

Ruby 2

Chapter 13 – Boy’s Toys

“Billy was a dinosaur, left over from the days when your weren’t a real gangster, unless you’d nailed someone’s hand to the public bar counter in an East End pub.”

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A few days after seeing Christine McNeil, Spider was back in London and going through his diary. Not that anyone else would call his collection of post-it notes and scribbles on odd tatty pieces of paper, a diary. To Spider it was his life and livelihood though. His business had been neglected; his tin full of used bank notes was looking decidedly depleted. One rather crumpled post-it note had been on his desk for a while.

‘Simon – MT – Billy four K.’

Simon was a local minor hoodlum, the MT meant medium threat. Always know who you’re dealing with, was a rule that had kept Spider fairly safe in a dangerous business. He knew Simon; he’d even bought a little weed from him. Simon was a runner and a hider, definitely not someone to plunge a knife into your guts. Knowing that was important !

“Saddle up guys.” He shouted. “We need to work today, there’s money to be collected.”

There were no complaints, they’d been promised a few days off and he’d given them a three day break. There were already a few signs of boredom setting in, they needed to be kept busy. Monique had her head round his bedroom door;

“Who from and how much ?” She asked.

He liked her attitude, Monique had the makings of a good collector of old and difficult debts. Fabio was keen, but he didn’t have her natural affinity for the work.

“We’re collecting for Billy.” He replied. “An old debt of four thousand. Shouldn’t be too much rough stuff, but stay alert.”

Billy was a dinosaur, left over from the days when your weren’t a real gangster, unless you’d nailed someone’s hand to the public bar counter in an East End pub. Billy was old and feeling a little threatened by the newcomers, the crooks in jeans who sold designer drugs and knock off branded goods. Billy always wore a three piece suit with a folded handkerchief in his top pocket. Last of a breed was Billy.

“Simon owes me four grand and he’s been selling packets of shit on my turf.” Billy had told him. “Get my money and then hurt him a bit. Have a bit of a chat with him Spider.”

A bit of a chat meant nothing that left a permanent limp or scar, though accidents had been known to happen. A good long talking to, often meant a lorry being run over someone’s legs.

“We have to thump this one.” Added Spider.

Fabio put his head next to Monique’s.

“Great !” He said.

Who said modern kids were workshy ? His two trainees were always keen to learn new and useful skills. The job was a few months old and Billy only had so much patience. Spider’s cut was a third, which would help fill the tin up again.

“Can we have Thai food tonight ?” Asked Monique.

“Collect the money and we can.”

Monique had gone to bolt the back door and she was the one to hear the news on the radio. She had the lounge TV on a rolling news channel, before calling out.

"It's Newsmith !" She shouted.

"Has he resigned ?"

"Come and see Spider, you need to see this !"

He met Fabio at the lounge door, just in time to see the TV showing a news piece on a library somewhere being occupied by protesters.

"Wait ! It's the main item." Said Monique.

A very serious newscaster spoke, he was actually wearing a black tie. Above him a rolling banner told them the shocking news;

'Rob Newsmith killed in tragic accident.'

"A huge blow to the government." Said the newscaster. "The minister tipped as the next leader of his party, tragically killed in a car crash in the early hours of this morning....."

Spider muted the sound, the various banners on the screen told him everything, without the fake reverential tone. A few days earlier, the same newscaster was calling Newsmith a fool, but death seemed to bring out the syrupy sycophant in such people.

"That's all of them." Said Monique. "The radio said the other one was in the same car."

"Crap ! It was our report !" Said Fabio. "Those pictures of Chris McNeil."

Two dead and one forced to resign. It seemed that an arm of national security had decided that Rob and his friends posed too much of a risk to the established order.

"If anyone deserved it, they did." Said Monique.

"I think they'd already made their minds up after our visit from Iain Peck." Said Spider. "The interview with Chris McNeil was really just going through the motions, building up a little more evidence."

