

Ruby 2

Chapter 4 – A Job for George

“Important people want to know of any significant skeletons that might tumble out of his closet.”

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George had been using the café as a meeting place for years. For meeting Max when he'd been working for him, but sadly not a great deal less insane. Various city high flyers with information to sell or trade. George had met them all over coffee at 'Under the Bridge.' The staff changed on a regular basis, the current young girl was taciturn and efficient, which suited him. Tattoos seemed to be a must have accessory for young women, the waitress had a green dragon on her arm.

“The usual ?” She asked him.

“Yes please.”

Milky coffee and a pastry, he always had the same thing. He'd fallen in love with the place because you could order a coffee without learning barista language. No triple foam mocha latte nonsense, a frothy white coffee was all he'd ever needed to ask for. His coffee date was late, but he did have a large department to run. George had eaten most of his pastry, before Sir Edwin Fox walked in and joined him at his table. The waitress walked over and looked at him, it was her way of asking what customers wanted.

“Black coffee and two slices of toast.” Said Foxy.

There were only two other customers and they were well out of earshot. Foxy placed a copy of that morning's Times on the table and pushed it towards him.

“Front page this time.” Said Foxy. “Our girl has excelled herself. I've just had an unpleasant half hour with the minister.”

“What did you tell him ?”

“Not the truth George, never the truth.”

George had been watching the news unfold across the internet, it was still trending on Twitter.

‘Hundreds feared dead in chemical storage tragedy.’ Said the headline.

It was a side bar piece, the main story was about the personal failings of a well-known politician.

Still, Ruby had managed to get her visit to China onto the front page of the Times. That wasn't good and no one had foreseen events in Jingdao becoming so public, so soon.

“Were there really hundreds of deaths ?” Asked George.

“Troops from the nearby army base George.” Answered Foxy. “We must assume that there was a battle and Ruby's people won.”

Soldiers were still someone's sons and they were probably unwilling conscripts. George hadn't heard from Ruby, but she was still alive. Kallina had a link to her that nobody understood. If Ruby was dead Kallina would have been in touch.

“She hadn't expected there to be any serious trouble.” He said.

“Our friends across the pond sent these to the hotel in Vauxhall.”

Foxy gave him an envelope with about six pictures inside. The definition was poor, but a young girl could be seen, right in the centre of what looked like hell.

“Not bad for a high orbit satellite.” Said Foxy. “The Americans still have the best toys.”

The pictures were like a window into the lowest pit of hell. Everything was on fire and the girl appeared to be directing it. Ruby had often told him about her gifts, but to actually see the outcome was a completely different thing.

"Lightning too." Added Foxy. "Far stronger than we ever normally get from nature. Ruby really has caused a lot of questions to be asked by a lot of different security services."

Foxy took the pictures back and gave him a long hard look.

"I hope you've something planned to keep her busy George ? Keep her out of mischief for a while."

"I do have a job for her Foxy. Ruby will in London the day after tomorrow. She has never let me down when I've needed her, ever."

The job involved the top Story in The Times and a politician who was popular with the public, but accident prone. George decided to withhold that piece of information.

"Remember ! She was on a mission for you !" He said.

"Don't get me wrong George, I'm fairly pleased. All of the main mission aims appear to have been met. It's just the volume George, far too Fortissimo when we really needed Pianissimo. You get the idea George ?! I am really.....very pleased and grateful."

Foxy handed him an envelope, quite a thin and light envelope.

"Tell her we need a full debrief before she wanders off again George."

Foxy finished his toast and left. The envelope contained a certificate of deposit, made out to pay the bearer. They were the latest thing various security services were using to pay off useful informants and those who provided a clandestine service. Eventually their use would turn up on a Channel 4 documentary and another way would be found. George hadn't known the full details of Ruby's mission in China, but the size of the payment spoke volumes, it actually shouted at him. All those zeros, her damage to the Chinese government must have been massive.

