

Ruby 3

Chapter 16 - Luca

“The bark of the nearby trees cracked, as she pulled their life force from them. Every living thing was sacrificed to provide her with enough energy. Worms in the soil, birds in the trees, even bacteria busy recycling organic waste.”

Δ

It hadn't been that hot a night, but hot enough when you were sleeping in the back of a four by four. Twenty three degrees with high humidity could quickly feel like sleeping inside a slow cooker. Maybe it had been a mistake to send for the vehicles ? Sleeping out in the open could be dangerous though. Ruby had ended up sleeping in just her panties, covered in just a single cotton sheet. She'd woken a few times, her sleep disturbed by the humidity more than the heat.

“Keep still.”

His hand went to her throat, pushing, squeezing the breath out of her. A rough hand, the callouses on his fingers scratched over her skin. His other hand found her left breast, making her gasp.

“Be quiet.”

More pressure on her throat, squeezing her airway and restricting the blood vessels in her neck. For a brief moment Ruby felt light headed. Her night visitor wasn't going to be hurried, his fingers pulling and clawing at her breasts. All the time the pressure on her throat took her from breathless to the edge of passing out.

“Up....Up on your knees.”

The hand left her breasts and went under her tummy, lifting, pulling. More pressure on her throat, as he used both hands to lift her up. He knew what he wanted, there was no resisting the pressure. Ruby felt fingernails digging into her neck.

“Up on your knees.....I won't tell you again.”

She became submissive, it was the only option. Ruby went up on her knees and the pressure on her throat eased a little. He was roused, she could feel his hot, hard dick, against the inside of her thighs. His hand was pushing against her buttocks now, pushing her forward. The ammunition boxes, he was going to put her on the metal boxes to fuck her. As he pushed her forward, the pressure on her throat eased a little.

“No....Squeeze harder... You won't hurt me.” She said.

Todd gripped tighter, stopping her from speaking again. Ruby touched his mind and his only thought was to drive his dick into her, over and over again. He pushed her onto the boxes, the metal scratching at her bare breasts. That too was good, the pain mixing with her passion to become a good hurt, a nice kind of hurt. Todd used his knees to part her thighs and his dick entered her. He thrust forward, going in deep, very deep. After pulling back a little, he thrust harder, causing her thighs to slam into the steel ammunition boxes.

“That was just to get it into you.....Now I'm going to fuck you with it.”

The thrusting went on and on, so deep that the pleasure was like a wave moving up her body. Every time she tried to gasp in pleasure, he squeezed her throat even harder. With Serge, that kind of brutal sex had been something for high days and holidays. It wasn't really his thing and his heart was

never really in it. Other women were usually good at it. They didn't seem to have any problem being merciless and brutal when it came to rough sex. A whimper managed to escape from Ruby's throat. "I told you to be quiet."

They'd agreed beforehand that there'd be no spanking. As far as possible everything had to be done quietly. Apart from that, she'd left the repertoire pretty much in his hands.

"Surprise me." She'd told him.

He was definitely keeping her surprised. Todd pulled her hair back for the final dozen or so strokes, pulling her head right back with it. His hand wrapped right round her throat, squeezing tighter as he thrust into her. It was wonderful, just what she'd been needing for a while. Sarah was full of tacky sayings about sex, most unrepeatable. One of them was about needing a good rogering to clear her pipes out. Todd was giving Ruby one hell of a good rogering, to well and truly clear her pipes out. Genuine pain as he pulled on her hair for what Sarah would have described as the vinegar strokes. Todd gave her backside one very hard spank, before getting off her. He sat on the floor of the van, grinning at her. She thought about saying something mildly disparaging, but she couldn't, it had been too damned good. Ruby lifted herself off the ammunition boxes and sat on the floor, grinning back at him.

"That was....." Said Todd.

"Oh, it most definitely was." She said.

"You've a few scratches."

"It was worth it."

