

## Ruby 2

### Chapter 5 – Beer and Pizza

**“The word brooch didn’t seem grand enough for the beautiful gold object that fell out of the tin and into Eugenie’s palm.”**

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Charlotte had called Serge to tell him about Tobor being killed. Ruby was working on something for George and the thirteen were calling anyone who might be in danger. It impressed him that the Scoobys were now a proper organisation, with contingency plans for emergencies and external threats.

“Be careful Serge.” Charlotte had told him. “We might have a traitor among us.”

“Jalil will be able to take care of himself.” He’d said. “I’ll go to Budapest and see what I can find out there. With luck our opponents won’t expect to be hunted and I’ll come up on them from behind.”

“I’ll let Ruby know. Will you be taking Roger and Lisa with you ?”

“Oh yes, they’re far tougher than I am.”

They’d shared a short chuckle and Serge had decided he might need some heavy firepower.

“If you see Kallina.” He’d said. “Tell her to find us in Budapest. We might need a little help from Baba Yaga.”

“I will. Keep your head down Serge.”

His small team of trainees were delighted at the potential to use their skills during a field trip to Budapest. Roger spoke fluent Hungarian, along with several other European languages. As to Lisa ? Lisa was a well-trained assassin and he hoped to get an opportunity to aim her at the bastards who’d tortured and killed Tobor. He was now quoting a little Bram Stoker to Lisa and Roger, as they collected their equipment and threw it onto a table in the basement.

“Listen to them, the children of the night. What music they make!”

“You may laugh.” Said Roger. “You’ll appreciate us bringing all this kit, when we get into a fight with the State Security Department of North Korea.”

“I’ve heard they’re really tough.” Said Lisa, not even attempting to hide her glee.

“I love the enthusiasm.” Said Serge. “But we’re not driving all the way there, we haven’t the time. We’ll be flying out and that means just packing our clothes and a toothbrush.”

He really did think Lisa might burst into tears, as she lovingly handled an AK-74M assault rifle. Roger too, was looking glumly at the heap of lethality he’d intended to take.

“The good news.” Added Serge. “Is that Olga’s people still operate in Budapest and have a whole room full of weapons we can buy from them.”

They cheered up, but they were still looking at their weapons. Serge understood, he’d felt the same way once, still did sometimes. It was nice to use the gun you’d trained with, whose weight you knew and how it twitched when you fired it. He’d learned though that the best fighters, can use any weapon that might be at hand.

“Come on guys.” He said. “The rifles would have just remained locked up in the hidden compartment in the SUV. You could hardly walk around Budapest, carrying assault rifles.”

“Ruby did !” Replied Roger.

The rumours and anecdotes about Ruby became more absurd by the hour. They’d probably apply to have her made a saint one day. It was an odd thing that he’d seen in the DGSE. Sometimes wild, but

plausible nonsense, overwrote the genuine, but implausible truth. Ruby might carry automatic weapons through a busy city, but coming back from the dead was never mentioned.

“She didn’t Roger.” He said. “Olga saved Ruby that night and she did it with just a knife.”

Lisa’s eyes had lit up, Serge rarely told them about the events when Ruby had travelled across Eastern Europe.

“Tell us about it ?” She asked.

“Get packed and I’ll tell you in the SUV, on the way to Marseille Provence Airport.”

He remembered how young they both were, as they bounded off to pack their weekend cases. Not that he was worried about them being hurt. If it came to a fight between the kids and agents of North Korean security..... his money was on the kids.

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Ruby had an apartment full of people, trying to drink beer and eat pizza, while still talking over each other. It was chaos, it was pandemonium and she loved it all. Home ! Ruby decided that her crappy flat in a bad bit of Hackney, was definitely her home.

“Get that on the carpet and you can clean it !” She shouted at Sarah.

Sarah pushed the guacamole dip further onto the lounge coffee table.

“Sorry Ruby.”

Imran was in her kitchen, putting together various vegetarian nibbles and the smell was making Ruby feel very hungry. It was an informal party that had just sort of happened and they are often the best kind. There were rumours of trouble brewing and maybe a traitor, so Ruby was keeping the kids near her. Her new entry phone was buzzing away to anyone who wasn’t too busy to hear it. George had installed a few mod cons in her flat and the entry phone was one of them. There was still a slight musty smell on the stairs up to her flat, but she was quite fond of that smell. It meant she was almost at her door, almost home.