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Their Junk wasn't moving fast, it had never been designed to. Ruby wasn't at all concerned about their speed, the flight to London was already booked from Noi Bai International Airport in Hanoi and they were on scheduled to arrive in good time for their flight home. Home ! That concept had been a bit of a moving feast for Ruby. Sometimes Budapest felt like home, sometimes Baku, with its fake London taxis. On the whole though, if it had to be one place, it would be her flat in London. The grubby flat in Hackney, which was far less grubby since George had bought the freehold to the building. Ruby was lying on a deck lounge with Olga doing the same, not that far away.

"Где , черт возьми, ты идешь?" Olga yelled at Lau. "Where the hell are you going?"

Ruby knew Lau's Russian was poor, but he'd get the idea..... Olga was pissed off at him. Everyone else was quite happy to spend a day or so travelling at a nice leisurely speed. Lau kept insisting on steering their junk and trying to find a quicker route. He'd barely avoided running them aground in a lonely inlet.

"Leave the crew to do their jobs Lau." Ruby told him.

"Fine !"

"We arrive back at Halong Bay when they were expecting us." She said. "We do nothing that could make anyone curious about us."

"Apart from arriving with two young children." Said Olga.

She was right, that was going to be awkward to explain.

"Charlotte, what do you think of our captain ?" She asked. "You've dealt with him more than the rest of us."

"He's a good man."

"That's it ? Care to expand on that ?"

They were all looking at her now. They weren't stupid, they knew her intention was to leave Mei's kids with the captain.

"They're Chinese." Said Lau. "They look Chinese. No one in Vietnam will adopt them and they'll be in an orphanage until they're adults."

The twins were on the deck, grazing off their half-finished dinner plates. They seemed to have hollow legs and never missed any opportunity to eat. Charlotte had taken away most of their emotional turmoil, but they'd soon miss their parents again. She felt Olga's hand on her arm.

"Don't give them to Kallina." She said. "She'll keep them and treat them like pets."

"No. I know where to take them." Said Ruby. "I'm taking them to Britain."

She walked over to the children and knelt in front of them. The girl child had tomato sauce on her chin and a smile on her face. Eugenie was giving off waves of anxiety that were beginning to interfere with her thoughts.

"Where in Britain Ruby?" She asked. "Who are you giving them to?"

There was only one place in the world she could be certain of moving herself to and with luck, return from.

"I'm going to abandon them." She said. "I should have thought of it sooner. Left in the street with no identification. They'll be found and put up for adoption quite quickly."

Ruby went through their pockets, throwing away the various items that might identify their origins. A sweet wrapper in Cantonese, a bus ticket from Jingdao. It all went over the side of the boat, until they had nothing left to identify them. Their clothing was of Chinese manufacture, but nothing could be done about that.

"I'll miss them so much!" Said Eugenie.

Goodbyes were said and then Ruby held them both against her and thought of home and her safe place. The world in front of her looked a little misty for a moment and then she was inside her parent's garden shed again. The children looked startled, but more excited than scared.

"Damn!"

The door wouldn't open, someone had fitted a padlock to the outside of the door. She pressed against the door until it burst open. Noise, quite a bit of noise and a dog somewhere began to bark. Why did nothing ever go quite to plan?

"Come on, follow me."

They didn't understand her of course, but her tone was soothing as they followed her out into the garden. Ruby unbolted the side gate, there had to be a logical explanation for people to latch onto. Abandoned Chinese children find garden gate open and take refuge from..... a nice warm summer's morning. Oh well, it would have to do.

"What do you think you're doing? I'll call the police."

Her mother was standing at the back door, or more accurately, the woman she'd called mother for the first eighteen years of her life. It wasn't that either of her parents had been bad people. There had never been any abuse or cruelty. Her mother had just been indifferent to her and that had left scars.

"Hi mum." She said. "Can you look after the twins for me? It's important."

