

Ruby

Chapter 12 – The Caspian Sea

“I can whisper in your ear Ruby and tell you about who is trying to wipe us out.”

Δ

The house in Batumi was large, but not large enough for the seven of them to sleep in comfort, eight of them including Kallina. It seemed the relationship was back on again for Spider and Sarah, they claimed the dusty and empty garage as their room.

“You can sleep on the sofa in my room, then we can talk in private.” Kallina had said.

Ruby wasn't sure if it was a good idea, their new found friend did seem a little strange. But she didn't want to upset Kallina, so she'd put her bags of grubby clothes next to the sofa. No one else was allocated anywhere to sleep, they just grabbed an empty space and called it theirs. Serge and Leo put their bed rolls at opposite corners of the lounge, leaving the small bedroom for Olga. Carlos didn't seem to understand the 'grab a spot' game until most of the house had been claimed. The dining room was full of packing cases and smelt strongly of cat. A litter tray was near the door and a cat bed made of old blankets and a cardboard box, proudly proclaimed that the room belonged to Constanze, the cat.

“She doesn't need all this space.” Carlos had said.

He'd moved a few boxes and placed his bedroll under the bay window which overlooked the back garden. Constanze had hissed at him and Ruby could see a territorial conflict brewing.

“I bet she pisses on your head while you sleep.” Serge had said.

Ruby looked at the ornamental clock on the mantelpiece and realised that had all happened two and a half hours previously. They'd all been busy settling in, getting their clothes into the washing machine in the kitchen and of course, washing off layers of mud. Kallina had insisted that they all squeeze into the lounge to eat. In fact Kallina was changing and was quickly becoming the person that Ruby had hoped she'd be. It was as if her mind was waking up after being dormant for decades.

“Sit on the floor Spider, you'll break the arm on my sofa.” She barked.

Once they were all sat somewhere, Kallina gave them each a plate full of food and the cutlery to eat it with. Everything looked clean and the food had an aroma that filled the room and reminded Ruby of childhood Christmases.

“Kallina, this is delicious.” Said Olga.

They ate and relaxed and Kallina quickly became one of them, became family. Carlos worried Ruby, he'd sat himself so that his legs went off into the hallway. He was keeping himself out of the group, making himself the outsider. Ruby picked up the glass of apple juice that Kallina had given her.

“To those that didn't make it this far.” She said.

The others picked up their glasses and drank. Ruby made eye contact with Carlos.

“I'm sorry you lost people.” She said.

He didn't reply, but he did smile back at her. Serge seemed more pragmatic about life, but he was a professional agent of a major security organisation. He'd mentioned Roland once or twice, but he'd never gone into the moody that Carlos seemed to be going through.

“How long have you lived here ?” Sarah asked Kallina.

“I remember the date, it was three days after Kennedy was shot. I moved in here and lived with the old lady.”

They all exchanged looks, but Kallina was up on her feet.

“Cheesecake, I have cheesecake. Not a large piece each, but I hope you like it.”

Kallina flew into the kitchen and Olga was smiling at Ruby.

“Is she crazy or really that old ?” She asked.

“Older, she showed me her photo collection.”

They only received a tiny piece of key lime cheesecake, but it tasted better than any dessert Ruby had ever eaten. Then coffee arrived and that too was wonderful. Ruby had once cooked a dinner for just six people and it had been hell and the guests had criticised everything. Ruby watched Kallina, her eyes twinkling, her easy charm captivating everyone. Was Kallina putting the whammy on them ? Ruby looked at the cheesecake and wondered if she was really eating leftovers. Perhaps every meal in that house was like ambrosia of the gods ? For a moment Ruby thought about trying to negate any influence there might be on her, but then she thought ‘what the hell,’ if it was all a fantasy, it was a fantasy they needed.

“Wait until you taste my fry up in the morning Spider.” Said Kallina.

She was getting their names right now too. Early on he’d been Spike and Sarah had been Sonya. Kallina really was waking up.

“So tell me all about yourselves ?” Asked Kallina.