They were settling themselves down into chairs, watching pictures of a burned out car and a crying woman. The banner said it was the lady who ran his constituency office, another woman smitten by his charm.

"We still need to work guys ! No cash, no Thai food !"

He turned off the TV and led then out of the house. Another trip on the tube into town, it would take their minds off the fate of Rob Newsmith.

Spider had been wary of listening to Christine McNeil. Paying her the five hundred pounds she'd demanded, did devalue her testimony. It didn't devalue the deep old scars on her back though.

"He wanted to kill me." She'd told them. "Said it was the only way to keep me quiet."

Monique had hugged her for a while and then taken pictures of the scars on her back. A few mild hits with a whip that had got way out of control.

"I thought I was going to die !"

"You must have been terrified." Said Fabio.

Chris had left it until they were leaving to whisper to Spider;

"His friend paid me a few grand to keep quiet and warned me to move out of London. He said he didn't want anyone to be hurt again. Again ! Spider."

The significance wasn't lost on him. If anyone deserved to die, it was Rob Newsmith. Plus, they'd probably earned Ruby another get out of jail free card with the UK security services. Always handy things to have.

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Patrick and Delmar had been planning it for three days, rarely sleeping for more than two or three hours a night. Even for people with skills and stamina above that of a normal human, they were pushing themselves too hard. They'd already broken into Serge's private weapons lockers, the great

holy of holies of the house. They'd be in huge trouble with Ruby and Serge, but the lockers had yielded several state of the art weapons. The desk in the security room looked like a gun nut's wet dream. Several AK74s, at least three AR15s and a huge assortment of hand guns. To top it off there was a whole row of grenades and some wicked looking knives. They were both breathing a little quickly; the first traffic detector had just pinged.

"He's out there. I can feel him !" Said Patrick.

Delmar was already reaching for an assault rifle, as the second detector pinged. The familiar sight of the large VW badge on the front of the Combi Van was almost an anti-climax. The screen still showed just the dim view in the darkness, but their imaginations were filling in the gaps. They were there in that Combi, the group from North Korea. He was in there too, the one like them.

"Don't forget we need him alive and conscious." Said Delmar.

"I know the plan !" Snapped Patrick.

There had been a lot of friction between them and quite a few coin tosses. Delmar even had a nasty looking bruise below one eye. When consensus had failed, they'd thumped each other for a while. When that failed, they'd finally sat down together and formulated a workable plan. Neither of them was going to be left in the house, they were both going out to get him. They actually had a split second man hug, as they picked up a pistol each and left the house together. Via the back door of course and keeping low. Their quarry wouldn't have parked up yet, the advantage was theirs for a minute or so. The plan had started off as simple and brutal.

"We kill all the others and just take him alive." Patrick had said.

Delmar had agreed, they had a plan. Then realisation dawned on them that mowing down people who hadn't attacked them was murder. Delmar had pointed out the serious flaw in their Plan A; "Ruby will never let us pick up a gun again !"

They'd talked it over into the night and agreed on another plan, long after they'd run out of the alphabet. They'd begun to prefix the plan versions with numbers and Plan 7G was their final attempt. It had the distinct advantage of not including the random slaughter of North Koreans, while still containing a fair chance of needing to use their weapons.

Patrick found the small stream again and cursed the mud on his boots. He was dressed for it now, they both were. All in black, night vision glasses over their eyes, they moved at speed towards where the VW normally parked. He might sense them in the night, they'd been working on that. They'd taken it in turns to hide outside, using a gift they barely understood, to hide from each other.

"Ruby can hide her presence from us." Patrick had said. "We should be able to make ourselves invisible to him."

It worked to a fashion, but it wasn't perfect. If they really concentrated, they could still sense the presence of the other. Ruby would have told them to find a plan 7H, but they decided to take a risk.

"We know their gifts aren't as good as ours." Delmar had said. "I bet he'll never know we're there."

He hadn't said he'd bet their lives on it, but that was exactly what he was doing, both their lives.