She'd intended to knock on the back door and leave. Giving her mother a request from beyond the grave was never part of the plan. Ruby caught her mother as she fainted and leant her against the open door. How old she looked now, how frail for a woman who wasn't that old. It seemed they'd both been damaged in their own way. She kissed her mother on the cheek.

"You fed and clothed me for eighteen years. Thank you mum."

She waited until her mother began to come to, before moving herself back to the junk. Return trips could be a challenge, but she arrived only a foot away from where she'd been. Appearing out of nowhere gave her an instant and attentive audience.

"They're safe in the UK." She said.

Eugenie began to cry, but the others looked cheerful enough. Ruby went back to her lounge and sipped her now warm drink.

"Where did you leave them?" Asked Olga.

"With my mum."

"The mother who thinks you're dead, the one who cried at your funeral?"

"Yes."

Olga went and fetched her a fresh drink, with plenty of ice.

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Jalil liked his house in Bilgah, one of the nicer areas of Baku, capital of Azerbaijan. Baku, largest City in the Caucasus, with a population of a mere two million, give or take. Jalil knew that Azerbaijan was a nice place to live, as long as you kept your head down and didn't make waves. He had two sons who he was very proud of. There had once been three sons, but the youngest hadn't been good at keeping his head down. Helping Ruby and her friends wasn't just a bad idea, it could easily become a fatal idea. In a nation still recovering from serious problems, anyone making too much noise could be viewed as an insurgent. But, Jalil was a businessman and Kurt always arrived with plenty of hard currency. He wondered why Kurt didn't simply send the information to Budapest himself, but he wasn't going to talk himself out of the fees. Besides, the Kurt sat in his home looked to have been through some fairly grim times.

"You must let me send for a doctor Kurt, you're injured." He said.

"I'll be fine, I heal quickly."

He didn't look fine. Even the usual mischievous twinkle had gone from his eyes.

"Where have you been this time?"

"South of Baishan again old friend."

Jalil knew what he meant, you only had one place to go if you headed south out of the Chinese city of Baishan and that was the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Or North Korea as most people knew it. It was a wild and mountainous part of the world and he dreaded to think what Kurt had been doing there. Kurt Trifonov dropped a thick bundle of Euros, next to a wooden box he'd already placed on his coffee table.

"This time, the box needs to go by hand to Tobor in Budapest."

"I know a reliable courier."

"No couriers. Send someone you'd trust with your own life."

Kurt was smiling at him and Jalil felt a deep sense of wellbeing. Why not send one of his sons, it was just a simple delivery job. All via nice safe international airports, there were even two direct flights a week. Money for nothing really.

"I'll send my oldest son with it." He said.

"Perfect, perfect." Said Kurt.

Jalil picked up the pile of money and it was way too much. Even allowing for a few days in a cheap hotel, waiting for the return flight, it was too much. He wasn't going to refuse the cash, but some part of his mind knew it wasn't going to be a simple delivery. Kurt was giving him danger money, enough to ease his own conscience.

"How long is it since you went to see Ruby yourself?" He asked.

Kurt's smile turned to a look of discomfort and Jalil found himself waking up from a nap. The clock told him an hour had passed, though he had no recollection of falling asleep.

"Strange." He muttered. "I never fall asleep during the day. Kurt will think I'm getting past it." Kurt had gone, leaving just the wooden box and the large bundle of five hundred euro notes.

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Jalil had put his eldest son on a plane to Budapest by the time Ruby saw the jetties of Halong bay in the distance. She barely knew Murad and had no idea of the danger Kurt was effectively sending him into.

"With everything else." Said Charlotte. "I'd forgotten how beautiful it is here."

Lau just snorted, but Ruby knew what she meant. The Vietnamese called it Vịnh Hạ Long, which literally means, Descending Dragon Bay. Emerald green waters and hundreds of tiny islands, it really was an idyllic place. It had been made a UNESCO world heritage site, which probably meant that even more tourists would arrive to ruin the place.