Ruby heard a squeal from nearby and realised they weren't the only two using sex to occupy their time during a hot, sticky night. Sarah, she could feel her mind, as she enjoyed Spider.

"I'm tougher than the other women you've slept with." She said. "You can squeeze much harder without hurting me."

"I'll remember that for next time." Said Todd. "If there is going to be a next time?"

"There will be a next time."

They seemed to have started a trend, the sounds of people enjoying sex were beginning to fill the night.

"Do you think we started all.....That?" He asked.

"Yes, I think we did."

The towel she'd been using to wipe away sweat was sodden, but it was all she had. Ruby wiped her body, noting how deep some of the scratches were. When she'd finished, she handed it to Todd.

"Thank you."

"I moved those dreadful memories very deep." She said. "If you wanted me to, I could remove them completely."

"No, they're part of me, they almost.....No they do...They define who I am. Does that make sense to you?"

"Yes, it does....Very much so."

Todd leant towards her, cupping her left breast in her hand. His touch was different now, softer, affectionate rather than demanding. Ruby pulled him towards her, as she lay back on the grubby floor of the four by four.

"Do you always like sex to be rough?" He asked.

"No, not always."

Ruby lifted her knees and groaned with pleasure as he thrust into her.

~

~

“Damn, I thought it would be a bigger building.” Said Jai.

“I thought everyone lived in mansions in Tóalmás.” Said Christophe.

“Bad....Very bad, but we’ll have to make the best of it.” Said Olga

To Charlotte the house looked no different to a hundred others they’d driven past since leaving Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport. All on one level, to her the building seemed quite large, almost describable as sprawling. To her though, the cartel men were the experienced ones, her personal mentors. If they thought the bungalow near the woods was a bad size, it was a bad size. She had to ask why though, just to increase her knowledge.

“Why is the building size so bad ?” She asked.

They’d left the vehicles half a mile away and walked across the fields. Partly to approach quietly, though it would also stop their SUVs from being associated with the unpleasantness at the bungalow in Tóalmás Village. There was going to be unpleasantness of course, bound to be before the night was over.

“A tiny building and we could go in hard, killing everyone before they had a chance to hurt the hostage. Trust me, if you’re not worried about any of the bad guys surviving, a small two or three room building is perfect.” Said Olga.

“Yeah....A decent assault rifle and you can clear the place out.” Added Jai.

“A big place can be good too.” Said Pablo. “A real mansion of a place and you can usually find a way inside without being seen. Get in place and.....We’re back to using lots of firepower to clear the place out.”

“This building though..... It’s a nightmare.” Said Jai.

“Neither one thing or the other.” Added Christophe.

To her it looked like a nice bungalow near the woods, but Charlie listened and took it all in. She was aware that as with all professions, they were likely to be exaggerating the problems. A barn with a high roof was behind the bungalow, probably where the mercenaries had garaged their vehicles.

“Can you sense her yet ?” Asked Olga. “Luca I mean....Can you do that ?”

It was weird how Olga had known Ruby for years and still treated their gifts as though it was some sort of voodoo, or very clever magic trick. To Charlotte her gifts were logical and obeyed definite rules and limits.

“There will be only one woman in the building and she’ll be terrified.” She said. “So yes, I will be able to tell where Luca is in the building and where the six men guarding her have settled down for the night.....We need to be closer though.”

A dark cloudy night, though there was a background glow from lights on a nearby main road. It didn’t seem completely dark to Charlie, though Christophe managed to find something to fall over. He committed the sin of cursing quite loudly as he fell.

“Quiet you fool.” Hissed Olga.

They were close to the bungalow, close enough to be heard by anyone being particularly vigilant.

“Are you alright ? Any injuries ?” Asked Pablo.

“I’m fine.....Just a little off my game. I’ll be alright.”

“Being off your game can get you killed, and us.” Said Olga. “Are we close enough Charlie, can you see where Luca is yet ?”

“Are they agitated in there, did they hear anything ?” Asked Pablo.