Carlos even moved further into the room and talked about his life as an enforcer for a drug cartel. There was definitely some kind of influence going on, they were all talking far too freely. Serge actually cried when he talked about the death of Roland. Ruby let it carry on, she could see that Kallina was trying to cram a lifetime of getting to know them all, into a single after dinner conversation. A bottle of vintage brandy appeared from somewhere and Sarah had them in hysterics with her exploits at the Job Centre, or poverty pimps as she called them.

“So, now you know all about us. How old are you Kallina ?” Asked Sarah.

“And where did you learn to cook so well ? Added Olga.

Kallina was like a young girl, fiddling with her skirt and basking in the attention.

“I was a chef for many years, at one of the best hotels in Moscow. I had to leave there because of the war.”

“You were in Moscow in the 1940s ?” Asked Carlos.

Kallina was laughing so much that she was having trouble getting enough breath to talk.

“No silly, not that war. They had to burn the entire city you know, that awful Napoleon was coming. Terrible, terrible times.”

No one was looking at Ruby and rolling their eyes, they now all knew that Kallina was the genuine article. Sarah pushed Leo aside to get closer to her, actually touching Kallina on the arm, appearing to be making sure she was real.

“When were you born ?” She asked.

She was serious now, looking around the room, her gaze lingering on everyone for just a second or so.

“I was born in the year you’d call seventeen hundred and two. My people had no names for the years, it was just another summer on the steppes. I was born that summer.”

Serge hadn’t said much, but now he too leaned over the coffee table that was covered in dirty plates. He touched her hand and smiled at her.

“I’ve seen the old DGSE files that have been kept locked away for centuries. They say that one of the elder members of Das Geheimnis actually started the legend of Baba Yaga, the vicious wild woman of the woods.”

Again Kallina laughed.

“Yes, I think that was all about me. For a long time I wanted nothing to do with other people and I wasn’t a safe person to be around. Then I was given the task of looking after the children, keeping them safe. I stopped being Baba Yaga and became quiet little Kallina.”

For a second Ruby stopped seeing a young woman and saw an old woman in front of her, a hideous creature of almost unimaginable age. Then it was sweet young Kallina again and several voices were asking the same question.

“What children?” They asked.

~ ~

Max woke early, he always did in hotels. Breakfast was just being put out and he filled a plate with the ingredients of a full English breakfast, though he was sure the locals would have called it something different. The bacon was ruined of course, dried up to become salty boot leather, but that was how the tourists liked it. He found a table by the window and tried to ignore the large plasma screen that was showing the news.

“Have you everything you need?” Asked the girl.

“Yes, thank you.”

She was pretty and her uniform was freshly pressed. How long before the hotels in Georgia became just like the hotel in the major western countries? He loathed the boring and insipid large chains, where even the paintings on the wall were the same from Tokyo to Los Angeles. The plasma screen caught his eye, there were small images of ships being shown as moving south across the Black Sea. It looked like a poorly drawn weather map, but one indicating a shower of warships.

“Is something happening in the Black Sea?” He asked the girl.

She’d almost wandered off and seemed surprised to be asked anything that was not breakfast related.

“Yes, a Russian patrol boat ran aground near Batumi, it looks to be the same one the Turkish police have been chasing.”

“And the Russian fleet?” He asked, nodding at the screen.

“It’s very worrying, I have family on the coast. They’re moving south, really, the Americans have been releasing satellite pictures. Fucking Russians!”

She blushed and looked around the room, obviously worried about who might have heard her outburst.

“Don’t worry, I agree with you.” Max said.

They exchanged a conspiratorial grin and the girl wandered off in the direction of the reception desk. So the Black Sea fleet was heading south. Sarah had prodded the Russian bear and it was coming to investigate. Max finished his breakfast and went to dig Marco out of his bed. Things were moving and moving fast, if he didn’t kill Ruby in Georgia, he might not get another chance. If the Russians were after her, so would be the Americans, the French and several other countries arrogant enough to feel their national interest was affected by events in Eastern Europe.

“I bet even the bloody Israelis are looking for Ruby.” He muttered to himself.

~ ~

George had bought about six or seven phones, all pay as you go and all from different shops. He’d even tried to make sure he wasn’t being followed before buying them, but he had no way of being certain.

“The security services aren’t stupid.” Max had once told him. “Very few of their people wear an Eton tie and a trench coat these days. The young guy with the skateboard is likely to be the one watching you, or even the old lady in the wheelchair.”