"Now three hours being bumped about on the roads to Hanoi." Moaned Eugenie.

"Don't you dare moan, until you've done the trip by bus." Said Olga.

Parting from the crew was more emotional than it really should have been, they'd been through so much together. Ruby still didn't know their captain's name, but he called her 'con gái,' as he hugged her. "Daughter." They picked up their bags and became just another party of happy tourists. Olga had reluctantly dropped all her weapons into the ocean, so their kit would withstand a search, if it happened. It was a bit of an anti-climax when their car was late and they had to sit by the dusty road and wait.

"Can we come here again and do some snorkelling?" Asked Eugenie.

"I could teach you how to scuba dive." Said Olga.

It struck Ruby that learning how to dive probably should have been added to their list of required skills.

"Good idea Olga." She said. "We'll have to add that to the rotation."

Olga seemed about to deliver an insult in Russian, but their driver arrived in a very muddy four wheel drive. He spoke some English, but was happy when he realised that Charlotte spoke fluent Vietnamese.

"He's sorry to be late." She said. "There has been heavy rain and some of the roads are flooded."

Their heavy stuff went on the roof rack, the cases in the back. Ruby claimed the seat next to the driver, everyone else wedging themselves in as best they could. None of them had enjoyed the journey down from Hanoi and they weren't looking forward to the return trip. Their driver was keeping up a constant stream of chatter to Charlotte.

"Any problems?" Asked Ruby, as they bounced out of a pothole.

"He says the journey might take four hours."

"Blyad." Said Olga. "Fuck!"

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Max Krause had no lighting at all. When it was dark outside, he went to sleep until the sun came up again. It was the kind of existence his ancestors would have lived, but they probably had hot food. Kallina had given him no lighting and no way of cooking anything. She'd obviously concluded, probably accurately, that he'd use any cooking equipment or lights as an aid to his escape.

"More congealed beans and sausages." He muttered.

He pulled off the tin lid and pushed a plastic spoon into the unappetising looking contents. The instructions said to make sure the food was piping hot, but he knew it was safe to eat cold. He'd

been living off cold tinned food for quite some time. The bits of egg in the all-day breakfast were particular unpleasant to eat cold, but he'd become an unfussy eater. She brought him all sorts of foods that were impossible to eat uncooked and he'd experimented. Leaving some pasta to soak for too long in cold water had made him quite ill on one occasion. Kallina usually brought him a hot takeaway on Friday evening and he lived for those meals. It was beyond Stockholm syndrome, he knew that. His relationship with Kallina was unique and very unhealthy. He missed their game of chess if she didn't turn up on Friday, really missed, like missing a lover.

"If I just had a light !" He yelled.

Not for night time. He was now used to being left in almost total darkness. There were clear skies over North Yemen on most nights. He was usually able to see the Milky Way and starlight almost always lifted the total darkness of night. He wanted a light to lower into the hole, the hole he had become obsessed with. His radio had two tiny LED lights, which gave him a dull glow as he moved about at night. Barely enough light to stop him from stubbing his toes on the bed legs and nowhere near enough to examine the depths of the hole. Anyway, he had no intension of risking his precious radio, by using it as a lamp. He'd asked her for a light once and she'd laughed.

"Sure Max and maybe you'd like a pistol with fifty rounds too ?"

A light could be used to get noticed, to aid his escape. Max now knew that eventually he'd drop down the hole, he was just building up the courage, or the desperation, or both. He'd begun to save a layer of margarine at the bottom of each tub he used. Kallina never bothered to check his food store and he had enough margarine to rub over his entire body, lubricating himself to fit down the hole.

"Not yet though," he muttered, "not quite yet."

He chewed at his beans and sausages and it just tasted of cold beans. Everything was beginning to taste of cold beans. Kallina brought him tinned meats, but the desert heat ruined their flavour. Corned beef out of a hot tin, tasted and looked like shit. He looked at the hole and wondered if being wedged in the dark would be that bad. He'd die of thirst quicker with the heat, he might only last three or four days.