“Shall I get that ?” Called Spider.

“Yes, thanks.” She replied. “Bottom green button to let them in.”

She could hear Spider muttering at someone, but Eugenie was challenging Monique to a drinking contest and that needed her attention.

“Put the tequila down Eugenie and behave.”

“Oh..... Fine !”

It really was like being some sort of den mother and of course, there was never enough pizza. Ruby was heading towards the kitchen to see how Imran was doing, when she heard Spider calling her.

“Murad is here.” He said. “Came straight from the airport.”

Crap ! Her flat looked and sounded exactly the wrong place for a tired man who was a long way from home. Not to mention the effect on him of seeing the aftermath of the attack on Kornél Toys. Olga had been in the bathroom, but she ran to the door, a small 9mm pistol in her hand.

“Was he on his own ?” She asked.

“I think so..... Yes.” Said Spider.

The mood changed in the room as Olga stood by the flat door and waited for Murad to walk up from the front door. Ruby walked over and put her arm around Olga’s shoulders.

“It’s alright.” She said. “I can feel it’s just him and he’s tired and confused.”

Ruby opened the door and welcomed Jalil’s son into her home.

“We’re just having a meal and a few beers.” Said Ruby. “Come inside and grab something to eat, before it’s all gone.”

As she steered Murad to a gap on a sofa, he took off his backpack and handed it to her.

"It's the box, though it's completely empty." He said.

"You wait and see." Ruby answered. "Sit..... and have some food first."

Imran came out of the kitchen that moment, carrying a tray of food. Fabio followed him, with yet more of the food that smelled so good.

"You timed it well." Said Charlotte. "Dig in; all of it is made to be eaten with fingers only."

"We don't have enough cutlery anyway." Said Spider.

Murad did as he was told. He ate and drank and laughed at their jokes and Ruby saw the stress ease out of him. It was decided that Murad would spend the night on Ruby's sofa, once the impromptu party was over. That meant Charlotte and Eugenie using sleeping bags on the floor, but they didn't seem to mind. As the night became the early hours of the next morning, Ruby cleared the coffee table and put the pine box on it.

"This is a box based on the most famous trick by the magician Dedi of ancient Egypt." Said Ruby.

"Please Spider, examine the box."

"No point, it's empty." Said Murad. "Even the airport scanners found nothing."

Spider had the box upside down, banging it, looking for hollow places. Ruby was enjoying being a little theatrical. Spider eventually shook his head at her.

"Nothing in it." He said.

"Many think that Dedi was fictional, but he existed and he'd been to ancient Karakum." Said Ruby.

"He delighted the Pharaoh Cheops with this trick and Kurt taught it to me."

Ruby picked up the pine box and slapped her hand on one end. She intoned a few words that meant nothing, but she thought they added to the atmosphere. The real trick wasn't a trick, but a piece of genuine Karakum magic.

"Hold the box for me Spider."

He held the box and she slapped every flat edge, continuing with her chanting. She then pulled back the sliding top, to reveal a box full of papers and a battered old sweet tin.

"Voila !" She yelled.

Ruby bowed as they all cheered and applauded. Murad joined in the applause, though he looked confused.

"That's impossible." He said. "How did you do that ?"

"I could never reveal the secret of Dedi's most famous trick."

Charlotte winked at her and began to look through the various papers in the box. Most of it was written in the language of ancient Karakum.

"I bagsy the old sweet tin." Said Eugenie.

Ruby went to take the tin off her, but remembered that there is no higher authority than a bagsy. Once someone has bagseyd something it can't be taken away. She watched as Eugenie pulled off the lid and looked inside.

"It's a brooch."

The word brooch didn't seem grand enough for the beautiful gold object that fell out of the tin and into Eugenie's palm.

"That is gorgeous." Said Monique.

Soft yellow gold, the purest kind, covered in precious stones. It took Ruby's attention away from the box full of paperwork. Kurt had sent it all for her and put several lives at risk to make sure she received it.

"Time we settled down for the night, Murad must be exhausted." She said. "Everything back in the box and we'll go through it all in the morning."

"Looks like we're off to North Korea." Said Charlotte.

She threw the report she'd been reading into the box and Ruby recognised the CIA insignia on the front. Kurt had obviously been gathering information from a variety of sources.