It annoyed George that Max was still the person he thought of, when he wanted to assess a situation, but Max was now an enemy. George had given Penny one of the phones and told her only to use it when calling him and to leave it on twenty four hours a day. He wasn't completely without street skills though, George had often hired low level body guards. It had been in the early days, before the Polandrous Foundation had gone multinational and too legit to hire heavies from companies run by retired mobsters. He walked over to Penny's desk.

"Have you still got Harry's number?"

"You mean Harry the gangster? I can look it up."

Her hands went instinctively for her keyboard and Google.

"No, not like that. Have you still got it written somewhere?"

Penny looked at her keyboard as though it might bite, she realised what she'd almost done. She went to a row of metal filing cabinets and removed an old and crumpled copy of Yellow Pages from the bottom drawer of one.

"I knew I put it in here, but it was a while back." She said.

She proudly unfolded a creased page and pointed at a number, with a doodle of a man in a stripy jumper and a swag bag over his shoulder.

"Subtle." Said George

She just smiled and handed him the old heavy book. Did they still get it delivered a couple of times a year? Everything was online these days, which meant any and every search was logged somewhere. George went back to his desk and called the number on his new mobile.

"Can I talk to Harry please? My name is George Polandrous, he does know me."

If you looked Harry's company up, you'd find a group that did everything from run a fleet of delivery vans to renting out several streets of housing in Hackney. Dig through the website a bit and you'd find they also provided close security, which meant a couple of very large guys following you about. The one thing you'd never find was any mention of Harry. The directors and managers were all squeaky clean; you'd have trouble finding anyone with a parking fine. Harry ran the place though, but it had been a generation since he'd driven a van over anyone's legs, or run out of a bank with a stocking over his head.

"George old friend. I'm hoping this call is about business, it's been a long time since we placed anyone with you?"

The voice was the same, oddly educated for a guy born in Deptford and with a distinct hint of menace. No one ever pissed Harry about.

"Hi Harry, I hired my own team, as you know. I seem to remember you helped me find a few good people. But most of the team are abroad and I need a couple of guys to cover my back for a day or so."

He could almost hear Harry's brain working. The aging gangster had one of the quickest minds George had ever come across, which was probably how he'd survived to reach old age.

"Is there a definite threat George? Someone giving you a hard time?"

"There are a few people who don't want to see my current project succeed. I don't expect your guys to be attacked, I just need two big minders to put anyone off the idea of threatening me."

There was a few seconds of silence and George could hear Harry using a desktop calculator, the type that printed the results.

"If you want two guys to guard you round the clock, I'll need to reserve six or seven of my best people George. That isn't going to be cheap. I'm assuming you want to pay cash and keep this off the record?"

“Yes Harry, no invoices or paperwork.”

Harry came up with a daily rate that made George gasp, but he needed to be able to move around without worrying about another unpleasant meeting under a railway bridge.

“Sounds costly, but I know your guys are good. Can you get them here today ?”

“Yes, two of my best can be with you by lunchtime. I’ll get them to use the password we agreed some time ago, so you can verify they’re my guys.”

“I remember it Harry.”

He almost rang off, but decided to ask Harry a question that had been forming in his mind.

“Before you go Harry. Are any of your people military trained ?”

“Are you on a secure line George ?”

“Yes, newly bought unregistered mobile.”

“Well I’m not. I’ll call you straight back.”

George hung up and smiled at Penny, who was watching him. His phone rang and no number at all came up. It was obvious that Harry took telecoms security very seriously.

“Hello George. I may be a cynic, but usually if a client asks about military training, they really mean, can this guy use a gun. Am I right ?”

“Yes Harry, this spot of bother might need that skill and I may need to take your people overseas.”

Harry was laughing and the sound wasn’t that unpleasant.

“I know George, you need people you have no connection with, should they end up dead in some corner of a foreign field.”

“I’m not intending to get them shot Harry.”

“No one ever does George, no one ever does. You’ll need seven guys, the seventh is to be their commander. You tell him your orders and he tells them. You need him because none of these people are exactly Sandhurst trained. You understand George, they’re a bit high maintenance as my daughter often says about her friends.”