They ran wide, coming up on the VW from the rear.

"They brought lots more kit." Whispered Patrick.

They could see and hear about four men, carrying heavy boxes into the woods, heading for their house.

"Maybe they picked tonight to attack us." Said Delmar.

"Can't be helped, we stick to the plan."

It seemed a bit rough on Serge, to leave his home undefended. It was just stones and mortar though. They waited, giving the men time to get the boxes wherever they were taking them. All that was

immaterial to their plan, as was the house. Their one obsession now was to catch 'him,' the one like them. To meet him, talk to him !

"I feel him, but he doesn't feel us." Said Delmar.

"He will when we move closer."

It was a warm and muggy night, once again they'd left a side window ajar on the van. The curtains still hid the interior from view, but that open window was integral to their plan.

"Only three of them." Said Delmar. "I feel him and the civilian from London. Just one real trained agent to worry about."

"No time like the present."

They both put on gasmasks. Patrick moved slowly towards the VW, a gas grenade in his hands. A fast acting nerve toxin, designed to paralyse rather than kill. He felt the one like them react to his presence, as he dropped the grenade through the window. He moved back a little and watched the green mist topple out of the van window. The gas was clear and odourless, someone in the military had insisted on the green colouring, to see how the gas spread out. No whispering to each other now, Patrick stood next to Delmar, weapon ready. The grenades had been in one of the special lockers, guaranteed to work fast.

"Crap !" Said Delmar.

They should have all been paralysed and struggling to breathe, yet the door was opening. The one trained agent, the tall man in the expensive suit. He was doing the impossible, using pure willpower to counter the effects of the drug. He stood in the doorway, staring at them for a few seconds.

Delmar raised his assault rifle.

"No ! His friends will hear. The gas will work."

It did, the man fell forward, hitting the ground with an audible thud. They had the plastic ties, so beloved of TV cop shows. Patrick used two lots of ties on the man's wrists and another two on his ankles. They had plenty and he wasn't taking chances. It was odd to see his opponent's eyes open, watching him yet unable to do anything to stop himself being bound.

Delmar was just dragging the civilian from London out of the Combi and onto the grass.

"Too much gas." Said Delmar. "I don't think this one will make it."

Patrick felt a sudden panic, supposing he died, the one it was all about. He ran into the VW and grabbed his ankles, not caring if he bumped the man's face on the way out of the door. He seemed ok, his breathing was obviously laboured, but he still had a good colour. The man from London was as pale as death, with foam coming out of his lips. Delmar was shaking his head.

"No need to use the ties on this one. He's gone."

There was no warning on the instructions for the grenades, nothing about using them in a confined space. Patrick laid the one like them on his side, pressing a finger to his neck. Good, a nice steady heartbeat.

"I know you can understand me." He said. "Don't panic, you're fine and the effect will wear off soon."

He tied his wrists, but not his ankles. Carrying him back to the house seemed an unnecessary chore, when their prisoner would soon be capable of walking. Patrick was looking into the eyes of their prisoner, wondering what he might have to tell them, when the first explosion occurred.

"What the hell was that ?" Said Patrick.

The ground trembled, as another massive explosion, filled the quiet of the night.

"I think they're blowing up the house." Answered Delmar.

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The train had rattled north out of Vladivostok, travelling for miles, even further away from North Korea. Ruby had done her homework; she knew they'd have to detrain at Ussuriysk. It was a major city and railway hub, where they had to transfer onto a train bound for Korea. There was nothing to worry about, it was all routine. Unless of course, you had a huge amount of heavy baggage to transfer. Having a member of the train staff paid to look after them really helped.

"I know some porters who won't ask questions."

A bazooka in a homemade case still shrieked of being something lethal and cricket bags full of guns made a unique clanking sound as they were carried. Without some friendly porters, they might well have been in trouble.

"Next time we detrain, it'll be in Korea." She told her people. "Keep a careful eye on everything and try to look harmless."