It was always easier with no background noise and the bungalow was the only dwelling for quite a distance.

“Luca is in there, the room with the red curtains. It’s the biggest bedroom and her movements are restricted in some way. I think she might have been tied to the bedframe. She’s been beaten and is terrified they might do it again.”

“Bastards.” Said Olga. “How about the men.... Where are they ?”

“One is asleep in the chair outside her door, I’m guessing he was supposed to be guarding her. Another two are asleep in the back bedroom, which we can’t see from here.”

“Which leaves three..... Where are they ?” Asked Olga.

“Bad news I’m afraid, they’re all wide awake.” Said Charlotte. “All in the first room to the right after you go in the front door, I’m assuming it’s the lounge. They’re probably playing cards or watching a porno movie, or whatever paid mercenaries do at night.”

“Almost certain to be watching a porno.” Said Pablo. “They’re awake though, which means we’ll be spread out fairly thinly to deal with them. It’s the damn building.....The wrong fucking size.”

“I think we’ve covered the building size already.” Said Olga. “No one has come out to investigate, so we can assume they didn’t hear Christophe fall over a rock.”

“Something dug a hole.....Anyone could.....”

“Shut up Christophe..... We know....Everyone has a bad day.” Said Pablo.

Olga was looking towards the bungalow with chinks of light coming between the curtains to the right of the door. The mercenaries sleeping or watching a movie, were about to get the visitors from hell.

“Normally I’d let you organise the troops Pablo.” Said Olga. “As I know what Charlie can do though and Luca is my friend.....I’d like to take command.”

“Fine by me.”

Charlotte was using her gifts to feel the inside of the unfortunately sized bungalow. Everyone was still asleep, apart from the men in the lounge. They were so animated, one was even angry.

“Cards..... They’re playing cards and one is angry about something.” She said.

“He’s probably losing.” Said Jai.

Charlie knew what Olga was going to ask her, by the darkness that had fallen over her thoughts, like a rain cloud on an otherwise sunny day.

“We need a diversion Charlie and we don’t need the worry of the two men in the bedroom joining the fight.” Said Olga. “I’m sure you could do something to scare the crap out of our card playing friends, and dispose of the sleepers.”

“Controlled of course, no hurting unintended targets.” Said Charlotte. “I can create a bang that’ll destroy the back bedroom and sound like there’s been a drone strike on the house. A bit of smoke and flames too, just to keep them guessing.”

“Do you need to be inside the building ?”

“No.”

“Good, once it’s done, get to the lounge to help deal with the card players.” Said Olga.

“Will do.”

Olga had probably picked up bad habits from Ruby and Kallina, she started muttering to herself about not knowing how strong the outer doors were.

“Christophe.” She said, making him jump. “Can you put a charge on the outside door to blow it inwards ?”

“Yes, easy stuff..... It’ll take me less than five minutes.”

“That’s our timeline, right there.” Said Olga. “Charlotte goes to wherever she needs to be and gives Christophe six, no ten minutes to be safe. Once we hear the explosion, the charge on the front door is detonated. Sadly.....Then comes the bit where we could have done with two more guys.”

“Fucking building is the wrong size.” Said Jai.

“Yeah.....Yeah.....I’m now banning anymore talk about that.” Said Olga. “Once the door is matchwood, I’ll go in first with Christophe. We’ll take out the man guarding Luca and enter her room. I want two of us there, because we don’t know what they might have done to her. She may need to be carried.”

“I saw a glint of a chrome bumper in the barn.” Said Charlie. “We could use one of their vehicles if Luca can’t walk.”

“Yes, a good idea.” Said Olga.

“Yes, brilliant.....Getting back to the plan, it sounds to me as though there will be just two of us against three when we enter the lounge.” Said Jai. “They’ll be shocked by the explosion, I get that. It’s still three of them against just Pablo and me.”

“I’ll be there as quickly as I can.” Said Charlotte. “And I’ll be coming in from behind them.”