“But they will obey orders and follow me where I go ?”

“Oh yes George, they’ll be good as gold. They know I’ll have a bit of a word with them if they aren’t and they won’t want that. It’s just..... well once you get to where you’re going, they’re not likely to think much about following the Geneva Convention. Now George, please tell me you understand ?”

“Yes Harry, I understand.”

The calculator was printing again, this time the clatter went on for far longer and the price was painful. Still, it was nothing compared to the £1.2 billion the mission could have cost.

“Do you need weapons George ?”

“No, I’ve a whole store room full of the latest stuff.”

“Good, good. Two heavies are on their way to you and they’ll be replaced by the ex-army guys within three hours. I will need the money before you leave the country George, just in case.”

“Yes of course, though I do intend to survive.”

“Everyone does George, everyone does.”

“Same bank account I used to pay into before ?”

“Yes, that’ll do nicely. Good luck George and remember one thing....”

“Yes.”

“Keep your head down and let my guys do the fighting.”

~

~

The house felt like the centre of a hurricane. Outside they could hear the helicopters patrolling the area and the sound of troops searching the gardens, calling on every house. Yet so far they had remained undisturbed, no one had even walked up the front path.

"I've spent a lot of years building the defences around this house," said Kallina, "and the best defence is to remain unseen."

"What do they see instead of the house?" Asked Olga.

"Oh they see the house. I get letters delivered and the neighbours call, but if I want it's easy to make people overlook that it's here. I once went a year without seeing anyone, but they cut my phone off, so I started letting the postman deliver again."

They'd all ceased wondering about Kallina and her eccentric behaviour.

"Could you let one of the troops in if we wanted to find out what they know?" Asked Carlos.

"Not a good idea," said Kallina, "one contact will lead to another and then their commander may want to check on something. I know, I've been doing this for a long time. Best to keep everyone away and stay hidden."

"I agree with her." Said Serge.

"We can't risk anyone checking the garage." Said Ruby.

Their weapons were in there and despite losing a lot of firepower with the patrol boat; they still had more weapons than was easily explainable. Ruby stroked Constanze as the cat sat on the windowsill and watched the troops wandering up and down in the street outside.

"They're bored and losing interest," she said, "they're orders are to move further east this evening. It's just about the only thing in their heads and none of them really expect to find any Russians in Batumi."

Carlos still found her gift a little intimidating and she felt his thoughts change, trying to concentrate on anything but sex. The others carried on as usual and as usual, most of their thoughts were about trivia.

"We can leave tonight, when the troops have moved on." Said Ruby.

"I will join you for a while, but we'll need transport." Said Kallina.

Sarah was doing her usual job, bringing lots of coffee into the lounge. It seemed everyone expected a post breakfast meeting and they were claiming a comfortable spot before only the floor remained to sit on.

"Do you have a car?" Spider asked.

"Oh no, though I have ways of getting around. Constanze and I can go anywhere. I have to take her you see, she can't end up starved like the poor birds. We saw Ruby in London just last year."

Ruby didn't like correcting Kallina, but all eyes were on her, expecting some kind of response.

"That was four years ago."

"Oh yes, so it was. We spotted you at that awful club. Or rather Kurt did, I'm always wary of trying to pick up partials in public, you're becoming so rare you see? There's been a rule against it for hundreds of years."

Ruby wished she did understand half of what Kallina said. She just felt the need to focus on their immediate problems and Olga obviously felt the same.

"Can you help us get a car? Actually we'll need two." She asked.

"Yes, yes I'll just need to make a phone call to Oleh and you'll have your vehicles. Did I mention he runs the local garage? I think he has a bit of a soft spot for me."

Kallina went into the hall and used the phone to call Oleh. There was a lot of intimate talk that made it obvious that the garage owner was more than just a friend, or hoped to be. Kallina put the phone down at one point to ask Ruby a question.

“He has a three year old BMW estate and an Audi A6 saloon. Are they acceptable to you ?”

Ruby looked around the room and everyone was smiling and looking pleased.

“Perfect.” Said Spider.

“Heaven after some of the shit we’ve been driving around in.” Added Sarah.