They were good at looking harmless, without putting much effort into it. They were young and quite noisy, the sort of group that most people gave a wide berth. Only Olga seemed happy to be shifting everything to another train.

"A day Olga !" Ruby said to her. "A whole day to get this far and we're now another hundred miles in the wrong direction. Why make everyone detrain in Ussuriysk ?"

"You need to think like a soviet." Said Olga. "Scratch every Russian and you'll find someone who was far happier in the old days of the USSR. Asking why we have to detrain here is like asking why the wind blows, or the rain falls. Accept it Ruby and enjoy the journey."

"It is quite good fun." Added Eugenie.

Everything fitted onto one ancient trolley with squeaky wheels. They followed their belongings down a ramp, across two sets of tracks and up again and into the baggage car of a far less comfortable looking train. Why was the Korean train so tatty ? Ruby remembered to be soviet, she didn't ask. Again it was Murad who offered to guard their belongings for the first shift.

"Half the passengers seem to have remained in Ussuriysk." Said Lau.

"Or picked up a train to somewhere else." Said Olga. "The Moscow trains leave from here."

There was a buffet car and their friendly staff member changed trains with them.

"I get off at the border, then you're on your own." He'd told her.

Ruby chose the least grubby carriage and claimed a window seat. Olga sat opposite her, staring out of the window and looking happy to be home, in Russia. Her group moaned a little, but settled down quite quickly. The train wasn't that bad, the slam doors and dusty interior reminded Ruby of a school journey, by train to Devon.

"This train wasn't waiting for our connection." Said Olga. "It might be quite a while until it leaves."

An hour later and her team began to get a bit restless.

"Does this thing ever go anywhere ?" Asked Murad.

Charlotte had gone to find the buffet car, to be told that it only opened after the train left the station.

"What sort of crap is that ?"

Ruby sat back in her seat, smiled and listened to Olga, giving her speech about being more soviet. Eventually after another thirty minutes the train began to move. It seemed to spend the next twenty minutes, running over every set of points and junction in Russia. It clanged, it shuddered, it bounced so badly that Ruby felt the shock right up her spine. It was a huge relief, when they left the mass of sidings outside of Ussuriysk and picked up speed on the mainline going west.

"How long are we on this train ?" Asked Sophie.

"Officially two days." Said Olga. "But it might be three."

No one moaned, no one swore or asked why. They were learning to be good young soviets.

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It's strange to notice how quickly people adapt to the situation they find themselves in. Serge's people had managed to find gaps in the doors to look out and see where their train was. There was also a broken plank in the wall of the carriage which gave them a view along the side of the train. They'd headed west for a while, before heading due south from Yayuanzhen. One factory along the route had its own private railyard. Their train had left the mainline, picked up two bulk cargo trucks and then headed south on the mainline again. It was interesting, it added a bit of variety to their humdrum existence. There were obviously going to be lots of stops, many of them during the night. They'd have to be careful, but toilet stops didn't look like being a major issue. Hygiene was going to be poor, but there wasn't a problem with being a bit ripe, if everyone else was in the same boat, or freight car. They'd arranged the boxes in their carriage, forming a sort of hollow fort to hide in. So far though, no one had been near them.

"I've travelled on worse trains in Eastern Europe."

One of Terry's men, a guy called Matt. All of Terry's mercenaries had stopped trying to appear like tough guys and mellowed considerably. They even had normal first names like Matt and Peter. Not a Snake or Butch among them, most were ex-army from Britain. Trained up in the arts of war and then let go during the cuts.

"This isn't anywhere near as bad as I thought it might be." Said Trudy.

It wasn't. Serge peered through a gap in the door and saw mountains in the distance.

"It's beautiful out there." He said. "One day I'm going to come back as a proper tourist."

"Then we'd better not get caught." Replied Terry.

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Whatever weapon the Koreans had been carrying, it was obviously destroying Serge's house. Violent explosions at the rate of about one every two minutes and a red glow was filling the sky in that direction.