"Soon." He mumbled. "Not yet, but soon."

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Murad didn't know why the pine box couldn't simply be emptied into a bag, but his father had been insistent.

"We're being paid a lot of money to deliver this box, as is, to Kornél Toys in Budapest."

"What if they want to open the box at the airport in Budapest ?"

His father had just given him one of his infuriating smiles.

"Not a problem Murad, not a problem."

So he'd put the box into a backpack and taken it through Baku airport departures as hand luggage. No one had looked at it twice and it had gone through the scanning machine without any mishap. The problem was that he was now stood at a desk in Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport, with two uniformed officials wanting to look in his box.

"You have already told one of our staff that you packed this bag yourself. Is that correct ?"

"Yes it is."

What could he say ? No, my father received it from a crazy man with known links to even crazier people..... No, he'd say the least he could and ask to see a lawyer if things got awkward. One of the men was mumbling to the other about his box being already checked by an explosives scanner and a sniffer dog. They weren't taking any chances.

“Do you have any objections to me opening this box ?”

“Yes.”

That agitate them, the answer was no, everyone knew that you were supposed to say no, or even ‘of course not officer’. They even stepped back a little. Murad tried to stand still and look normal and definitely not look like some kind of terrorist. The problem was that terrorists tended to look like normal people.

“Why do you object ?” One asked him.

“I’ve told you. It contains items of a private nature, but nothing dangerous or illegal.”

They looked at each other, the sort of look that says they weren’t being paid enough to deal with this kind of crap.

“We have authority to open any package arriving into Hungarian territory. You do have the right to be present during the inspection.”

“Fine.”

They were nervous, Murad was surprised they hadn’t already called in the military. Perhaps they’d already called in help for far too many harmless parcels. The shorter of the two men pulled back the sliding lid of the box.

“Is this some kind of joke ?”

The box was empty, not even a little dust inside it. He was as surprised as them, but he wasn’t going to show it.

“Can I take my box and go now ?” He asked.

They didn’t answer him, one of them, the taller one, said he was going to get someone called the boss. There were no chairs, so Murad stood, resigning himself to a long, pointless and tiring afternoon.

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Monique had bought several small gifts for Sarah, rather than one big gift. It wasn’t the sort of present buying he was used to, but he trusted Monique. She’d shown him the box containing a Selfie Stick and assured him that Sarah would love it. He hadn’t let her buy a dildo from a sex shop in Soho, there had to be limits.

“It’s her thirtieth.” Monique had told him. “And a girl needs a little fun.”

They’d ended up with a compromise present of a large jar of KY Jelly, intended as a bit of a joke gift. There were a few other presents in the joke category and he just hoped that Sarah didn’t blame him for some of them.

Spider was probably the worst person to be given the job of organising Sarah’s birthday party. Which meant of course that by the perverse laws of social interaction, he’d ended up with the job.

“You live in London and I’m far too busy.” Ruby had told him. “And don’t ask Sarah to help !”

“She won’t mind.” He’d said.

“No Spider ! It might not be a surprise party, but you can’t ask her to organise her own party.”

He could see why that was bad and besides, Sarah might want to invite all her ex partners and it could easily turn nasty.

“It’ll be an odd mix of friends and muggles.” He’d told Ruby.

“Make it a large venue Spider.” She’d told him. “We’ll need a private area for gifted friends only.”

He’d found the perfect place. A local hotel in Ealing which had seen better days and was quite willing to let him hire the entire building for a few days. Spider had been to view the facilities and had left a deposit within minutes of arriving. It was perfect ! The Lemon Tree Hotel, a rather shabby building on a corner that looked the sort of hotel used by people having affairs. Most of the rooms had en

suite loos and they all looked clean and presentable. There were three function rooms and a dining room where the hotel served breakfast.

"If we run out of rooms, people can crash on the floor." He'd told Ruby.