“They’re perfect Oleh, can you drive them over here about ten pm tonight ? Yes, I know I’m asking a lot, but it is important.” Kallina said down the phone.

It appeared Oleh said yes, because there was more flirting from Kallina and the promise of a dinner for two in the very near future. She put the phone down and curled up on the sofa next to Serge.

“Was my van really that bad ?” Asked Olga.

“Sorry.” Said Sarah.

“I quite miss the Beige Merc.” Said Ruby.

Constanze was growling at the noise out of the window, as the troops began loading road block signs and cones onto a flat back truck.

“I take it Oleh will forget we ever had his cars ?” Asked Serge.

Kallina was nodding her head at him.

“And his son, who will drive the Audi over here. In a few months they’ll think they were stolen and put in an insurance claim. I am quite fond of Oleh.”

“You seem to assume that Leo and I will be coming with you.” Said Carlos.

Everyone looked at him and Ruby knew they had all assumed he’d be with them all the way, why else had to come to find them ?

“Decide now,” said Ruby, “go or stay, but do it right now and if you stay it has to be until we save the children, or we’re all killed.”

“I’m going with you, he can leave on his own.” Said Leo.

“He’s behaving like a spoilt child.” Added Kallina.

“Ok, ease up, jeez. I’m going, of course I’m going. It would have been nice to be asked, that’s all.” Serge stood up and stretched his legs.

“We were all sort of press ganged in some way by Ruby,” he said, “but no more talk of leaving, ok ?”

“Ok, ok, I’m with you guys until the end, whatever that is.”

Ruby went to the loo, more to get a few minutes on her own than because of a need to pee. She came back feeling refreshed and quickly grabbed the gap that Serge had left on the sofa.

“Plan time,” she said, “we know the way east will take us to the Caspian Sea, but how do we get there Kallina ?”

“Baku, it’s the only way. The Caspian is dangerous, very dangerous. Passenger ships simply don’t exist and anyone silly enough to want to cross it, has to buy passage on one of the few goods ship that leave Baku. They’re called Ferries, but in reality they’re just old and unreliable freight ships.”

“We’ll never get the necessary visas and tickets,” said Serge, “I know Baku, it can mean weeks of waiting to get a ferry out and lots of greedy palms to be filled.”

Kallina was grinning at Serge, which might mean she liked him, or considered him to be a fool. Ruby had long since given up trying to decipher what Kallina’s body language signified.

“I know a fixer,” she said, “a good one, one we’ve paid a lot of money over the years. I can give you his address in Baku and then it’s up to you. Pay him enough and he’ll get you on a boat out of Baku and all the right bits of paper. Of course there will still be problems.....”

“There are always more problems.” Said Sarah.

“If it was easy, they’d all be doing it.” Added Spider.

“The ferries go to Turkmenbashi, which is a long way from where you need to go. It’s also not unknown for the crew to stop halfway and demand money from passengers, or simply steal everything they have.”

“But your fixer can stop that, right ?” Asked Olga.

“The fixer just gets you on the boat.” Said Kallina.

“Then what do you suggest ?” Asked Ruby.

“You have skills Ruby, a genuine gift. You need to show some..... Initiative and get to the children in the best way you can.”

Kallina ran upstairs and returned with a photograph album and a badly crumpled map. She shoved Spider’s legs off the coffee table and tutted until the dirty cups had been cleared away. Then she unfurled the map and spread it across the table.

“I will stay until after the first battle, but then you’ll be on your own.” She said.

“First battle !?” Exclaimed Ruby.

“Calm Ruby, it will be fine, you need to test your gift to the full. After the battle you will need to get to Baku. Here, let me show you the best way.”

~ ~

Max didn’t know any of the men waiting for Marco. He didn’t want to know them, they were all cannon fodder, all expendable. He recognised a little Russian being spoken and the odd Bulgarian accent, but he had no curiosity about his new force. Marco was their boss and all orders would go through Marco.

“They need burying, we may be here a while.” He said.

The old woman looked over eighty, one of his new team had snapped her neck like a twig. Beside her was the body of her dog, a huge mongrel of some kind that was larger than the old woman. The dog had fought hard and one of the Russian speakers had a nasty bite on his leg. Max couldn’t help hoping that the man would have a limp for the rest of his life. Several pairs of hands grabbed the bodies and dragged them along the corridor and towards the back door.