“We knew this wasn’t going to be easy.” Said Olga. “With Charlie’s help you’ll be fine. Any problem with carrying out my orders ?”

Jai looked ready to rebel, until Pablo grabbed his arm.

“No problems, no problems at all.” Said Pablo.

“Good.....Right Charlie, on your way and start counting off ten minutes.” Said Olga.

Charlie quickly kissed Pablo on the lips, partly in case she never saw him again, and partly because it felt like the appropriate thing to do. Not far from the house, the grass had grown long and gone to seed. By crouching and moving quietly, she was confident of arriving behind the house unseen and unheard. The grass was still wet from the recent rains and she arrived at the rear of the bungalow, wet and covered in spider’s webs.

“Let’s have a quick look.” She mumbled.

Moving close to the window gave her a chance to look at the wall. A wood frame construction with a layer of bricks that were more for show than adding strength. There’d be layers of cladding on the inside for warmth of course and plasterboard. A nice solid, cosy little home, even if Jai thought there were too many rooms. If she placed her outpouring of energy right though, most of the rear wall would be turned to rubble and wood chippings. Charlie looked through a gap in the curtains and a night light clearly showed her the two men in their beds.

“Don’t wake up, it’ll be.....Better if you’re still asleep.” She muttered.

The house with the wrong number of rooms was about to have one less and she wondered how Jai would view that. No standing back after lighting the blue touch paper, she needed to be close, right up against the window. Close meant getting in fast after the bang, close meant being quicker at offering help to Pablo and Jai. Risky of course, being right on top of her own explosion. She was going to divert an amount of the energy into a shield. Hopefully the shield would stop her becoming Charlotte Puree. Eight minutes had gone by without her accomplishing much at all.

“Please..... Don’t let there be a satellite filming this.” She muttered.

Ruby could pull energy out of the living biosphere without harming a thing, or even causing a single blade of grass to wither. Charlie needed a lot of energy quickly, which necessitated being more brutal. As she drew in energy the grass behind her died and became ash. Rabbits in their burrows became lifeless husks, without ever realising they were in danger. Some of the energy was used to shield her and some to shield the rest of the house. Her strike was going to be both surgical and massive, but only one room was going to be vaporised.

“More...I need more.”

The bark of the nearby trees cracked, as she pulled their life force from them. Every living thing was sacrificed to provide her with enough energy. Worms in the soil, birds in the trees, even bacteria busy recycling organic waste. The only living things safe from her were Olga and her friends and the occupants of the house. No draining the living creatures in the bungalow, that would kill Luca too. "Time." She shouted.

Charlotte was holding the ball of energy in her mind and at exactly ten minutes after kissing Pablo goodbye, she dropped the energy inside the back bedroom of the house. All that power, released in an instant. She felt the wind trying to shred the skin on her face, as the rear wall of the bungalow was blown apart.

~ ~

Kallina stood next to Ruby, as they looked roughly north west from where the group of wunderkinds, rogues and assorted humans had camped for the night.

"So..... Todd huh ?" She asked. "I'd have thought you'd have gone for Rory. Far too old for you, taciturn to the point of rudeness. Just your type. Whereas Todd is actually age appropriate."

Ruby ignored her and pointed past some low hills in the far distance.

"Doc says we'll be over the border once we get past Bungoma." Said Ruby. "Difficult to be certain, but judging by the direction I'm being pulled in and the terrain....We'll need to set up a base camp near Tororo in the Eastern Region of Uganda. Then we start digging."

"So.....Todd took your fancy ?"

"Sophie looked up Tororo on the web and for once we'll be near a town with proper infrastructure. Supermarkets, gas stations, even an airfield. It'll feel like luxury, though we'll have to keep Ishel and her rogues well hidden. Imagine the fun if the locals get a good look at them."

"Was he good.....Todd I mean ?"

"Crap Kallina, you've only been here for half an hour. Who's been talking ?"