It wasn't just a party, it was an opportunity to get everyone together under one roof to discuss some unsettling news that Ruby had received from Kurt. The thirteen were spread across the world to keep them safe, but it had been over a year since there had been a gathering of them all. Sarah's birthday was an ideal opportunity to bring everyone together, Tobor had even promised to fly in from Budapest. A gathering brought risk though and Kallina had promised to use a few of her tricks to keep the building safe. The hotel staff were being given a few days off and Spider had all the catering to organise and the entertainment. Oh yes, there'd be entertainment a strippergram for Sarah. Spider was now on the phone trying to arrange something a little special.

"Is that Steve Jones of Local Boyz strippergrams?"

"Yes."

"I'm looking for something special for a female friend's birthday."

"Yes, we can help you, what sort of strippergram were you looking for?"

"Erm.... I'm looking for three or four guys dressed as American Footballers." Said Spider. "And the venue is a private hotel, so they can strip all the way."

"Not a problem, I'll call you back with some prices."

Spider smiled as he ticked yet another item off the birthday party 'to do' list. Much to his own surprise, he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

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Murad was late and that probably saved his life. The authorities had finally given up on finding anything wrong with his box and let him out of the airport. He'd assumed they'd follow him around for a while, just in case he was a terrorist with a strange empty box fetish. Even if they weren't following him, he thought that going through the routine to lose a tail was worth doing. He arrived outside the rear doors of Kornél Toys, feeling tired and hungry. He pressed the entry phone and it wasn't answered. He pressed the button again and spoke quietly into the microphone.

"I've brought a box for Miss Ruby."

He tried once more and there was no answer or any sign the building was still occupied. It wasn't right, Tobor wouldn't go home until the delivery was received, or he'd made certain Murad wasn't being detained by the police. He was expected and Tobor was a professional. He pushed the door and wasn't surprised when it opened to show a darkened hallway. Something was wrong, badly wrong.

"Hello." He called. "I have a delivery for Tobor."

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him, giving his eyes a chance to adjust to the gloom. There was a green emergency exit sign illuminating someone lying on the ground. Murad didn't immediately want to think in terms of a body, but he found no pulse as he felt the man's neck. Still warm though, whatever had happened, had happened recently.

There was a pry-bar next to the man's hand, which he picked up. He felt less nervous now he had some kind of weapon. No more calling out though, he was going to be as silent as possible. Murad had survived the internecine troubles in Azerbaijan, he wasn't a stranger to sudden death and dangerous situations.

He had never visited the building before, but his father had mentioned the office being on the top floor, right under the roof.

"Ruby has told me the stairs are a bit rickety." His father had said.

So creaky stairs to contend with too ! He walked through the warehouse, finding the body of a young girl with a bullet wound in her chest. She had a bunch of keys, which he took with him in case they might be useful. The stairs looked old and almost homemade. Murad kept to the sides, but there were still a lot of loud crackling sounds as he reached the next floor.

Some sort of workshop, probably the dolls hospital. Another dead man, this one holding a hammer. He added the second potential weapon to his collection, by pushing it through his belt. It would have taken a long time to completely search that floor, so he ignored it and carried on up to the top of the stairs. The stairs were noisy, yet no one came out to challenge or attack him. He was fairly certain that whoever had caused the deaths at Kornél Toys was long gone, but he couldn't be certain. There's debris now, from a door that's been bashed in. No sign to say the office is Tobor's, but the huge desk in the corner and floor covered in toys and parts of toys, fits the description that Ruby had given his father.

"Oh, why kill an old man ?" He mutters.

A rather overweight old guy in an expensive suit, it had to be Tobor. They'd tortured him first, his face showed signs of a bad beating and his fingernails had been pulled out. That all took time and Murad realised the attack had probably been timed for when he was supposed to arrive with the box. Who knew though ? Did Ruby have a traitor among her people ? He used the phone on Tobor's desk to call his father, ignoring the small chance that the call might be monitored.