“We have our base of operations.” Said Marco.

“Did your guy bring the equipment I asked for ?”

“Yes, Kasi is a good man. Let me unpack them now.”

Marco lifted a holdall up onto the kitchen table and took out two heavy looking handsets.

“Latest Russian technology, copied from the British. Encrypted, constantly changing frequency, completely secure and can’t be scrambled. The batteries last for weeks and so tough that it’ll survive an explosion that will kill the soldier using it.”

Marco gave him a huge grin.

“Stupid bloody Russian huh ? All that money to make a comms device that outlives its user”

Max picked them both up and satisfied himself that they both worked and were fully charged.

“I’ll park in a small rest area a mile or so down the road,” said Max, “and call you once I spot Ruby and her group.”

“I know the plan Max, you’ve been over it a hundred times.”

“And I’ll go over it a hundred times more if I have to. If they’re travelling at speed you’ll only have a few minutes to get ready, you have to keep the men outside alert.”

“I will, I will, they’re good guys.”

“They’ll need to be. Ruby and her friends have left a lot of dead bodies behind them, don’t underestimate them.”

“You told me, they’re bad asses, I get it. There’ll always be half the men waiting outside, weapons loaded and waiting for your call.”

Max looked at the weapons the men were going to use, all of it old tech. Reliable, you could drop an AK47 into a muddy pool, leave it there for a month and still pick it up and use it. Less a sign of quality though and more a sign of the gaps between its components, the gas leaks that gave it the famous bark.

“I just wish we had a few heavy machine guns.” Said Max.

Marco was looking down and wiping the mechanism of one of their few modern weapons, an American Special Forces assault rifle.

“It’s not a computer game Max. Don’t worry, I’ve never known anyone who doesn’t die from a single round to the heart.”

Max hoped he was right, he had a feeling that Marco wasn’t worried enough about Ruby and her team of misfits.

“I’ll eat and get to my position,” said Max, “don’t forget to have my meals sent to me, I may be there a while.”

“Don’t worry Max, you worry too much. I’ll get someone to bring your burger and fries to you.”

~ ~

George liked having the two ex-military minders around the office. One was called Terry, which was a bit disappointing; he had no idea what the other was called. They both looked like extras from a Stallone movie and the girls in the office kept making excuses to come and look them over. George only had to stand up from his desk and they were on their feet, ready to follow him anywhere.

“This must be what life is like as a mafia don.” He’d said to Penny.

They weren’t armed of course; the British police are not amused by that kind of thing. Once they left the UK though, that would be a different matter. George’s no2 unregistered mobile rang; the number he’d given to the few military contacts he still trusted.

“The time is tight, but I’ll be there.”

He retrieved his coat from where he flung it over a chair and instantly Terry was calling the driver in the car park below. George left his office and the other minder was out in the hallway and pressing the button for the elevator.

“This may be a late one,” said George, “we’re off to see an old business contact in Rochester.”

“No problem Sir.” Answered Terry.

No problem ! No whining about getting home late or missing the X Factor, or whatever TV programme his people moaned about missing. George had decided not to take his own team to Turkmenistan. It had nothing really to do with them being a little over relaxed in their attitude and was all about problems if they died abroad. Harry had been right, his guys were expendable and he doubted if Harry would call in Health and Safety if they got shot up a little. His own team were good, some of the best, but he’d use them as logistics support and intelligence in the UK. Logistics of course meant driving him around and he was pleased to see one of his team drive up outside in a Range Rover.

The minder who wasn’t Terry, opened the door and looked inside the vehicle. Satisfied that no one was hiding in the back, he beckoned George to enter and then Terry sat in the front. George was beginning to think it was all a bit surreal, until he saw the girl sat in the old Toyota Corolla look their way. He’d seen her before, a seemingly random face in the crowd near the café he visited most days.

"She's one of them." He said nodding at the elderly Toyota.

"I know," said Terry, "always a mistake to use pretty girls to follow men around, you tend to remember their faces. She picked us up as we left the station on the way here."

George felt his stomach tighten and his brow become wet with a light covering of sweat.