"Just about everyone. I went to the breakfast truck and people were quite chatty. Sophie mentioned the sex being quite noisy and Anna said there was the sound of spanking in the early hours. It appears you woke a few people up."

Ruby was giving her the stink eye. A full 'shut the fuck up' look.

"Hey, don't give me that look." Said Kallina. "You and Sophie were always telling me to be more social. I seem to remember Sarah saying I was like a feral cat that needed socialising. Well I socialised and discovered I quite enjoy being a nosey bitch....Tell all.....Pourquoi Todd ?"

"Yes we had really great sex, yes it was noisy and yes, I do intend to it again....Quite a lot of times. Just to prove I do have a type, he does have a darkness about him and a tragic past.....Happy ?"

"What sort of tragic past ?"

"The kind I'm sure he wants to keep private."

Kallina knew there was no one near them, yet she still made a point of looking around.

"No one can hear us and you know I'll never tell anyone, if you say it's private."

"It is private, I don't think even Rory knows everything." Said Ruby. "Todd used to be a mercenary, employed as security by an overseas company. He was here, how's that for coincidence ? There was trouble with local people just over the border into Uganda."

"Who did he kill ? A tragic past for such people tends to mean a lot of blood on their hands."

"Can you adopt that tone Kallina, could either of us ? Yes, there were deaths, it tends to be why companies hire mercenaries as guards. There were reprisals and one evening Todd's family were killed in their rented house. He came home and found them cut to pieces, his wife and young daughter."

“Crap.....Sorry Ruby. I’m assuming you helped him bury the memories ?”

“Yes, buried but not deleted.... Todd wouldn’t let me remove them.”

“I’m not surprised, we are our memories.” Said Kallina. “They might be terrible memories, but take them away and something inside us dies....Just a little. Would you have some of yours removed ?”

“No, not even the really unbearable ones..... The ones that make me cry. Anyway, what else is the talk of the breakfast truck ?”

“That Ishel is amazed British Security Services sent help and don’t want to kill her. Sophie seems to think Charlotte has gone rogue on us, but we’ve been there before. My guess is that the girl has found a new lover and wants to show you she’d not a little girl anymore.... Shall I go on ?”

“No....We should be moving Kallina. Can you yell at them today, I’m fed up with being the angry, shouty parent.”

“I get home after a tough day at the office and you expect me to discipline our children, before I’ve even had a gin and tonic.”

Ruby was grinning at her, they’d been through the routine before. Usually Ruby played the role of tired husband, but they were flexible.

“All right.....I’ll go and yell at the kids.” Said Kallina.

The breakfast truck had closed up, but Sophie was still gossiping with Isobel. People were getting ready, though not with any urgency.

“Come on, we need to be moving people.” Shouted Kallina. “We’ve a long way to walk today.....Come on, put the heavy gear in the vehicles, they’ll be using the roads. We’ll be using the more scenic route.”

No one likes to be yelled at by mum, the thirteen began to move at an amazing pace. Ishel surprised her by not arguing, or refusing to take instructions from her. The Rogues began to get a move on too. Kallina actually waved a thank you at Ishel.

“How far until we get there..... Wherever there is ?” Asked Rory.

“Could be fifty kilometres, maybe more. Definitely a few days walk.”

“Crap....I can call in helicopters, or tracked vehicles.....Walking seems pointless.”

It always happened, the confusion and misunderstandings when muggles and their technology, met gifts and powers they didn’t understand. Kallina liked Rory and hoped he wasn’t about to be a pain in backside.

“Ruby has to walk the route, so we have to walk with her.” Said Kallina. “Remove her feet from the ground and she might lose the pointer to where we’re going. You can hardly expect her to walk through Africa on her own.”

“No.... You’re right, it wouldn’t be safe.” Said Rory. “I’ll put a rocket under everyone and get them moving. You can rely on me.”

“Thank you.”

By the time Kallina had walked back to where Ruby was waiting, the camp behind them was no longer a camp. The vehicles were moving away, towards the nearest road. The wunderkinds, the rogues and the assorted humans, were all approaching them on foot. Everyone was ready to follow Ruby, wherever she might lead them.

