

Ruby V : Machu Picchu

Chapter 7 – Meeting Serge

“Lily knew she was the obvious person to organise the watchers and listeners. For a start she was the only one of them to have been an officer in UK intelligence. Todd had years with the military, but that was an entirely different animal.”

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The hotel had been chosen by the number of decent reviews and Lily liking the online pictures. Ruby had taken an interest at times, but Lily had made the choice. Within walking distance of the train station, but so were a huge number of other hotels. The number of hotels and places to eat was staggering, most of them clustered around the centre of Huancayo. For a city with a population a little under half a million, the number of hotels and restaurants was incredible. It was tourism of course, making sure the tourists were well fed, housed and likely to tell their friends that Peru had to be on their bucket list, with Huancayo as their destination city. Ruby was busy unpacking, hanging up her clothes in the hotel room’s wardrobe. Todd was looking at the view of the city, while stood on their own tiny balcony.

“Oh, there are never enough hangers.” She said.

“Call the front desk.” Said Todd.

The freshness of the air at ten thousand feet, took her towards the balcony. She put her arms around Todd’s shoulders and enjoyed the view. A little cool perhaps, but the view made up for that. An impossibly blue sky and mountains in every direction. Add that to a city full of history and she was looking forward to exploring the area.

“It’s beautiful.” She said. “No matter what, we must spend some time here.”

“How about a month, maybe two.....We are on holiday.” Said Todd.

“I was thinking of a week, maybe ten days.”

“That’ll do for me.” Said Todd.

The real world, the non-tourist world had already moved into their idyllic stay in Huancayo. Todd would have to know, though there would be better times to tell him. On the other hand, often it was best to get things out there, in the open.

“DINI are here, I felt their minds in the reception area.” She said. “Our names popped out of their thoughts, as soon as they saw us.”

“Crap, they must have flown here.” Said Todd.

“Regional office more likely, they carry out police intelligence duties.” Said Ruby. “They’ve probably got a floor in the local Peruvian National Police office. Nice that they’re watching our back.....”

“But their people will be known.....Soon every petty criminal in Peru will know we’ve something to hide.”

“Exactly.....The more they send to look after us, the worse it will get.” Said Ruby. “No asking them to clear off, as they’re doing this as a favour for Foxy.”

“Crap....So how do we handle this ?”

“Well.....We ignore them, we are on vacation.”

“Ignore them and hope they go away.....I like that idea.” Said Todd. “It won’t work of course.”

“I know.”

Sarah arrived, with Spider following her. No knocking on the room door, though in fairness, it had been left open.

"We had to see if your room was as nice as ours." Said Sarah.

"So, is it?" Asked Ruby.

"Oh yes.....Though I think our view is better." Said Sarah.

"What won't work?" Asked Spider.

Todd just laughed, which Ruby thought was better than getting angry. No use in telling him not to be nosy, it'd just make Spider even more curious. As was often the case, telling Sarah and Spider the truth, was the easiest path to take.

"There are DINI agents in the hotel foyer." Said Ruby. "We're going to ignore them and pretend we haven't noticed them."

"Oh, we can do that." Said Spider. "Need someone given a good ignoring....Just call Sarah and me."

"We could ignore people at an Olympic level." Added Sarah.

"Idiots.....Have you got any spare coat hangers in your room?" Asked Ruby.

"Lots, I'll get you a handful." Said Sarah.

Spider remained and wandered out to look at the view from their tiny balcony.

"Are you going to wait at the agreed spot today?" Asked Spider. "Or rest today and begin in the morning?"

"It needs to become a routine." Said Ruby. "The earlier I start, the better. We all have a learning curve about the area and the local population."

"We're going to begin after lunch." Said Todd.

"Fine, Sarah and I are ready." Said Spider.

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Angie had appointed herself post monitor for the building, which Chris found mildly annoying. Ruby trusted her though, according to Cal. It seemed Angie had been taking in post and parcels for Ruby, for quite some time. Not just books from Amazon, there had been confidential documents. Nothing had ever been steamed open or commented on by Angie. It seemed she was one of the mythical neighbours everyone would like to have, but doubts that they really exist. A busy body with control issues, who despite that, respects your privacy.