"She followed you, how would she know you?" He asked.

"You've dealt with us before, it seems logical that you'd use us again, to handle er..... a difficult situation."

George simply nodded and looked through the rear window as the Corolla moved away from the kerb and followed them. It was huge, had to be huge! The security forces wouldn't put so many resources into something that was merely a minor embarrassment.

"We'll change vehicles in Sydenham." Said the driver.

George enjoyed the car swap, it reminded him of something he'd seen on a TV real crime show, but it involved a lot less running. Their driver stopped at the end of a cul-de-sac and Terry opened the door for George.

"The second car is waiting the other side of the bridge Sir."

George noticed the bridge, it was one of those grubby metal structures that seemed invented to make suburban railways an eyesore. There was the usual graffiti on the side of it about someone being innocent of something or other. They left the driver behind and he carried out a three point turn and began to drive back up the road. George and his two minders crossed the bridge, not seeing the Toyota until they were nearly at the other side.

"No need to rush sir, this was anticipated."

The car they'd just left tried to get in the way of the Toyota, but the girl driving it mounted the pavement and hurtled down the street at speed. By the time she'd run up the stairs on the footbridge, George was comfortably seated in the four by four Shogun. He looked back in time to see the girl aiming a camera at the rear of their vehicle.

"Don't worry Sir," said the driver, "the plates are stick on fakes. I'll rip them off once we're out of the area."

George hadn't organised any of the precautions, his team and Harry's men had. George began to realise how far out of his league he'd been attempting to play.

~ ~

Oleh and his Son had delivered the vehicles and never even asked what Kallina needed them for. They both just seemed incredibly happy to be helping their neighbour, much in the way Dean and Kylie had been so pleased to give Ruby their motorhome.

"They've even valeted the insides," said Spider, "they both stink of car cleaner."

It seemed almost a travesty to put their bags of weapons in the mint condition BMW estate. Kallina decided who went where and Ruby was in the back of the Audi with Kallina, with Spider driving and Sarah beside him. There was room for one other, but Kallina had insisted that everyone else should scrunch up together in the estate.

"We'll go in front," Kallina had told them, "be prepared to stop about an hour and a half after we set off."

Constanze was in the window, her head bobbing about as the two cars drove off. None of the neighbour's houses had lights on and there were no street lights. A hundred yards and their small convoy vanished into the night.

"Will your neighbours have seen us?" Asked Ruby.

"Probably, but I'll convince them they were mistaken."

They turned onto the main road east and Spider slowed down, his left hand reaching for the satnav system.

“Where do I tap in ?”

“Khulo, it’s about eighty four kilometres away.”

Spider tapped in the destination and the system told him to proceed the way he was going. Ruby glanced behind and she could see Olga at the wheel of the estate.

“Is Olga a good warrior ?” Asked Kallina.

“Yes, why ?”

“No matter, we’ll find out soon.”

Ruby was becoming infuriated with Kallina and her half statements, her confusion of what was going on and how it appeared to be deliberate.

“Talk to me Kallina, tell me what the hell is going on ?”

The woman next to her seemed to age before her eyes and once again the legendary Baba Yaga was in front of her. Not fierce this time, sadness filled her ancient and heavily lined face.

“I could tell you it all child, put it all into your head. Every good thing I’ve done and seen in over three hundred years and every bad thing. It would fill your head, turn you like me child.”

Ruby blinked and Kallina was there again, her face looking just as sad as her other wild persona.

“I’ll tell you the big secrets Ruby, but the details would fill your head and drive you crazy. Things spill out you see, three hundred years of memories is just too much. The mind prioritises all on its own you see, it forgets to feed your pet bird, but remembers what you had for breakfast on the eighth of December eighteen hundred and forty five. Eggs, I had fried eggs.”

Ruby had seen the grand mother of one of her friends at college, ruined by dementia, unable to recognise her own family, yet remembering the words to a popular song from the nineteen thirties.

Kallina seemed to have a similar kind of problem and Ruby wondered if she was seeing her own eventual fate.

“Will my mind start to overflow ?” She asked.