“Can I just confirm that you have no interest in Rory.” Said Kallina. “He really is far more your usual type than poor tragic Todd.”

“Don’t call him that.....If you fancy Rory..... Have at it, he’s all yours.”

No shouting, Ruby just waved at the people behind and began to walk forward. Kallina walked beside her, resigned to a tough fifty kilometre trudge over broken ground. By the time they’d walked

around rivers and the occasional chasm, it might well be a seventy kilometre walk ahead of them. As she walked, Kallina felt something, like a faint electrical crackle in the distance.

"I felt it Ruby." She said. "I'm sure I felt what pulls at you."

"Good.....If I get eaten by a Hippo, you can take over."

"At least I'd be busy..... I'm feeling under used at the moment." Said Kallina.

"You'll be busy once we start digging. The thirteen are tough, but they still need to breathe air and work in a comfortable temperature. Tororo has an airstrip, though I can't imagine large planes being able to land there. Small planes though, we can charter them to bring in mining equipment and protective clothing. I'm relying in you to work with Olga in acquiring what's needed. Most of it we can buy, but some.....I know you're good at acquiring items when the stores are closed."

"Yes, that does sound like something I can get my teeth into. What happens if someone official turns up to check our paperwork for this mining operation."

Ruby was grinning at her, actually grinning.

"That depends on how many friends they bring with them and how well armed they are. Personally I'm hoping we can dig a hole in the ground and cloak it in some way, before anyone starts asking awkward questions. Whatever happens, I'm sure we'll be able to deal with it."

Ruby had changed, even Sarah had mentioned her being more cool about problems, a little more quirky. Developing an appetite for rough sex was one thing. Kallina liked the new Ruby, though she hoped it didn't lead to a battle with the Ugandan army. Another three miles of trudging through damp grass and there was shouting behind them. Anna in particular was getting very animated.

"Doc has found something to fall over, or into." Said Kallina. "He should have gone with the vehicles."

"He's besotted with Anna. The real thing I think.....Love." Said Ruby. "I think we'll have to get used to these kinds of things."

"Love you mean?"

"That too maybe, but I was talking about people finding things to fall over."

"Look... Crisis over, he's on his feet." Said Kallina.

At about lunchtime, Ruby grudgingly stopped for a meal break. Sophie joined them, as did Spider and Sarah. By the time the post lunch gossip began, there was quite a crowd clustered around Ruby and her.

"You've heard all our news Kallina." Said Sophie. "You must have some news from out there, in the big wide world."

"Yes, what's been happening?" Asked Fabio.

"Well.....There isn't..... Oh yes, for some reason Monique Ostby had decided to shag Max."

"What?!" Everyone yelled, almost in unison.

~ ~

Olga knew the old saying was true of course, anyone who'd been in a fire knew there were no exceptions to the rule. No plan, no matter how clever and well thought out, ever survived first contact with the enemy. Charlie's explosion in the back bedroom had been huge, far louder than Olga had expected. The car alarms on the vehicles in the barn were now going full blast. Someone within twenty miles probably hadn't heard the explosion and subsequent noise, but she doubted it.

"My ears are ringing." Said Jai.

"Worry about it later, we're moving in." Said Olga.

She was shocked by the noise and destruction and so were her hired cartel men. Being the cause of a huge explosion didn't make you immune from the effects. Her heart was thumping as she walked

across the debris that had once been a sturdy front door. The good thing was that the thugs who'd abducted Luca, were probably crapping themselves. Pablo was coughing in the smoke, which stopped when he put on a gas mask. Another present from Gregor, another favour from the cartel. Pablo threw a thunderflash into the lounge and ran in after it, quickly followed by Jai. Olga carried on down the corridor, towards the door to the main bedroom.

"Fuck." Said Christophe.