"Angie is fine.....Ruby would know if she wasn't." Cal had said.

Proper post boxes for each flat would have been nice, though that probably wouldn't suit Ruby. Nothing gives away that you're away from home a lot, like an overflowing post box. The post came through the letterbox on the front door, before being sorted into heaps by Angie. Post was pushed through the letterbox for each flat, usually by midday. Anything in the way of junk mail was placed on a table in the ground floor lobby, before being periodically chucked out. Ruby's post was different; Angie hung onto that until asked for it. As systems went it worked well, though Chris didn't like anyone fiddling with her post. The letter that wasn't properly addressed caused Angie to knock on her door.

"You're Mrs Christine Bull, aren't you?" Asked Angie.

"Yes, I am."

"Then this is yours.....There's no flat number on it." Said Angie.

Were there flat numbers? If there were, no one had told her. There had been problems with an overzealous neighbour in a flat below theirs, when she'd been married. Post was a way in for some people, an ice breaker for those not into chatting about the weather. Nice to have someone to take in the occasional parcel. Not so nice when they comment on the size of your credit card bill. Angie

was looking at her, expecting some kind of comment on the brown A4 size envelope. Chris was determined not to give her one.

“Thank you Angie.” Said Chris.

They were going to be enemies; Angie obviously recognised a fellow busy body and two in the same house could become a critical mass. With luck the babysitting job with Cal, would be over before things became really nasty.

“Fine....No problem.”

It wasn't the first letter Chris had received while living there. A steady flow of mail was essential for any cover, even if it was just a few magazine subscriptions. Nothing worse than trying to be incognito, in the one flat that never gets any post. An unexpected letter in a large brown envelope though.....That was a little weird. Too light to be anything likely to go boom, which was reassuring. Chris put on a pair of thin rubber gloves, just in case there might be a need to conserve forensic evidence.

“Open it you pussy.....It's probably just marketing crap.” She muttered.

A colleague had been sent a turd in a box, a human turd. Nothing like that would fit in a brown envelope, but there were other unpleasant possibilities. Chris used a stainless steel dinner knife as a letter opening. The envelope contained just a single sheet of paper. Large curly writing on the paper, in green ink.

‘The house of interest to Ms Mason, has been torched by persons unknown.’

Green ink was one of those things, a piece of intelligence services folklore. Difficult to photocopy it was said, though her iPhone had no problem with taking a decent picture of the note. There was some evidence that MI6 had once used green ink on internal documents, though that was probably not as widespread as implied in novels. Chris had a good idea who'd sent the note and to them....Using green ink was being funny.

“Idiots.” She muttered.

Chris sent the picture to Monique, with a short note saying it had been received in that morning's post. That was enough for Monique to turn up that night, probably with Nazili. For various reasons Chris was sure the CIA had sent the note. Talk of that kind though.....It had to be face to face.

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Lily knew she was the obvious person to organise the watchers and listeners. For a start she was the only one of them to have been an officer in UK intelligence. Todd had years with the military, but that was an entirely different animal. Out of all of them, Lily thought she had the most appropriate training and transferable skills. It had still been nice, that Ruby hadn't needed much persuading.

“Just do as I ask, Thio.” Said Lily. “Don't wander off and when I ask something, tell me the truth. That way, we'll all get along perfectly.”

“You say that.....But Todd hates me.” Said Thio. “He threatened to kill me.”

“Relax; he's just concerned about Ruby. Do as you're told and no one will hurt you, I promise.”

They were walking along 'the' road, the one where Ruby was waiting. They passed her without comment, as she leant against a stone wall. Quite a few other people around, probably students at the Colegio Ramiro Villaverde Lazo, which everyone was calling the college. Lily watched Thio and was pleased that he didn't react to Ruby at all, not even a change of his eye line. It boded well and proved that when it mattered, he did listen to her. He even waited until they were close to the café, before talking.

“Will Todd be armed ?” Asked Thio.

A comment that was more than mildly alarming. The sort of question someone planning an attack might ask. Such a naïve thing to ask, that Lily decided it was, hopefully, nothing to worry about. Not that she was going to answer the question.

“Don’t worry about Todd....I told you.....Just do as you’re told.” Said Lily.