"What the fuck are they doing to the house?" Asked Patrick.

"We can't go back there." Replied Delmar. "We'll need to take their van."

"Then we'll need money for fuel and food."

They searched the pockets of the three of them, the dead man, the thug and finally the one like them from North Korea. He was the wealthiest, a good two thousand Euros in a variety of used notes. Delmar held open the wallet, riffling the notes.

"We're not going to starve." He said.

Their prisoner was silent, though they could both feel the fear in his mind. It was as if he was unable to stop broadcasting his emotions, to anyone with the ability to read them. The dead body they left on the grass, which just meant a discussion on the thug, their second prisoner.

"We should kill him." Said Patrick. "He's seen our faces."

"They all know our faces and I'm sure they can guess who stole their VW."

He was left tied up but alive, there wasn't time to argue. Patrick got in the back with their prisoner, while Delmar started up the VW Combi.

"Crap! That noise will wake people up in Paris."

The VW was making the knackered tractor engine noise, so beloved of Combi Van fans.

"They all make that noise." Said Patrick. "You'd better drive us out of here, quickly!"

The road was just a forest track leading back to the main driveway. In winter it would have been a muddy nightmare, but the recent hot weather had baked the ground into a solid road.

"They might have left someone." Said Delmar. "To watch where the track joins the road. Ruby would have."

They hadn't and they were on the main driveway and soon on the main road to Marseille. Delmar slowed down to about fifty, just another harmless Combi full of tourists.

"So, what now?" Asked Delmar. "And no fighting about it, there's been enough of that."

"What would Ruby do?"

"Ditch this thing, it's too noisy and might even have a GPS tracker somewhere."

"Fine." Said Patrick. "Find a village where we can steal another vehicle."

Roquefort-la-Bédoule on the A50, they spotted a whole row of cars parked on driveways. They'd both been through street craft training from Serge, Olga and Spider. Spider was their favourite though, his street craft was learned in his everyday business.

"People think of driveways as part of their home." He'd told them, one rainy afternoon in London.

"You'd be amazed how many people leave keys in cars on driveways."

Delmar drove the camper van about a hundred yards further on and parked.

"I know you can understand us." Said Patrick. "You need to walk and be quiet. Do you understand?"

"Or we'll cut you and leave you to bleed out!" Added Delmar.

They still didn't know a name for their prisoner, but he hadn't struggled and the effects of the gas must have left his system. He had the permanent sweaty face of someone who's terrified.

"I understand."

"That's better." Said Patrick. "Co-operate and we might all become good friends."

"And if not!"

Delmar ran his finger over his throat in the gesture known to everyone. They left the VW, Delmar locking it and throwing the keys into the roadside bushes. Patrick kept hold of their prisoner, holding him against the side of a house. It was late now, a time for all decent locals to be in bed. Very few of the houses showed lights. Patrick noticed a large four door saloon, as it slowly rolled down a driveway and into the street. It had to be Delmar.

"Quiet until we're in the car."

"I know. I'll do anything you want."

Still obviously terrified, their prisoner had good English with just a slight trace of Asia. The car started and drove towards them, still without showing any lights. Delmar lowered the electric window.

"Easy peasy." He said. "Brand new top of the range Renault. Hop in."

Leather seats and still that new car smell. Patrick shoved the man into the back and then sat next to him. Delmar drove quickly for a few miles, before slowing down to about fifty again.

"No one will miss this until they get up in the morning." Said Delmar.

"And then?" Asked Patrick.

"I remember the address of a bar in Marseille, one of Serge's old DGSE friends. I think we could do worse than going there."

"I agree." Replied Patrick.

"First though, I want to find somewhere quiet, so we can have a talk to our friend."

"He speaks English, good English."

The Korean just looked at them, the sweat still covering his brow. Delmar found a motel car park, as good a place to stop as any. It was fairly dark, but not somewhere that might cause the police to investigate a parked car. Patrick was already talking to the North Korean.