The chair to the right of the door was empty, the guard had obviously been woken up by the noise. Olga opened the door and ran into the bedroom. One of those moments when time seems to obey different rules. The man was stood next to the bed, a gun in his hand. He was aiming the weapon at Luca's head.

"No!" Yelled Olga.

All an illusion, caused by her brain's frustration with the constraints on how fast she could move. Olga felt as though she was wading through treacle. The thug with the gun was speeded up though, turning towards her at lightning speed. He fired at her three times. Shots so fast that it sounded like a quick burst from a machine gun.

She waited for the pain as the bullets tore into her chest, destroying her heart and lungs, or brought the instant oblivion of a shot to the head. No, it seemed a miracle, though there wasn't time to think about it. She was unhurt and had an assault rifle in her hands. She fired a burst into the thug's face.

"Bastard." She muttered.

Messy, very messy. The wall behind the bed was covered in blood, as was much of the top end of the bed. Some of the blood and tissue had given Luca's hair and neck a wet redness. Messy but effective, the gunman was no longer a threat to anyone.

"Luca!" Shouted Olga. "Are you alright?"

Luca had a strong pulse in her neck, but refused to wake up. Drugged probably, to keep her in deep sedation. She'd have been far easier for them to handle and move about once drugged. The thugs were belt and braces guys, they'd also duct taped her wrists to the bedframe.

"Sorry Luca, but I don't want you wandering off."

It seemed heartless leaving her taped to the bed, but the building still wasn't secure. Definitely not the place for anyone under heavy sedation to be wandering about. Olga hadn't been thinking about Christophe. He was a hired professional, who'd done it all before, bought the DVD and the T shirt. Worrying about not hearing him behind her hadn't entered her consciousness.

"Oh shit! Gregor is going to give me so much shit." She muttered.

Not exactly a caring first reaction, but she hadn't known Christophe that well. If it had been Igor or Aron on the floor, her first reaction might have been different. Three bullet holes in Christophe, one in his throat and two in his face. She didn't need to look for a pulse to know he was dead. The ever expanding pool of blood under his head was seeping through the gaps in the floor boards.

"Shit, shit.....Shit." She muttered.

Automatic weapons fire from the lounge, followed by a detonation that made the whole building shake. Things might have gone well, or she might be the sole survivor of a failed rescue attempt. Olga put on her gasmask, just in case, and ran towards the lounge.

"It's me.....Olga." She shouted.

Her gas mask came off, as if to prove the point. They were all fine and it was the three hired thugs who were dead on the floor. Pablo was sat on the sofa, looking at his ankle, but they were all alive. Charlotte was stood in a hole in the wall. A massive hole, the roof above her looked dangerously buckled. Charlie nodded her head in the direction of the hole.

“Quicker than using the corridor.” She said, as if it explained everything.

Jai was kicking the body of a dead man, probably making sure he was dead.

“This one was wearing Kevlar, sneaky fucker.” Said Jai. “Two in the head and he went down easy enough.”

“Look for their car keys, we’ll need transport for Luca.” Said Olga. “She’s not badly injured, just drugged.....I think they sedated her with something.”

“I already found a set with a Mercedes key fob.....I’ll bring it round the front.”

Once Jai had gone, Olga looked at the sore spot on his ankle, which Pablo was still rubbing. Everyone had to know about Christophe, it just wasn’t something that could be slipped into a conversation about car keys, or injured ankles.

“What happened to you ?” She asked Pablo.

“He fell over the coffee table.” Said Charlie.

“Yeah..... Alright.....Christophe will really dine out on this, after I kept on about him falling over a rock.”

There never was going to be a better opportunity.

“Christophe didn’t make it.” Said Olga. “Three bullets that I think were meant for me.”

“Crap..... Where is he ?” Asked Charlie.

“In the bedroom.....We should check on Luca, I left her taped to the bed.”

First the three of them surrounded Christophe, making all the right noises about a fallen comrade.

Next Olga cut the duct tape and they all looked at the sleeping medical student.