Sophie was near the café on the roundabout. Again Thio was perfect, tradecraft anyone at MI6 would have been proud of. No looking in Sophie’s direction, even his facial expression didn’t change. Maybe Todd’s paranoia about Thio was infectious. Lily began worrying that Thio’s street smarts were too good, for what he claimed to be, a poor Peruvian who earned peanuts working in a restaurant. The café had a few customers, but there was an empty table near the window.

“Order what you like, Thio.” She said. “We may be waiting here for a while.”

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It was a fresh morning, the temperature like an autumn day in London, with the threat of rain for later. That suited Sophie, who could wear a hoody and keep her face looking down as much as possible. Sophie was waiting among the locals at a bus stop on the roundabout, though she had no intention of getting on a bus. She didn’t match in perfectly with the crowd, though her new brunette hair wasn’t the problem her red hair would have been. She fitted the crowd reasonably well, which would have to do. Her mental link with Ruby was similarly, not perfect, but that too, would have to do.

‘Apart from Lily and Thio, no one has shown any interest in you.’ She sent to Ruby.

‘Oh, that’s disappointing.....I thought this outfit suited me.’ From Ruby.

‘Right....Yes, several young men did.....’

Sophie realise Ruby had been teasing her, when the laughter was in her head. Annoying that Ruby could project a mental chuckle, but she couldn’t. Sophie let the conversation die and began to concentrate on thoughts near the café. No one was thinking about Ruby, apart from two horny college guys, which was good. The real problem was going to be doing the same thing for several hours a day, for at least a week. Realistically, even the best team of watchers; lose focus when things get tedious.

‘All clear here, I’m going to walk down towards the college, Ruby.’

‘Fine.’

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Probably no warmer than thirteen degrees and Todd could hear a few raindrops hitting the bushes in the college campus. It was all good though; it meant he could wear a thick coat and pull his hoody down over much of his face. Like Sophie, he wasn’t going to blend in perfectly, but the hoody helped. He could see Spider and Sarah near the campus car park. Not much shelter from the rain over there, but they were tough and it wasn’t their first surveillance job. They’d tough it out, no matter how torrential the rain.

“Poor Ruby, drenched on her first day.” He muttered.

Todd had a foldup umbrella, that Ruby had bought for him. Her shopping trip to the camping and hiking store, had provided him with a reasonable weapon. A quiet weapon that could be easily pulled apart and discarded, if the need arose. A chubby fold up umbrella with a lead weight inside the folded up material. A boating lead weight, it too had come from the camping store. Thirty two ounces of lead, more than enough weight to break a limb, or crack a skull. A last resort really, just in case it was all a plot to harm Ruby. The noise of rain hitting leaves, suddenly went up in volume.

“Crap.....It really is getting heavy.” He mumbled.

Todd's job was as a roving watcher, looking for where Serge, or someone pretending to be him, might be waiting. Plus he was keeping an eye on the others, just in case they needed help. If Serge could see Ruby waiting, there were only so many places he could be waiting. Not behind her, there was a solid stone wall. In front of her was the college campus, full of students. The campus couldn't be totally ruled out, but Todd thought if Serge or Pseudo-Serge was anywhere, he'd be in the new buildings between her and the roundabout.

Todd was trying to ignore the deluge, as he worked his way through the college grounds, to get at the new housing from the rear. It had all been agreed with Lily; their private grievances had finally been forgotten. Todd could see the sense in letting Lily organise the watchers and it left him to be a roving watcher, or a rogue watcher as Ruby insisted on calling him. Ruby had her mental links, but Todd was connected to Lily by a burner phone and text messages. Luckily the city had good cell phone coverage. Lily was the controller, everything went through her.

'At rear of housing.' He sent.

A smiley face as a reply, their agreed way of saying received and read. Todd walked between two trees and put his foot on what looked to be grass. It was a gully and he was up to his knees in cold, dirty water.

"Crap." He muttered.

Tempting to yell a few obscenities, but he was quite close to the nearest house. Todd had been through worse, far worse. He walked to a slightly less sodden area of grass and began to look over the new houses. The closest had a child's stuffed toy on a windowsill, a bear.

"No, not there."