"Is that everything?"

They all nodded at her, so she slid the box lid over to cover everything and slapped the side. She could feel Murad wanting to ask, desperate to ask, but being far too polite to ask.

"Open it if you like." Said Ruby.

He slid open the lid to find an empty box, without even a speck of dust in it.

"It was better the first time." Teased Spider.

"Yeah, maybe add a rabbit next time Ruby." Said Sarah.

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Jalil received a call to visit the Baku City Police Department. It wasn't a request, his presence was required, urgently. The local police consisted of many divisions, some of them behaving more like spies than a police force. Luckily, the call was from Jalil's cousin and he wasn't too concerned about it.

"It's a bad time Rashid, I'm entertaining a client." He'd said.

"I'm waiting for you. Get here!"

The drive across town was slow, traffic jams seemed a routine matter in Baku. His cousin Rashid was waiting for him outside the police department and he never saw the inside of the building.

"Get in the car." Said Rashid. "We're going to the north of town."

A uniformed policeman took his phone off him and for the first time, Jalil was nervous. He sat in the back of the unmarked police car, with a uniformed officer on either side of him.

"Talk to me Rashid." He said. "What's going on here?"

"You'll see. You shouldn't bring your shit into town cousin, it's not right."

So he sat and kept quiet and wondered if he was about to vanish. There were a lot of new buildings in the north east of the city, a lot of concrete being poured into foundations. Jalil did his best to avoid dealing with those the government didn't approve of, but it was so easy to get it wrong. It took over two hours to get through the traffic and arrive at a small housing complex on the edge of town.

"Come!" Barked Rashid. "Come and see your mess."

It was all so new, the plants in the gardens had yet to put on any real growth. Rashid told his men to stay outside and led Jalil into the kitchen of the single storey building. On the floor were the bodies of two men in expensive looking suits.

"Sorry." Said Rashid. "I had to shout a bit, the uniforms expect it. These must be the people you told me might come looking for you."

South Koreans were seen quite often in Baku, Samsung had held several business seminars in the expensive waterfront hotels. These men looked different though, their feature more angular.

"Did they say anything?" Asked Jalil.

"Never got a chance to talk to them." Said Rashid. "They put one of my guys in the hospital, which is why I'm going to chew you out some more on the way back."

Jalil knelt beside one of the bodies and examined his clothing and felt inside his jacket pockets.

"Nothing." Said Rashid. "We already went through all their clothing. They were just carrying these."

He was pointing at something on one of the kitchen units. Jalil stood and picked up one of the automatic pistols, complete with a fitted silencer.

"I've never seen anything like it." Said Rashid. "They must be making their own weapons now. It looks like a Browning, but it isn't."

“Will you tell me if you find out anything else about them ?”

“Sure.” Answered Rashid. “These guys were good. If their comrades are being sent after any friends of yours ? You should tell them to be very careful.”

“I will, thank you.”

Rashid was already walking towards the door.

“Sorry, but I have to call you some really bad names on the way back.”

“That’s ok. I know you’re people expect it.”

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Kallina noticed that Max already had several boxes of new trainers, as she piled up her latest supply run on the floor. Maybe he was stocking up in case she forgot all about him for a while. That was of course, a real possibility. Anyway, there wasn’t much weapon potential in boxes of trainers. It took her three trips, to bring all the bags and boxes from her house in Georgia.

“Don’t give me that look Max.” She said. “I didn’t forget your pet. Its feed and other things it needs are in the green box.”

Kallina returned to her home and picked up the large cage, which hung off a heavy metal stand. The merchant in..... She had to think hard to remember where; she’d travelled to so many places. Somewhere on the west coast of India, yes she remembered. Kallina had asked about a pet bird that was intelligent but didn’t make much noise. Oh no, Max wasn’t going to have a screechy friend to attract rescuers. The merchant had charged her a lot of money for the colourful bird in the cage, but it looked healthy and alert. She was sure the climate in North Yemen would suit it better than the current wet spell in Georgia.

“Come on bird, you can’t live here.” She muttered. “I’d forget to feed you and you’d starve.”

There was the familiar blurring of reality, as she moved her physical form to the ruined basement in Yemen. The bird ruffled its feather and looked around, but seemed less bothered by moving around the globe in seconds, than most of the humans she’d moved in that way.

“Where do you want him Max ?”