“We’ll have to carry her.” Said Olga.

“She’s small.....Which is a good thing.” Said Pablo. “We’ll all fit in just one of their cars.”

They’d fit now that Christophe didn’t need a ride home. Olga hadn’t known him that well, yet his dead body on the ground upset her more than she’d ever admit.

“Too much blood to wipe away....And the bodies.” Said Olga. “We must have something that’ll burn the place to the ground. The barn too, that can go up in flames. There must be something in your box of tricks Pablo ?”

“No phosphorus grenades I’m afraid.” Said Pablo. “I’m sure we can get the job done with a can of gas and a few flares.”

Charlie was glaring at them both, a real glare, several notches above a plain stink eye.

“Sorry Charlie, I wasn’t thinking.” Said Olga.

“You want fire.....I can become hellfire. There’ll be nothing left apart from a scorched hole in the ground.” Said Charlie.

Jai returned in an expensive, top of the line Mercedes saloon. The mood changed quite quickly from sadness over Christophe, to how cool their new wheels were. It wasn’t being totally heartless, they all lived with the constant threat of sudden, violent death.

“Don’t get too fond of the Merc.” Said Olga. “Charlie will be turning it into a fireball once we’re back at our own vehicles.”

“Oh, come on.....I know a guy who can get me new plates.” Said Jai.

“No.” Snapped Olga.

“I’ll get Luca comfortable, I can carry her on my own.” Said Charlotte.

Olga did a quick walk around the bungalow, making sure they hadn’t left behind any pieces of expensive equipment. The Mercedes wasn’t that overcrowded, even with Luca taking up most of the rear seat.

“Charlie will be here in a minute or so.” Pablo told her.

First the barn became a ball of white hot flames and then the bungalow. Olga could see a shape against the flames, the outline of a young woman covered in fire. As the shape reached towards the bungalow, it was engulfed by fresh flames.

"I'm glad she's on our side." Muttered Jai.

Explosions of flames, until the barn and the house were no longer recognisable. The Charlie that came back to the car looked naked and charred, her skin the colour of soot. Olga noticed the girl's eyes seem to have flames dancing inside them.

"Christ !" Said Pablo, as he opened the car door.

"No, I've seen her like this before." Said Olga. "Leave her alone, she may not be the Charlie you know..... Not yet. Just leave her alone for a while."

Olga took off her jacket as she got out of the car. Her hand trembled as she handed it to the creature in front of her. It was no longer Charlie, or at least not entirely Charlie. Olga felt scared as the soot covered girl took the jacket without saying thank you. Charlie got in the back of the Mercedes and sat on the floor. They hadn't reached the main road, before Luca woke up enough to start singing a few words of a pop song.

"I'm a genie in a bottle, baby.....Gotta rub me the right way."

"What the hell ?!" Said Jai.

"Just the result of the sedation." Said Pablo. "I had an aunt who once woke up out of anaesthesia and confessed to three murders. My uncle José still thinks she was telling the truth."

"Her eyes are open, but no one is home yet." Said Olga. "She just needs a decent night's sleep. We'll take her to my place."

Swapping to their own vehicles meant more space, and a chance to get a proper look at Luca. There were no serious wounds, just lots of small cuts and scratches. Once they were all comfortable, Olga needed to ask Charlie for one last favour.

"Can you ?.....The Mercedes...."

Charlie simply nodded and let her jacket fall to the ground. Olga wished she hadn't watched, as the creature of flames moved through the metal of the car. Really moved, she seemed to swim through solid metal, turning it into liquid as she moved.

"That's something you don't see every day of the week." Said Jai.

Charlie put her jacket on, before sitting on the floor of the car, quite close to Luca.

"Next stop Budapest." Said Olga.

Luca began to sing again.

"I got this feeling on the summer day when you were gone

I crashed my car into the bridge, I watched, I let it burn

I don't care, I love it

I don't care."

"I liked her better when she was unconscious." Said Jai.

~

~