Ridiculous to use such an arbitrary filter, but he might only get one chance at choosing the right house. A young woman in a garden ruled out the second house and one looked....Far too affluent. When Todd saw what looked like a house that was still vacant, he knew....He just knew.

"There.....He has to be there."

A rear wall, though nothing he couldn't clamber over. The rain made everything slippery. It also deadened any noise he might be making. As Todd saw the perfect window, with just the right angle to see Ruby.....

"Fuck.....It is Serge." He muttered.

A face in the window and a tall man with hair styled in the manner Serge favoured. Todd had seen a lot of pictures of Serge, some in intelligence service files. There's no way of competing with a woman's ex, if he's a dead hero. He'd realised that and done his homework on Serge, even before he'd moved in with Ruby. He'd have recognised Serge across a foggy field at dusk. The figure in the window looked like Serge, but it wasn't him.

"Close.....But no cigar." He muttered.

So keen to get closer of the Pseudo-Serge, Todd committed the unforgiveable mistake of walking into some brittle tree branches. The face in the window turned, saw him and was gone. The grass was fairly water logged; it felt as though he was wading through treacle. By the time Todd reached the house, he saw a tall man running away from the building. There was the sound of a car starting, a car with a blue roof, as it went behind a hedge. Almost immediately, the car became just an engine sound, vanishing into the distance. Ruby would be devastated, but to him.....A fake Serge was actually a huge relief. Todd sent a text message to Lily.

'Saw the man. Looks like target. Certain he is not target.'

They were working to old school rules, Villand would have approved. Short text messages with no names, with all discussions face to face. It didn't surprise him when Lily called him, it had to be irresistible.

"You're certain it wasn't him?" Lily asked.

"I am."

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Lily didn't think Thio would run, or try and hurt her, but if all the training courses had taught her one thing, it was to never assume anything. The café wasn't that busy, though definitely not the place to have a fight. Tempting to take him outside, but he really didn't seem the type to get nasty. One instructor had always told her to trust her instincts, so she leant in close enough to talk in a whisper. "It wasn't Serge." She said. "Todd saw him and he looked like him, but it definitely wasn't Serge." Poor Thio, he looked so sad. Not that it was his fault of course, though Ruby might not see it that way. No one likes the bearer of fake good news, even if they're unaware it's fake.

"I'm sorry." Muttered Thio.

"All you did was pass on a message." Said Lily.

Tempting to send a text to everyone with a burner phone, which was just about all of Ruby's group. Too impersonal though, Ruby deserved to hear the bad news from a friend.

"Come on, we'll go and tell Ruby."

Thio didn't look keen and looked hesitant to leave the café.

"Don't run.....That will look really bad and we will find you." Said Lily.

"I have nowhere to run to."

If Todd was keeping to the rules, he wouldn't have called Ruby to tell her the news. He might have run to her though, to tell her in person. Where Todd and Sophie were, was answered by a text from Sophie.

'Searching target's house with roving watcher.'

If Thio had tried to run, Lily had decided to give him a few bruises as a reminder to behave. Even if there were people about, he couldn't be allowed to run away. On day two she'd already decided to have Spider with her in the café....Only there wasn't going to be a day two. Thio looked miserable, but so far at least, he was walking beside her. Ruby was still there, leaning against the wall. Lily got close enough for their elbows to touch, before leaning on the wall next to her.

"Todd saw the target." Said Lily. "It looked like Serge, but he's certain it wasn't Serge."

"It sounds like the target escaped." Said Ruby.

"I won't know details until they report back." Said Lily. "Sophie and Todd are searching the target's house."

Thio was at the edge of the path, digging at the dirt with the toe of his shoe. He looked like a moody teen, who knew he had a severe telling off on the way. Lily genuinely felt worried for Thio, as Ruby walked towards him. No one likes the bearer of bad news and Ruby had to be feeling very raw.

"Look at me Thio.....Did you know it was someone pretending to be Serge?"

"No.....I only saw him once."

Ruby hugged Thio, which seemed to surprise him, as much as it surprised Lily. After a few seconds of being hugged, Thio hugged Ruby back.

