chris Morgan

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CHRIS MORGAN JONES

THE SEARCHER



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For Rose and Luke

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Hammer had seen riots before, and knew this was how they began. At the bottom of the hill in the open square stood a crowd of three or four thousand, not organized but with a rough air of purpose, waving banners he couldn't read and singing with patchy enthusiasm. On the placards above their heads bobbed the horned head of a balding man with the bland expression of a politician, blood dripping down his chin from a pair of painted fangs. There was a tired anger in the air, and a growing impatience that matched Hammer's own. In and out, this had to be. Find what he was looking for and go home.

The driver slowed on the broken road, muttered something to himself and, coming to a stop in a queue of cars sat for a moment shaking his head and blowing out air, as if at some dreary but all too familiar difficulty.

'Can you go back?' said Hammer, sitting forward.

The driver shook his head and gave a full sigh. 'Nit shansi,' he said, looked over his shoulder at the cars lining up behind, and shrugged.

Somehow Hammer knew what he meant: this was Georgia. They were stuck, it was bad and there was nothing to be done but wait.

'We need to turn round,' he said, but the driver merely shrugged again. Hammer drummed his fingers on his thigh and wondered why they had come this way and how much

time it was going to cost. On a case like this you needed a quick start, and he was already two days late.

The sun was low but still strong, and in its stubborn heat the protesters were growing ragged and tetchy. Hammer stopped tapping out emails on his phone and from the cool of the car watched them for a while, took in their faces, the way they dressed, the hundred signs that made this crowd a Georgian crowd. The faces were dark, fine, handsome, Eastern and European at once. Caucasian, Hammer thought; of course, this was what it meant. A democratic group of men and women of all ages, though the front line was mainly men now, their expressions grimmer than the rest. Banners covered in a strange, curved script billowed in the wind and a hundred flags waved alongside them – red crosses on white, and in each quadrant a further red cross, flared and ancient-looking. For a moment Hammer imagined that he had landed in the middle of some forgotten holy war.

A line of police in black carrying shields and long black truncheons contained the crowd. Hammer lowered his window and on the hot air came the sound of chanting, in this growly sing-song language that he had hardly had a chance to hear. Beside him the whole front of a derelict townhouse had been papered with red-and-white election posters bearing another face – reasonable, impassioned, the same one that adorned half the T-shirts in the crowd.

‘This the new guy?’ said Hammer.

The driver twisted in his seat.

‘Candidate. Politician.’ Hammer pointed at the posters.

‘Speak Russky?’

‘No.’ Hammer smiled. ‘Just American.’

The driver raised his eyebrows and from the seat next to him picked up a newspaper, black with strange characters and smudged where his heavy fingers had held it. As he passed it over he jabbed at the headline on the front page.

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Hammer took it and thanked him. For a moment he was distracted by movement in the square, where a young man with a shaved head had walked up to a policeman and was now theatrically tearing up a poster in front of him. When he was done he threw the last pieces at the policeman's clear plastic shield, looked him in the eye and, with a great nod, spat down at his boots. The policeman stepped back a pace but did not respond and the young man went back to his friends with a fist in the air.

Hammer weighed the paper in his hand, felt a moment of fondness for the cheap ink that came off on his fingers, and took in the lead story, to the extent that he could. A single word in fat, round letters ran across all six columns and below it, extending beyond the fold, two photographs: one of a devastated building, its front blown off, the other of the man whose fanged face was being brandished in the square. The words were unintelligible but Hammer had an idea of their meaning.

'The president?' he said.

'President,' said the driver, nodding and gesturing at the crowd. 'Yes. Diakh.'

'He's the guy who started all this, huh?'

The driver turned, his frowning face in profile, and shrugged. The shrug was expansive and seemed to say he didn't understand the question, but it could have meant many other things: *Who know who starts anything?* or, *Who am I to say what any of this means?*

Hammer shrugged back. He understood the gist of it, from the scant reports in English: a bomb had destroyed an apartment block in a Georgian town, killing people as they slept and sending the country into a spiralling whirl of accusation and conspiracy. It was Islamists; it was the Russians; it was the opposition. The latest story to break, and the craziest, was that to win votes the president himself

had arranged the whole thing to look like a hellish Russian scheme – that to prove he was the only man capable of protecting his people against that ancient bogeyman he had sacrificed a few of them. Hence the fuss in the square. Hence the fangs.

What a case it would make. The best kind – big, delicate, visible. Dangerous, no doubt. The kind he lived for. Hammer let his instincts play with the idea, plotted its course, drew together a team and a plan in his head, imagined the cast. The president was the obvious client – he had the most to lose, or to save – but perhaps some sort of cross-party commission might be set up, to investigate independently and allow the whole painful business to close. It could be done, for the right fee, but it wasn't what he was here to do, and he had no intention of becoming involved. Besides, Karlo Toreli would have to take part, and Karlo was dead. What kind of case would it be without the man whose scoop had caused this whole mess in the first place?