"I arrived here late..... Tobor has been tortured and killed."

"Do you still have the box ?"

"Yes father..... they're all dead, there are bodies everywhere."

Silence for a few moments as his father thinks.

"Don't come back here." Said Jalil. "Take the box to Ruby in London. I'll give you an address, but remember it. Don't write it down !"

He listened to the address and memorised it, repeating it back to himself several times.

"I have it.....who do you think killed Tobor ?"

"Almost certainly the State Security Department of North Korea. Kurt has been playing cat and mouse with them for some time. I had no idea they were getting this close though."

Someone had forced open the desk drawer and he noticed a large sum in Euro notes inside. Murad hated to do it, but he put the money in his pocket. He was likely to be hunted now and using his own credit cards would lead them right to him.

"I'll get on the first plane to London."

"Call the police from a call box before you leave. Tobor doesn't deserve to be left like that all night."

"I will father."

Murad looked at the box again, the plain pine box that seemed to be worth killing for. It was empty, there was no room for any hidden sections and the airport people had almost torn it apart. It was a mystery, but if it was worth killing for, it was worth delivering to Ruby Mason in London.

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Ruby knew nothing about events in Budapest as she arrived at the conference centre in Westminster. She wasn't arriving straight from the airport, but had cut it pretty close. Just time for a shower and a change and a couple of hours sleep. She'd never let George down though and didn't intend to start now.

"He'll give a twenty minute talk." Said George. "Then he'll mingle. See what you can pick up."

"I'll do my best George, but no promises."

They'd been through her brief for the day several times. Her target was the rising star of politics, MP Robin (Rob) Newsmith. Rob Newsmith was enormously popular with the public, so the establishment had overlooked his appalling choice of friends and his predilection for sleeping with married women. He'd even been given a free pass by the usually rabid press and was now tipped to be promoted to the front benches.

"Important people want to know of any significant skeletons that might tumble out of his closet." George had told her.

"You know that just eavesdropping on thoughts rarely reveals anything worth knowing." She told George and had told him before, often. "I need to drop a seed into a conversation, move his thoughts that way."

The problem was that no one knew what Rob might have been up to, hopefully nothing worse than being drunk too often and knowing a few dodgy characters.

"Ideally we'll give him a clean slate." George had instructed. "But if you do find anything..... get enough details to hang him."

The important people were probably the grey suits and blue rinsers who actually ran his particular political party. They'd have no idea of her gift of course and probably assumed George knew some particularly effective private investigators.

Money had its uses, George was well known and getting close to Rob wasn't going to be a problem. He liked blondes it seemed, so Ruby had used blue contact lenses and an expensive blonde wig. Her eyebrows she'd trimmed right back until they were barely a few strands of dark hair. She had looked in the mirror and seen a young Britney looking back at her.

"Just his type." She'd muttered.

The talk was on his plans, if he was ever in a position to bring about real change. It was the usual twaddle, but she picked up a lot of stress. Rob might be the darling of day time talk shows, but he was really a swan. Everything on the surface looked cool and calm, but underneath, it was all thrashing about like crazy.

She gave him a few minutes after the talk ended, before introducing herself as George's PA and flashing him one of her special smiles. All her trust, adoration and most positive vibes, hitting him like a mental tsunami. She'd always been good at it and she was still improving. He was hers now, he'd even give her the pin number for his Amex card, if she asked for it. She wasn't after his money though, just his darkest secrets. One of his flunkies was trying to block her getting close, obviously aware of Rob's reputation with pretty young women. Not too young though, there had been no underage girls in his life, as far as they knew. It was a young guy getting between her and Rob, she'd seen him cheering the speech.

"No problem here Tim." Said Rob. "You can leave me with Ruby. I'm sure she won't bite."

He was charming and she liked him. That might be a problem and usually she tried to remain emotionally neutral, but she looked into Robin Newsmith and found that his easy going charm, covered an easy going and friendly temperament. He was nice, simple as that.