"You know we're like you. We're curious more than anything. Aren't you curious about us?"

"Yes I am."

“That’s a good start. I’m Patrick and the guy driving is Delmar. What is your name ?”

“I have two names, an official one, but my friends call me Jae.”

Delmar smiled at Patrick, a name was important, telling it showed the start of trust. Patrick had a small knife in his hands and was pulling the Korean round.

“I think we can get rid of the tie on your wrists.”

Delmar was to replay the events since finding Jae for the rest of his life. No one had properly searched the Korean, he’s seemed so harmless. Sometimes in his dreams, Delmar imagined he’d shouted out, telling Patrick to leave the plastic tie. In truth he knew he hadn’t, he’s just smiled inately at their new friend. They still had a lot to learn and Patrick was about to run out of time.

“Fuck !”

Was all Delmar said, as he saw Jae pull the pin on one of several grenades that looked to have been fixed to his shirt. He’d been such a skinny guy, his jacket had still hung quite normally. Not so much a suicide vest as an insurance policy in case of capture. Delmar registered a good three grenades, maybe more, as he leapt from the car. No warning to Patrick, there just wasn’t time. Jae had his back to Patrick, he couldn’t have seen anything. Delmar felt something sharp hit his back and heat on his legs, before becoming unconscious.

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Kwan woke up screaming, loud enough for Nari to wake and hold him, a scared look on her face. He tried to clear the vision of fire from his eyes by blinking, but it refused to go. More fire, more exploding metal, he screamed again. Less than a minute later, two armed guards were in their bedroom, turning on the lights and looking in every corner.

“I’m fine.” Said Kwan. “Just a silly nightmare. I will stop eating spicy food before turning in for the night.”

The guards weren’t really his to command, but they nodded to him and left. Nari left their bed to close the door and turn off the light. She came back and put her arms round him.

“I know you.” She said. “That was no nightmare.”

She was so young, yet she’d always respected his confidences before.

“You must never tell anyone else.”

“You have my word.”

It would be a relief to tell her, the visions were still echoing in his mind.

“Jae is dead, some sort of explosion. I saw fire, lots of fire.”

He’d seen Baba Yaga kill one of his people on a street in Ealing, but that vision had been vague and gentle to his mind. There was nothing gentle about seeing the death of Jae; it still seemed to be burning his soul.

“Where was he ?” Asked Nari. “What happened ?”

“France somewhere I believe, the Taejang said he was being sent to Marseille. As to what happened.... I have no idea, but he died in some kind of explosion. I felt it more deeply his time.”

“You cared more about Jae.”

She was right of course, women felt those things more than men. He had thought of Jae as more than just another gifted student. Jae had been his son. He’d felt two of his people die, but not the third. He didn’t want to give his people false hopes, but he had a feeling that one of them wasn’t dead, but imprisoned somewhere. Sometimes, in his dreams, he saw miles of dry sand and barren rocks.

“They aren’t like us, these others.” Said Nari.

“No, they’re trained in the arts of war and seem to enjoy it.”

Kwan leant on the wall behind their bed and gradually the echoes of fire and destruction left his mind. Part of him hated Ruby and part of him admired her. Nari didn't know what her people were working on for the current Great Leader in Pyongyang. Research and development was highly compartmentalised, few knew the whole picture.

"You need to sleep." Said Nari. "Shall I get you a pill?"

"No. Sleep my dear, I will sleep again soon."

He didn't go to sleep again until dawn. His head had been filled with the implications of the missiles they were building and the warheads they carried. A mixture of advanced Karakum technology, mixed in with everything North Korea had learned from the Russians and then the Chinese. Not to mention what their hackers had pulled from servers in America. A whole underground bunker full of missiles that could easily strike anywhere on the globe. Warheads that contained far worse than even hydrogen bombs.

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Ruby had felt it too, they all had. One moment they were a happy group of tourists, just going through Zaysanovka and well on the way to the North Korean border. The next they were looking shocked and distraught. Charlotte was crying, uncontrollably.