Hammer put the paper down and, taking a handkerchief from his pocket, cleaned the ink from his fingers. Ahead, cars were beginning to turn round in a mess of back-and-forth; some freed themselves and came back up the hill, dusty Ladas and worn 4×4s, but the narrow entrance to the square was soon hopelessly clogged, and horns began to overpower the chants. Space opened up in front of them. The driver swore, pulled out fast into the path of an oncoming taxi and braked with a jolt before the two cars met.

‘Shevetsi.’

An inch apart, the cars stared at each other. Hammer's driver hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand, waved his fist at the windscreen and pointed to the side street into which he wanted to turn. Expressionless behind the dust on its windscreen, the other car stayed put. The driver leant on his horn, adding to the chorus.

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‘Use the sidewalk,’ said Hammer, but the driver merely raised a resigned hand. ‘Use the kerb.’

In the square, activity again caught Hammer’s eye. Another of the protesters, an old man with his belly lazily showing through his unbuttoned denim shirt, had torn the board from his placard and was now sweeping the wooden pole in front of him like an uncertain swordsman finding his range. Others were doing the same, running skirmishes up to the line of police, who had begun to shuffle together stiffly. Before, there had seemed plenty of them; suddenly there did not.

Hammer checked his watch. His plane had landed two hours ago, and it was all of ten miles from the airport to his hotel. This was eating up time he didn’t have.

The driver swore again, threw his arm over the seat beside him and, looking over his shoulder, began to reverse at speed up the hill. Hammer kept his eyes on the crowd. Three men were now beating the clear screens of the policemen’s riot shields, and it occurred to him that if everyone followed their lead they would take some holding.

‘OK. Time to get out of here.’

The car braked abruptly, and in the relative quiet before the driver revved the engine Hammer heard a hard crack, like a stone on glass, and though he saw no one move, nor any gun, he knew without doubt that the protester who fell had been shot.

‘Shevetsi,’ said the driver. He let the engine surge, found his gear and darted with a lurch down a narrow street to his left. Hammer had a last glimpse of the downed man, his friends stopped around him, and heard a new roar of fury as the moment of shock passed.

‘Shevetsi,’ the driver said, more than once. From behind them came two more shots.

The street was lined with parked cars, each one half on

the pavement, half on the pitted tarmac of the road, and though the Mercedes barely fit, the driver took it as fast as he could, the tyres squealing as they touched the kerb. Despite himself, Hammer started as the car clipped a wing mirror on his side.

Halfway down, an alley led back to the square. He glanced to his right and saw people running towards him, a man stumbling and another helping him up, heads turning to check behind them. A young woman, her hair tied in a flowered scarf, stopped for a moment to take a brick from a crumbled wall and hurl it in a high arc back onto the shields of the police.

This was what a riot looked like – Hammer recognized the mixture of zeal and fear in the eyes, made out in the distance the ones who were enjoying themselves, felt the panic of those running in his direction to get away. Forgotten instincts began to guide him. Best to leave the car and run with the rest, try to look as angry or as scared as everyone else. Cars got stuck in riots. Or take your camera out, make them think you're a newsman. More often than not they'd leave you alone.

But he had no camera, and in these clothes would never pass for a protester. He had packed his least conspicuous things but the truth was that he liked quality and could afford to pay for it. In every fibre he was wearing he was a world apart from the people in the square. The old instincts no longer served. They were for a young man, less respectable than he'd become. Someone without his money, and his luggage, and his briefcase, and the general air of comfort.

'Fast as you can,' he said, and shifted in his seat to watch the road behind.

The first protesters appeared and, without stopping, turned in his direction. First came a group running, keen to be gone, but the mass of people emerged into the street in

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confusion, stumbling ahead, shouting behind them, raising fists, picking up whatever they could find and turning to throw it. Wooden poles swayed like pikes. They were a frantic, angry troop, and Hammer was happy enough to be leaving them behind.

The car braked sharply and the driver let out some grand Georgian oath. Ahead of them an ancient red Nissan, unconscious of what was closing on it, had pushed out into the road, discovered that it hadn't enough room to get its nose past the car in front, and was now inching serenely backwards before making another attempt. Hammer's driver pummelled his horn. The first protesters were now level with them, and as Hammer looked back the street was full of people churning in his direction, smashing the windows of the parked cars with bricks and poles. He raised the window but the yelling and the chanting seemed to remain inside the car.

'You need to go round, OK?' shouted Hammer, leaning forward to touch the driver's shoulder and point at the kerb. 'Go round!'

The driver understood, began to roll the car onto the high kerb and was blocked by the Nissan, which juddered into the road again, taking its time.

'We need to fucking go,' said Hammer, locking the door and doing the same on the other side of the car. The noise dulled, for an instant; then the small space filled with a crash of sound. Hammer recoiled, his hands behind his head, forearms tight against his ears. Another crash. He stole a glance. Two men were beating the back windscreen, which splintered and sagged.

'Go!' he screamed, but there were people all around now, rocking the car, banging on the windows, pressing their faces up to the glass. Through them he saw the Nissan

driving off ahead, and a rock bouncing off its bumper. His driver had shrunk into his seat, arms up round his head.

Ben, I'm going to wring your fucking neck when I find you, thought Hammer and braced himself.