"I believe you." Said Ruby. "We must talk about your future. For now at east; I recommend you stay with us; you may still be in danger. Once we all go back to London.....You'll need somewhere in Peru to call home."

"I feel safe with you all.....On the bus." Said Thio.

Ruby stopped hugging Thio and began walking in the direction of the roundabout and the café.

“Text Todd and Sophie, Lily.” Said Ruby. “Get them to meet us at the café. Send everyone else back to the hotel; with instructions to enjoy themselves.....Is the food alright, at the Café ?”

“It’s alright....My burger was tasty.” Said Thio.

“Nothing to write home about....The coffee is good.” Added Lily.

“Good.....I’m hungry.” Said Ruby.

After that Ruby talked as they walked and it was often difficult to work out if she was talking to them, or herself. It was good that she was letting it all out though. Ruby with bottled up emotions and all those gifts.....It was something Lily didn’t want to think about.

“I should have realised of course.” Muttered Ruby. “The dead never come back, at least not like that. I think I was fooling myself, wanting to believe it so much. I saw Serge die; I was in the hospital ward as he took his final breath. I know, we all know.....There is no coming back from that.”

“Are we going back to Lima now ?” Asked Lily.

“The hotel booking is flexible, to a point.” Said Ruby. “Todd said he wanted to stay here for ten days, so I think we’ll do that. Huancayo is a beautiful city with a lot to see. We’ll become tourists for a while, genuine tourists.”

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Back at the hotel and Sarah would have asked the DINI agents to search their database, if Spider hadn’t said it wasn’t the done thing. Professional etiquette was the term he’d used. That from a man, who along with Lily, had brawled with two DINI agents, until it was obvious they were on the same side. Sarah had her own computer skills, as well as being fluent in all the local languages. Her searches on the internet might not have been as fast as using the DINI systems, but she’d get the information she needed, eventually. As she told Spider.....

“The magazine has a few names for the archaeologists and their student helpers. Most of those named will be Peruvian and they will have families. I guarantee some eager young student has mentioned the dig to his mum, or maybe his or her grandad. With a little luck, they’ll have told dear old mum the exact location for the dig. Not anywhere encrypted or difficult to get at. The key information we need will be on social media, like Twitter or Instagram. The hard work will be in finding it.”

“Doesn’t the magazine mention a district ?” Asked Spider.

“Yes and that makes the impossible task, slightly possible. Though that is still a bit like looking for a needle in the haystack of Peru’s Yauli District.”

“I get it.....I take it we’re not going out much for a while ?” Asked Spider.

“I will make it up to you and every positive result, means the whole thing being faster.” Said Sarah. “I can refine the search script for every name I find, every village mentioned. Most social media is SQL based so searches are quite easy. It can be done and I’ll be surprised if it takes longer than.....Three or four days.”

“I’ve heard of SQL, didn’t he do a try out for Fulham ?”

“Yeah, yeah....Just keep me supplied with booze and room service burgers.”

“Come on, there must be something I can do ?” Asked Spider.

There was, but it was sending him in a direction likely to break his beloved professional etiquette. Worth a try though, it could cut another day off her online searching.

“I seem to remember you got on well with Seb, the senior DINI agent ?” She asked.

“Yes.....I can see where this is going. Alright, what information do I need from him ?”

“Whatever you can get, beggars can’t be choosers.” Said Sarah. “We have a district and a few names for those involved. With luck, all archaeological digs will need some kind of approval or a permit. Seb may be able to find that approval and give us.....Maybe the closest village to the dig. If we’re insanely lucky, he might be able to find a full GPS location.....Or, bringing us down to earth, they might not have obtained a permit yet. Pester Seb, honey.....Pester the crap out of him.”

“Will do.”

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It wasn’t that Ruby didn’t trust them. If Todd and Sophie said there was nothing worth finding in the house, then there was nothing worth finding. A call to a local realtor had turned up some solid information. There had been a problem with the would-be purchaser’s finance package. It was lot 47 F on Site Armad Road South. The sale had fallen through and a few squatters had used the house. Caleb had made the call and he said the lady realtor had almost cried when talking about the squatters.

“Not really just a few, she said the police mentioned up to fifty in total.” Caleb had said.