"Patrick is dead!" Said Sophie.

"I know, I felt it too. Calm down, we don't want to attract attention."

"Is he coming back, like Charlotte?" Asked Sarah.

Ruby really wanted to give them a 'maybe,' or an 'I don't know,' which were lies. They deserved the truth.

"We never felt Charlotte die or return." She said. "This is permanent, he isn't coming back. I'm certain of it."

Eugenie was beginning to wail, a few faces were looking in their direction.

"Closer to me!" Ordered Ruby. "Huddle up and listen!"

Most of them were crying now, though Murad was just looking confused. Luckily Lau was all on his own in the freight area, guarding their cases and bags. Lau was likely to want to gun down everyone in North Korea.

"Delmar is probably injured, I need to go there. I need to go right now."

"Can't Baba Yaga help?" Asked Charlotte. "She must have felt it."

"Kallina is usually confused and now she'll probably be in shock. She thinks of each of you as her own children..... As do I. We need to do this on our own."

They were nodding at her, losing that look of hopelessness that had been on all their faces. At least no one had suggested sending for Kurt. Finally they seemed to realise that Kurt wasn't going to ride in, guns blazing to rescue them.

"Olga will look after you while I'm gone." She said. "If I can, I'll bring Delmar back here."

Sarah wasn't looking put out, she knew her skills didn't favour a leadership role. Ruby checked her bag, there was no weapon in there, but there was a small flashlight.

"I need another light, it'll be night there."

She was offered another three Maglites and added them all to her bag. There could be no vanishing from a busy train carriage, Ruby walked in the direction of the freight car. Olga followed her part of the way.

"Come back in one piece Ruby."

They hugged, probably the longest hug since Olga had tried to have Ruby killed in Croatia. That had been a different time though, when they'd both been different people. Time really did cure just about all ill feelings. Olga had been jealous of Ruby then, jealous of her hold over Jurǵis.

"If anything happens to me." Said Ruby. "Get Charlotte and Eugenie to pull down their thunder on the whole facility, destroy everything."

"I will. Do you need a gun?"

"No, I'll be fine without one."

Ruby was still in shock, as she walked through two carriages full of happy Russians. Families going home, or visiting their relations. The occasional business traveller, complete with suit, tie and leather briefcase. Her thirteen were now twelve and there was nothing Ruby could do to put that right.

Patrick and Delmar were supposed to be safe, minding Serge's house for a few weeks. She hugged Lau, who was sat on an ammunition bag and looking awful.

"I'm going to look for Delmar." She said. "Promise me you'll stay here and follow Olga if anything happens to me."

He nodded at her, the closest thing she was going to get to a proper reply. He'd do it though, if the worst did happen.

"Do you need a gun?" He asked. "I know which bag your Glock is in."

Guns, everyone wanted to give her guns! They often offered a strong statement of intent, but rarely led to a permanent solution.

"No, but stand in front of me, in case someone comes."

"Are you going now?"

"Yes, right now!"

The world around her looked a little fuzzy around the edges, like looking through smoked glass. Ruby homed in on the beacon that still lit up her emotions. The place where Patrick had died was a hot spot, a huge bullseye of fear, regret and deep sadness.

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Heat was her first feeling as she arrived in the motel car park. She was only feet from the burning car and had to step back a few paces. Then sounds, the approaching sirens of the French emergency services. Smells next, the acrid smell of burning rubber and oil. Other smells were vying with the unpleasant ones, the scent of pine and summer flowers. No time to enjoy a beautiful night in Southern France though, Delmar was face down and only feet from the car.

"What the fuck were you guys doing!?"

She had to risk the flames to get near him and Delmar was dressed all in black, with army boots and night vision glasses around his neck. She dragged him, the toes of his boots leaving neat furrows in the car park gravel. Far enough from the car to avoid being cooked, but close enough to use the light from the flames. Ruby felt Delmar's neck and found a good strong pulse and his breathing was slow and even. Good, he'd passed the not being dead test.