“Oh no, not if you live a normal life Ruby. Get married, have your children, you can have all the normal things. You’ll live the normal eighty five or ninety years and die just like everyone else. We never intended to live so long Ruby, it’s just that we had to protect the children. The best way seemed to be to keep them as children and extend the lives of those guarding them. The price though Ruby, the price has been hard to bear.”

Kallina was crying, so Ruby held her hand and kissed her cheek.

“Thank you child. I can give you the big secrets, I’ll do it carefully, just put the most vital parts into your head. I can whisper in your ear Ruby and tell you about who is trying to wipe us out. I can tell you about the children, give you their names and where they were born. I can also give you a few bits of information on Kurt, a few things that might give you an edge. Would you like me to whisper in your ear Ruby ?”

Ruby hesitated, but it was the information she’d been desperate to get hold of. The worry was that Kallina might become confused and dump three hundred years of memories into her head, some of which was likely to be very unpleasant.

“Do it Kallina,” she said, “do it before I change my mind.”

Kallina really did put her lips to her ear and whisper, but it was a whisper that went deep into her mind. Time stopped moving for Ruby and she awoke over an hour later, her head full of memories that weren’t hers.

“Oh Kallina, thank you I see it all. The bastards ! How could they betray you like that ?”

“Calm yourself Ruby, we’re approaching Khulo, the battle comes soon.”

The satnav was still telling Spider to proceed, but he was half leaning over the seat, looking for Kallina to give him instructions.

“There Spider the turning on the left. The house we’re interested in is less than a hundred metres further on, so turn as though it’s quite ordinary. Turn on your indicator and turn here.”

Spider turned into the dark and narrow lane, the estate car following him.

“Park where you can Spider. There ! The gap on the left with the road menders tools. With luck we’ll be on our way soon, just pull off the road.”

Spider pulled as far off the lane as far as he could and Olga parked the BMW alongside him. Kallina was out of the car and looking back the way they’d come.

“What do we do now ?” Asked Ruby.

“We go back to the house I mentioned,” said Kallina, “and we kill everyone in it. It’s only fair, it’s their intention to kill all of us.”

~ ~

Max had picked a good spot. As the Audi drove past, the driveway lamp of a large house lit up Spider as he concentrated on the road. Max also recognised Sarah, but his car was in the shadows and none of them saw him. He also recognised Olga as she drove the BMW estate.

“Decent cars for this lot.” He muttered to himself.

He picked up the advanced comms handset and called Marco.

“Marco, come in.”

Nothing, not even any white noise to tell him the thing was working.

“For fuck sake Marco, pick the thing up.”

There was the sound of cheering and then Marco’s voice.

“Sorry Max, one of the Bulgarian’s got a porno DVD... you know what these guys are like.”

Max was angry, but he kept his temper.

“Are the guys outside Marco, because Ruby is on her way ?”

“Some are Max, but there’s beer and the porno is a good one.”

There was more cheering and Max lost his temper.

“Marco are you listening to me ?”

“Yes boss, of course.”

“First car is one of those flash Audis. Second car close behind is an expensive BMW estate. You can’t miss them, haven’t seen any other car on the road in fifteen minutes. Get the guys out on the road and fire everything you’ve got at them. Every guy fires a gun, no more fucking beer and pornos. You got that Marco ?”

“Yeah, yeah boss. They’re as good as dead, you can trust me.”

Marco disconnected and Max started his car and began to move off. His offside front wheel caught on something and his engine stalled. Max went crazy, using his fist to beat the dashboard until he heard the plastic crack and begin to break up. He took the key out the ignition and counted to twenty, he had to regain his composure. He put the key in the ignition and turned it on.

“Fuck !”

Nothing, not a light, no gauges, nothing. It was probably just the battery or a loose cable, but he had no way to fix it. Max opened the door and went to the boot, removing his cane and a fully loaded AK47. He put the weapon over his shoulder and then put a coat over the top. It wasn’t perfect, anyone taking an interest could tell he was carrying a gun. Max didn’t care though, it was late at night, his car had died and it looked like he’d hired an army of dick heads. He grabbed his walking

stick and began to walk towards the house as fast as he could. It was a mile and a half to the house, the house where Marco was going to ambush and hopefully kill Ruby and her annoying friends.

~

~

© Ed Cowling – June 2015