Fifty over a period of a few months, some leaving clothing behind. There had been several worn toothbrushes in the bathroom. In theory there’d be enough DNA evidence to trace everyone. Sadly Ruby didn’t have that kind of clout in Peru and DNA testing was an expensive business. Plus, when she’d considered throwing money at the problem, Lily had mentioned....

“Too much DNA really, we’re not investigating a murder scene. Fifty lots of DNA, the majority I guarantee for people not on any current database. A lot of time and money to end up chasing our tails.”

For a few minutes Ruby had hated Lily. She knew her stuff though and she was right. In the end she’d invited Todd and Sophie to join her at the house, just in case she noticed something. No judgement on their competence, she just had to do something. Night now of course, but sometimes the darkness helped. Like radio waves, her gifts seemed to function better during the hours of darkness. Less other electromagnetic waves to get in the way, or something like that.

“I called off the search.” Said Todd. “It was daylight and the car hurtling away had caused a few neighbours to come out.”

“And it was pouring then.” Said Sophie. “Two people wandering about in a deluge.....Ten to one, someone would have started taking pictures of us.”

“I’ve said it a few times; I’m not checking your work.” Said Ruby. “I just need to look over the place myself to.....Get a proper feel for the house and our fake Serge.”

“I did a slow walk through most of the house and felt nothing.” Said Sophie. “But.....A second look by a fresh pair of eyes. It can’t hurt.”

The rain had almost stopped, though every gust of wind caused a few drops to hit Ruby’s face. She opened the door to what Sophie had described as a utility room. There was a smell of stale bodies, which was probably the main odour of the entire house. Fifty people at one time or another, squatting there and sleeping on old mattresses. The house wasn’t going to smell of lavender water and patchouli oil.

“There’s a lot of old clothing.....We did check the pockets.” Said Todd.

They were still behaving and sounding as though she was checking up on them. In a way, she probably was. Too easy to look at a filthy house with the likelihood of some kind of infestation and keep the search to the bare minimum.

“Interesting.....The fake Serge was living here, probably as one of them.” Said Ruby.

"It's a damned good cover." Said Sophie. "From what Caleb heard from the realtor, even the local cops avoid coming here. Once the fuss dies down, the squatters will probably return."

"Show me the bathroom." Said Ruby.

"There is a downstairs toilet." Said Todd. "The main bathroom is upstairs."

"The main bathroom." Said Ruby.

There was an odd mixture of filth and newness about the house. Labels still on some of the plasterboard walls and a distinct feeling that parts of the building needed to be finished. The water heater in the main bathroom, still had maker's tags on it, in Spanish. There was a long glass shelf with various toiletries on it. There was also a large mug, containing at least a dozen toothbrushes. The squatters seemed to be working on the principle that any infections and illnesses were to be shared.

"This is worse than college digs.....A lot worse." Said Todd.

"Any power on in any part of the house?" Asked Ruby.

"No." Said Todd.

"Crap.....What a hell hole." Said Sophie.

Ruby hadn't been officially trained in police work, but she had run around with a lot of criminals at one time or another. Jurgis of course though there had been others. When you've suddenly acquired a few strange gifts, but have no solid anchor on the world.....Ruby had gone full on feral for a while. Every skill and trick she could learn, she did. One piece of learned wisdom had been about where to hide things. Forget the back of the fridge or inside the washing machine. Bathrooms were the best places....Lots of good hiding places in a bathroom.

"Did you check inside the cistern?" Ruby asked.

They were using just one fairly low power flashlight, just in case the neighbours were still curious and keeping an eye on the place. Ruby felt the vibe between Todd and Sophie, even though she couldn't see their faces that well.

"Oh guys, that's bad.....It's a low level cistern, you didn't even need to clamber about to get at it."

"Sorry, Ruby." Said Sophie. "For all we knew.....The cops were on the way."

"My fault.....I called a halt to the search." Added Todd.

Todd put on gloves before lifting the heavy cistern lid, while Sophie aimed her flashlight at the water beneath. Ruby had expected a gun wrapped in plastic, or maybe a well waterproofed notebook. Or of course, there might have been nothing in there apart from water.

"Wow, that is full.....I'm surprised the ball valve still works." Said Todd.