There were people at the doors of their rooms, some pointing at her, one guy even shouting. The sirens seemed close too, far too close. Ruby picked up Delmar and slung him over her shoulder, like a sack of coal. He was twice her size and weight, but she carried him with ease.

"Please live Delmar." She muttered. "So I can beat the crap out of you."

Ruby ran into the woods as far as the burning car illuminated and then turned on her Maglite and ran on for another ten minutes. Silence in the woods, no sign of pursuit or sirens. She put him down on the ground and gave him a proper examination. The night vision glasses she threw away, still not

knowing why he needed them. Delmar was still out cold, he didn't murmur as she felt the gouge in his back.

"That'll leave a scar."

Six inches long but shallow, the blood on his shirt looked bad, but it was nowhere near as bad as it looked. Legs sound, no joints going the wrong way, ditto arms. One boot had burned through near the ankle and bits of it seemed stuck to his flesh. That was the worst things she'd found and it wasn't life threatening or life altering. Ok, he'd be in a great deal of pain for a while, but the bastard deserved that. Ruby regretted hating him for a split second and kissed him on the forehead.

"Drunk student type, after a night out I think."

She was already rehearsing a cover story, for the grubby looking new member of their party. She pulled down his jumper at the back, making sure it covered the bloody shirt. Delmar winced and moaned as she touched the bloody hole in his back.

"Now you decide to be noisy !"

No reply, he looked to be unconscious again. She dragged him up on his feet, feeling him instinctively trying to help her, his legs attempting to hold his weight. His eyes flicked open for a second, fear mixed in with recognition.

"I'm sorry Ruby."

"Oh, you will be."

Again he drifted away, his head dropping onto her shoulder. The effect was quite good, he really did look like a drunk. Returning to the Vietnamese boat had been difficult and that had been a big target. A moving narrow train was much worse. Get it wrong and they might end up under the wheels or missing the train entirely. Emotions were the key; she focused on Sophie and her tiny face full of tears. Poor little Sophie !

Ruby crashed into Lau and dropped Delmar. Somehow she'd misjudged the speed of the train and sent Lau crashing into the wall. A few bruises all round, but they were safely on the train.

"Sorry Lau, I'm getting better at this."

He picked himself up, rubbing a knee that must have collided with something hard.

"No problem." He said. "Glad you found him. Is he alright ?"

"A cut on his back that might need stitches, but short of giving him an MRI, he looks fine to me."

She picked Delmar up and he was helping her more. His eyes were open now, as though part of him knew he was back among friends.

"You're drunk." Said Ruby. "Can you remember that for me ?"

"Yes, drunk."

"Do you need a hand with him ?" Asked Lau.

"No, stay with our gear. I think a lot of people are going to be very pleased to see Delmar."

They were, treating him like a returning hero. Charlotte even gave him a huge kiss, despite claiming to not like him very much. To Ruby he was now a problem. An injured new member of her team, with no passport or Visas to be where he was. Crap ! He didn't even have a train ticket.

His arrival and the reaction of the others was perfect cover. The other passengers were amused and bemused, by a group of crazy kids. Ruby couldn't help a smile though, when he started to complain about the pain in his ankle. Sarah would get the story out of him, with her charm and smiles.

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There are no words to describe how Kallina felt ! One of her children had died, Patrick, she'd felt him go ! She was sat in her house in Georgia, Constanze in her lap. Her mind was running through emotions from psychotic to a scared girl who wanted to stay indoors.... Forever. Religions too, they

drifted in and out of her consciousness, offering her little in the way of comfort. Odin appealed to her, the Norse God who loved war and punished those who died in bed.

“Someone needs to suffer !”

Her cat purred, as Kallina stroked her. Nothing hurried, she knew her mind was often confused. She’d think it through, investigate a little. Then she’d utterly destroy those who’d killed her child. Only a mother could comprehend the rage that was building in Baba Yaga.

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