“Put the cage near the large gap in the stones. Where it’s lightest.”

Max looked at the large colourful bird and seemed pleased with his new cellmate.

“What is it ?” He asked.

“I can’t remember. There’s an instruction sheet in the box about what it needs and what species it is. Don’t expect a lot of chatter from it, I asked for a quiet bird.”

It wasn’t a day for his takeaway food, but she always brought him fresh bread and some chicken, bought from a New York deli less than an hour before. It wouldn’t last in the heat of course, so Max was already busy, making about three rounds of sandwiches. He was pointing at one of the sandwiches.

“If you’re staying ? I can’t eat it all.”

“Ok, I’m not in a hurry today.”

She sat on the sofa that had been such a nightmare to carry across the globe from London. An old chesterfield sofa that wasn’t coping too well with the dry desert climate. She knew that Max was pretending to be a model prisoner, she could feel it. But, she didn’t have Ruby’s expertise at planting seeds in his mind, to find out what exactly he was up to.

“I saw a military jet yesterday.” Said Max. “High up and travelling south.”

“Have you seen any more people outside ?” She asked.

“No, not for a while.”

It felt like the truth. There wasn't much reason for anyone to visit that area of North Yemen, unless they liked hot dry and barren deserts. Kallina ate her sandwich and picked up his next list of needs. She almost told him off for wanting yet another pair of trainers. His whole world consisted of about four rooms in a buried basement.

"Max, about the trainers."

"Yes."

What the hell, if the damn things made him happy. Perhaps he didn't like Nike or Adidas ?

"Do you have a favourite make ?" She asked.

"New Balance fit my feet better."

"Fine."

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Spider was happy as a dog with two tails. Ruby had told him to hang onto Monique and Fabio and had then sent him off to investigate the death of a hooker. Personally he'd never met an escort he hadn't liked. Ruby hadn't been able to tell him much, but it was something to get his teeth into. A mission that might catch the killer of a young woman and send several politicians to jail. As far as Spider was concerned, it was a mission with no downside. Plus all his investigations were likely to be in London, on his own patch.

"Her working name was Natalie." Ruby had told him. "I looked up the escort agency she worked for, but they seem to have closed years ago. Even if they paid cash, someone must remember something about the booking."

"Sounds a good place to start." He'd replied.

"West End Escorts they were called Spider."

She'd given him an exact date for Natalie's death and as much detail as she'd managed to pull out of Rob Newsmith's head. Three top politicians involved, it was as if Christmas was coming a little early.

"We have to find the evidence first." Monique had told him.

Spider wasn't going to let those kind of negative thoughts ruin his near perfect day. Ruby had even given him permission to carry his much loved Browning 9mm. They weren't likely to meet any dangers from the investigation, but there were known to be North Koreans looking for Ruby and her friends.

"Please try not to kill anyone, or get the kids arrested." Ruby had pleaded with him.

He'd do his best of course, he always did. The second part relied on luck though, far more luck than most career criminals wanted to admit. Spider walked along a quiet street in the leafy part of suburbia, known as Neasden and looked at his old A to Z map book again. Monique was rolling her eyes at him.

"Why use that antique ?" She asked. "Get a map app for your phone."

"Use those and you tell the world where you are." Said Fabio.

Spider simply nodded sagely at that comment and Monique stopped moaning. In truth, he wasn't that good with smartphone apps and his old A to Z had notes on some of the pages. One note was for Aunt Sylvia, though she wasn't a real relation.

"Next street along." He said.

They found the house, she still had the same concrete cat on her path that had been there for years. It had once been black and white, but someone had given it a ginger makeover. She'd be knocking on a bit now, he just hoped she'd remember him.

"Spider ! You rogue. Come on in, I'll put the kettle on."

"I brought your favourite." He said, waving an Oddbin's bag around.

“Oh, no Spider. My doctor told me to give it up years ago.”

Aunty Sylvia looked good for her age and led them into a tiny sitting room at the back of the house. It was her best room, the sitting room reserved for important visitors.

“Sit yourselves down and I’ll get the tea. I don’t get many visitors from the old days.”

She left them and Monique was eyeing up the handmade cushions and embroidered head rests on the back of the chairs.

“Not what I expected.” Said Monique.

“Trust me.” Replied Spider. “At one time, she ran the most elite and discrete escort service in London.”