"I bet he has to fight the girls off for you." She said.

He laughed and gave her the half smile that made him so popular on TV.

"Tim is a bit over protective, thinks every pretty girl is a journalist out to trip me up."

"Do you get many of those?"

"Oodles, enough to fill the Albert Hall some days."

They laughed and she touched his arm, gaining yet more trust from him. George had paid some of the best people to train Ruby in body language. Mix that in with her gifts and she was truly formidable.

“What do they think you’ve done ?” She asked

“I honestly have no idea.”

Something in his past, something he’s ashamed of. It might be nothing, might just be a memory of someone catching him masturbating when he was a teenager. George had introduce her to a sixty year old banker once, who was still carrying scars from an incident with Baywatch on TV and a box of tissues.

“Never mind Rob.” She said. “I promise you that even if you’re a serial killer. No one will hear a word of it from my lips.”

He laughed, but a memory from his college days emerged and Ruby had trouble not reacting to it. Luckily she’s seen a lot of things in people’s minds and a dead escort was far from being the worst. It was risky, sometimes touching too often can cause anxiety, but she held his hand and tried to strengthen the memory. The girls name had been Natalie, or at least that was her working name. She let go of his hand as Tim began fussing about again.

“Sorry.” Said Rob. “I have another function to attend.”

“I understand, I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

He was charming and still nice, but he was also a murderer. Ruby found George and rescued him from the attentions of a rather unpleasant German financier they both knew. George called for his car as they walked towards the entrance.

“Did you get anything ?” He asked.

“Oh yes George. Can we walk ? Just once round the block.”

“But your laptop is in the car.”

“I won’t forget anything George, almost wish I could. I just need a few minutes out in the fresh air.”

“I’m not sure if the driver can wait here.....”

George talked to their driver and then followed her as she walked along Cleveland Street, trying to avoid bumping into the usual groups of pedestrians.

“How bad is it ?” He asked.

“Bad George. Him and two of his friends killed an escort called Natalie. They were young and at college and it wasn’t intentional. A silly game with duct tape and gags that got a little too rough and they broke her George. She died taped to Rob’s college bed.”

She turned right at the Post Office Tower and noticed their car idling on the other side of the road. The driver was obviously keeping with them until Ruby could bear being in an enclosed space again.

“Christ !” Said George. “Who were the other two ?”

“Two more household names, both members of our current government.”

“Crap ! Come on Ruby, get it all typed up, then we can talk it over.”

She held his arm, feeling his mind, realising he hadn’t comprehended the real danger. She refused to budge, keeping him with her on the pavement.

“Do you want to tell them the truth George ?” She asked. “An all clear on Rob might be easier and safer.”

She could tell he understood.

“Don’t tell me our government doesn’t do that kind of thing George, we both know they do. The death of Natalie and what they did to cover it up, will be dangerous knowledge to know.”

“What did they do ?”

“Dumped her in Epping Forest and used a hammer on her face, to make her unrecognisable. It was before DNA testing George, she’s still an unidentified victim. Rob knows, he’s been keeping an eye on the case over the years.”

She allowed herself to be steered towards the car and made no objection to being sat in the back. “Get it all typed up Ruby, every grubby little detail.” Said George. “Then we’ll both decide if we tell the client or say we found nothing to report.”

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One tiny piece of news in a local paper went unnoticed by just about everyone. Even the reporter only included it to achieve her monthly word count requirement. It was a silly piece about a woman who was probably still mentally unwell after the death of her daughter.

Restless ghost in Bessemer Street

Mrs Mason reports seeing the ghost of her dead daughter.

It appears her daughter delivered two children of Chinese origin and asked for them to be looked after.

The puzzling thing is that two children were actually left with Mrs Mason and the police have so far, been unable to identify them.

The children, twin toddlers, are currently being looked after by Social Services.

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