Sophie dug everything out, all six, well wrapped packages. No opening them there, Sophie didn't even need to ask. The squatters might have been running a drug operation out of the house, but Ruby had a feeling about the six bundles of tightly sealed plastic.

"They're his.....I can feel it." Said Ruby.

"He might return for them." Said Todd. "Though to be honest.....I can't see him being that stupid."

"Neither can I." Added Ruby.

It was a quiet night, with no sign of a single over curious neighbour. Ruby took her time and walked through the entire house. She even walked along the path towards the communal parking area. Nothing, her senses found nothing to cause even a tiny tingle. Todd even took the lid off the cistern in the tiny downstairs toilet. Just enough space for him to lift the lid, while Sophie looked inside with a flashlight. Nothing there, just water. That didn't surprise Ruby, she was getting a feel for how the fake Serge thought and operated. Eventually she'd be able to know how he'd react in certain situations. Maybe not with total accuracy, but it would still give them an edge.

It was late by the time they were back at the hotel. Ruby was tempted to say they'd open the packages in the morning. There was a chance though, that there might have been something hidden in that cistern, that needed reporting to the authorities. Via DINI of course, with nothing attributed to Ruby and her friends. She was also hungry; they'd all missed any kind of evening meal. "Call room service for nibbles." Said Ruby. "We'll open the packages right away."

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It was a dark and stormy night, so Monique had brought Nazili with her. Perfect weather for long swirly coats, umbrellas and even a scarf. She'd hardly recognised Nazili when they'd left home, so she knew he'd blend in with the crowd. Even if he didn't, her lover was far from the weirdest looking person in Hackney. There had been a guy on the bus one evening, with unbelievable body-mods. If you weren't an alien, it seemed many believed they should try and at least look like one. Not that Monique ever judged people, not after some of the things she'd seen. Angie had boinged out on them as they'd opened the front door to Ruby's building. It was as if Angie had been on a spring, like Zebedee for the old kids TV show. After dragging them into her den, there had been a lot of complaints, all about Chris Bull.

"I don't trust her.....And I'm sure she's living off that poor girl."

Grazing was the word Monique liked and yes, Chris was probably eating and drinking at Cal's expense, which really meant living at Ruby's expense. Nothing wrong with it, almost an accepted perk in her line of work. As for not trusting her.....

"She refuses to talk about her past.....There's something terrible in her past, mark my words."

Which translated as Angie being a busy body who resented not knowing all of Chris's business. Monique could cure the problem, she knew Angie quite well. It meant lying about Chris and giving away a minor secret, but if it stopped the tension....

"Oh I see.....You did realise she's recently been a police officer ?" Monique asked.

"No, I had no idea. She just turned up one day." Said Angie. "Acted as though she owned the place. If I'd known she was a police officer...I had no idea."

"Used to be a police officer." Said Monique. "Her husband was in the force too, until the dreadful event last year. I can't tell you details, but I'm sure you get my drift ?"

Poor Angie, she looked about to have a coronary right then and there. Angie was old school, almost like someone older than her years. No matter what horrors the police might inflict on the population, Angie would always think the police were wonderful. To think that she had almost a police hero in the building.....

"Yes.....Yes, of course I understand." Said Angie. "I need to be more tolerant, I see that now. Don't worry; I'll look after Chris.....Now I understand."

Chris would have to be briefed of course, though Monique couldn't see her complaining about the invented personal background. It would keep Angie off her back, which could have grown to be something quiet unpleasant.

"This has to be our secret, Angie." Said Monique. "Not everyone likes the police. The last thing Chris needs, is grief from the local undesirables."

"I promise you.....I understand and no one will hear about her from me.....The poor woman."

It took a while to escape from Angie, after the obligatory Earl Grey tea and homemade cake. No answer at Chris's flat, she was upstairs with Cal. The two of them were snug on the sofa, watching a documentary on Netflix.

"We spoke to Angie." Said Monique. "There should be a lot less attitude coming from that direction."

“Thank you, that’s appreciated.” Said Chris.

“There’s Pizza.....It just needs nuking in the microwave.” Said Cal.

“That sounds great....I could eat a horse.” Said Monique.

“So.....Where is this note in green ink ?” Asked Nazili.

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