They were both giving him that look, but he wasn’t going to confirm or deny that he’d ever used Aunty Sylvia’s services. There had been a time, when he’d had money and no wish to get into a proper relationship. But that was none of their business. Sylvia returned with a properly laid out tray for afternoon tea, even though it was still morning. Spider took a bottle of single malt out of the Oddbin’s bag and poured a good measure into his tea.

“Anyone else ?”

They both nodded at him, all of the thirteen seemed to have discovered the pleasure of alcohol, often in large quantities. He poured a small amount into their cups and looked at Aunty Sylvia.

“Go on then.” She said. “Just don’t tell my doctor.”

Tea in the best parlour required some respect for the social niceties. There was a good ten minutes enquiring into everyone’s health, before Spider felt comfortable in mentioning why he’d dug out the old A to Z with her address in it.

“Did you ever run into an outfit called West End Escorts ?” He asked.

“Of course dear, that was one of my er..... trading names. It was before everyone went legit and set up websites and limited companies. There were about five different Silk and Lace escorts, including mine and several people using the name Chelsea Escorts. Do you know that some of the girls actually pay tax now ?”

“But West End Escorts was yours ?”

“Yes it was. Why Spider ?” She asked. “And don’t ration me, my doctor isn’t here now.”

He poured another good measure into her cup, knowing it would lubricate her tongue a little.

“I’m trying to find out about a girl called Natalie. She worked for West End.”

Sylvia banged her knees and laughed.

“Every other girl was a Natalie in those days. Now the Russians have arrived and it’s wall to wall Svetlanas, but then it was Natalies.”

“This one vanished.....suddenly.” Added Monique.

“Lots did, or they’d turn up with a black eye, saying their boyfriend had found out how they could afford all the expensive clothes.”

“Do you have any records we could look at ?” Asked Fabio.

Spider joined Aunty Sylvia as she laughed.

“It was all cash then dear. Only idiots put their extra marital fun on a credit card. Did she have any specialities, this Natalie of yours ?” Asked Sylvia. “Something that might jog my memory.”

“She let them use duct tape and a gag on her.” Said Monique.

“Am I in trouble Spider ?” Asked Sylvia. “I’m getting too old to go on the run.”

She was sipping at her Scottish malt and looking at him.

“What do you mean ?”

"I'll tell you a little story Spider." She said. "I've lived here for several years and I've been burgled twice. I was also burgled once at my previous address. I'm tidy Spider, I know how I've left things. Three times someone has been through every drawer and cupboard in my home and taken nothing. We both know who does that."

Monique and Fabio were looking at him, wanting to be let in on the secret.

"Special branch." Said Spider. "Are famous for burgling a house just to nose about. Or maybe even MI5, if the information they're looking for is big enough."

"I can't run any more Spider, I'm too old." Said Sylvia. "I've never revealed any of the names on my client list and never will, but I have an idea who your Natalie might be. I'll ask again, am I in trouble?"

They were all in trouble if it hit the fan. Spider knew the thirteen would take their lead from him, even if they knew he was being economical with the truth.

"No, it was all a long time ago. It just matters to a friend of mine." He said.

"What did they do to her Spider?"

"Killed her and dumped her in Epping Forest." He said. "After smashing her face to pieces, to avoid her being recognised."

Aunty Sylvia filled her cup from the bottle and stood up.

"Come upstairs." She said. "And make sure you bring the bottle."

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Serge walked through the arrivals lounge of Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport, expecting to recognise no one. Instead he found Sophie, stood next to a small suitcase on wheels and waving at him. The thirteen were like other kids their age and went through the ritual of hugging Sophie and making squealing noises. It was good, he liked them doing the things other kids did at airports. Anyone watching would just see and hear the things normal travellers did. He waited for Sophie to escape from their attention.

"Sophie." He said. "Good to see you, but it is a surprise."

"Kallina had a dream about you drowning." She said. "So she sent me to join you."

"Is she here?" Asked Lisa.

Sophie was beginning to look uncomfortable with her role as reinforcements.

"No, she just put me in the long term car park, which is a long way off and told me to find the arrivals area and wait for you." Said Sophie. "I'm afraid you've just got me."

"You'll do very nicely." Said Serge. "Do you know why we came to Budapest?"

He kept forgetting they were just young adults who'd been kept in stasis for hundreds of years.

Serge saw a tear roll down her cheek.

"No and I don't even have any local money." She said. "I've been here for hours and I couldn't even buy a can of coke."

Years of experience with the DGSE had taught him not to hug women he worked with, especially the young and impressionable ones. It was too easy for it to become complicated and according to the personnel manual, usually inappropriate. Therefore he surprised himself by hugging Sophie and then leading his group towards the KFC, which was the only fast food place in the airport that he recognised.

"I was going to talk to you at the hotel." He said. "But we can talk here. Do you like chicken?"

"Yes."

"She's just being a drama queen." Said Lisa.



The girls glared at each other and Serge thought there was some justice in that comment. Sophie was quite capable of talking to a store clerk and getting food and drink given to her. A few sentence and they'd probably have given her all the money in the cash drawer. They could all do it, bend people's minds to being almost their slaves. Serge made no comment and sat them all at a table in KFC. He decided it was time to assert his leadership a little.

"Ok, Lisa and Roger can go and get our food, while I tell Sophie what's been going on."

Lisa gave him her best dead fish look, but she took their order and pulled Roger towards the queue at the tills.

"I must learn to cry to order." Was her final broadside.

"Did you ever meet Tobor at Kornél Toys ?" He asked Sophie.

"Yes, he's a lovely man. Are we going to see him ?"

Crap, it was going to be a difficult conversation.

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Aunty Sylvia took them upstairs and into a large bedroom, that obviously doubled as a spare bedroom and study. The bed was covered in DVDs and paperback books and a large reclining chair faced a wide plasma screen on the wall. Under the TV was a shelving unit, with about three different VHS/DVD combo machines. The room was a huge contrast to the chintz in the downstairs rooms.

"I'm a bit of a geek at heart." Said Sylvia. "But I like to be a geek in private."

There was a built in cupboard in one corner of the room, that reached right up to the ceiling.

"It's all in here." She told them.

She opened the door and saw them all look disappointed. The cupboard didn't go far into the wall and had become a place for old suitcases to go and die. A good half dozen of them were stacked in there, with a dusty wicker cat carrier stuck on the top.

"I used to provide drivers for the girls, minders really." She said. "Two of them put this together for me, but all the junk needs to come out."

She looked expectantly at Spider and he seemed to get the idea. He was helped by the kids and quite quickly, all the dead suitcases and a few other things were stacked outside in the hallway. Sylvia walked into the empty cupboard and felt along the beading near the back wall.

"Damn !" She said. "It's all an insurance policy really, haven't looked at any of it in years. I've painted over the catch. Stupid ! Erm can you help me ?"

Monique was closest and pressed where she was told.

"Once it clicks, the door opens towards you dear."

The rear of the cupboard was an oak door, a good inch thick. It moved towards them and folded back against the side of the cupboard. Inside were archive boxes, the sort used by large companies to hold old paperwork that no one was ever likely to need again. Six archive boxes were stacked against the real cupboard wall, covered in dust and cobwebs. She looked at Spider again.

"I know." He said. "It all needs to come out."

"Yes please."

Once the boxes were out of the cupboard, she recognised the one she wanted. Sylvia removed the box lid and lifted several folders out, putting them on the bed. She found the folder quite quickly, she'd quite liked Natalie, she'd been reliable and kept the clients happy. She held out the picture for Spider to take.

"This is her and her name really was Natalie, Natalie Fernandez." She told him. "Most girls didn't like the rough stuff, being tied up and gaged. Natalie would do just about anything the client wanted though. Good girl was Natalie."

“Who booked her that night ?” Asked Spider.

Sylvia looked at her boxes and realised that her insurance policy was becoming less of a threat to anyone with the natural passage of time. Two high court judges, who were regular clients, had died and gone to face their own final judgement. Politicians were fools, who carried on enjoying their taste for pretty young women, until the media found them out, or their wives. Many of the big names in her files had long since left office under a cloud. Mr Caramel, that was her pet name for him, was one of the few big names who might keep her from being harassed by the police, or the security services. But, if he’d murdered poor Natalie.....

“That box.” She said pointing. “Clear a space and put it on the bed.”

It took her no time at all to find the old record card, her memory was far better than she wanted most people to think. Mr Caramel, with his list of over fifty bookings, all girls who’d agree to corporal punishment of some kind. Not that any of the girls complained, he paid well and had never gone too far.

“The signs were there though.” She muttered. “I should have stopped sending girls out to him.”

“Who ?” Asked Monique. “Who was he ?”

“Mr Caramel.” She replied. “I had names for all of them. He liked to suck caramel sweets all the time, so he became Mr Caramel.”

She looked at the growing pile of junk on the bed, not seeing what she needed.

“Do you have a pen ?” She asked.

Fabio had a biro in his top pocket and handed it to her. She wrote Mr Caramels name on his record card and handed it to Spider. He looked please at seeing the name, but not surprised. She’d seen him, on TV, talking endlessly about a need to return to family values.

“And the girls names ?” Spider asked.

In for a penny, in for a pound. Nothing to lose now she’d just given away the jewel in her boxes of insurance. She wrote the real names of two of the girls he’d seen most often.

“I don’t have contact details for them, this all happened so long ago.”

“That’s brilliant Aunty Sylvia.” Said Spider. “We’ll put everything away now and tidy up for you.”

“Show me where you keep your hoover.” Said Fabio.

The room was returned to normal quite quickly, no sign remained of what was kept in the secret part of the cupboard. Before they left, Spider kissed her on the cheek.

“Is there anyone you could stay with for a while ?” He asked. “Just until things calm down a bit.”

“Yes, I have a friend who runs a guest house in Broadstairs. I’ll leave in the morning.”

“Good.”

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By the time people had been fed and Spider had left to go off investigating, it was late morning before Ruby had a chance to go through the contents of the box. The kitchen table had been cleared and she literally upended the box and let everything end up as a heap in the centre of her new pine table. Her old fold up table had come with the flat and had been in danger of collapsing. No one had been banned from the kitchen and they came and went, but largely, she’d been left alone with the bits of paper, a laptop and an A4 notebook.

“Have you eaten this morning ?” Asked Eugenie.

“I’m fine.”

“I’ll make you some scrambled eggs. I won’t make a noise.”

The brooch came out of the box first. There was writing on the back, which she copied down and put a short extract into Google. It was a clumsy way to find out what language it was written in, but it

worked. Sumerian ! Fantastic, another dead language. Still, it was something else to keep her people busy. She put her head round the door into the lounge.

“Anyone know a fluent Sumerian speaker ?”

It should have surprised her when Sarah leapt up, but Sarah did have a wide circle of acquaintances, most attractive young men.

“I know a guy from Imperial College.” She said. “A lecturer I think, or maybe a post grad student.”

“And he definitely speaks Sumerian ?”

“Oh yes Ruby, he wrote a book about it.”

Ruby tried not to be surprised and failed. There were times when Sarah really was worth her weight in gold.

“It’s important Sarah. Can you go and see him and bring him here, today ?”

“Oh yes, no problem.”

Sarah was up on her feet, pushing her shoes on and heading for the door.

“Not alone !” Said Ruby. “Not after what happened to Tobor. Take Lau and Imran with you, the exercise will do them good..... and make sure you have your phones with you.”

They left and Ruby had a plate of scrambled eggs in front of her, by the time she was sat back in the kitchen. She munched the eggs and went through everything, including the CIA report on North Korean technology. There was a lot to take in and most of it ended up as bullet points in her notebook. Kurt was worried about information leaking from within their people. It might not be the thirteen of course, they’d made a lot of friends during their journey to the Caspian Sea and none of them had been properly vetted. Serge would be good at that, she’d talk to him about it when he was finished in Hungary.

“How were the eggs ?”

“Fantastic Eugenie, thank you.”

Eugenie had her phone in her hands, they all did that, all the time. None of them would deliberately betray her, but Facebook and Twitter had private messages. Perhaps some of them had made friends unwisely ? She’d get them off social media and monitor their text messages, maybe close their personal email accounts.

“You idiot Ruby” She mumbled.

For a second or so she’d been the plaything of blind paranoia. Someone in North Korea knew a lot about Das Geheimnis and they had some Karakum technology. That might mean a traitor, or more probably, they’d found some gifted kids in their own population. Only they might not be kids, they might well be a whole adult community by now. That scared and excited Ruby, the prospect of going up against people like them. She made her mind up surprisingly quickly, putting her head into the lounge again.

“We’re going to North Korea.” She said. “Details will be discussed after Sarah’s birthday party.”

“Wicked !” Yelled Charlotte.

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