

## Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

### Chapter 18 – Finding Cal

**“Lena had seen the news, there had been a few deaths near Skagen. Civilian deaths that were beyond even Gallaan’s ability to make disappear. Her debriefing had been all about what had bitten her and easily killed four highly trained soldiers.”**

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Night, that time of day when simple problems easily dealt with in the daylight hours, can seem insurmountable to some. Todd had dated a nurse once who’d told him that some patients could go a bit crazy after the sun went down and the ward became quiet.

“Some people just don’t handle the night that well.” She’d told him.

Todd didn’t mind being the night time base camp guy, the one who listened to the incoming communications and tried to advise accordingly. It was important, though he’d have preferred to still be searching for Cal. The base camp being a very comfortable hotel with room service, didn’t hurt. The hotel manager had been told one of their party had received bad news from back home, hence the occasional raised voices and short bursts of pandemonium. They’d booked expensive suites and were running up a room service bill that would have worried Rockefeller, so the hotel was unlikely to give them any grief. Just as long as the ruckus didn’t spill out of their rooms. Kallina turning up should have been good news, but he didn’t think it was going to work out that way.

“Kallina is back…….I think she’s going to kill Max.” Said Lily.

“Where are they ?” He asked.

“Max and Monique’s room.” Said Lily. “Monique is going crazy; you can hear her screams right down the corridor to the elevators.”

“Any idea what set Kallina off ?”

“She looks like Baba Yaga, Todd. I don’t think she needs a reason to go crazy.”

“Trust me, Kallina isn’t crazy.” Sad Todd. “There will be a reason. Come on, let’s go and see what’s going on.”

Lily was right, the noise of Monique yelling obscenities, could be heard at the elevators and quite a way along the corridor. Two cleaners were almost hiding behind their carts and looked quite scared.

“No problem, just bad news from home.” Said Todd. “We did tell the manager. I’ll quieten them down.”

A few dollars each and like magic, the cleaners were calmed. It would only work so many times.

Eventually someone was going to call the Baku City Police. That could be awkward as even Todd had no idea what names some of Ruby’s wunderkinds were travelling under.

“I have the key card for the door.” Said Lily.

“Brilliant, hang onto it.”

Once in the small suite Max and Monique were using, Todd knew none of the hotel staff could be allowed into the room. It was like a scene from a horror film, with Kallina now playing the deathless Baba Yaga, the infamous crazy witch of the woods. She looked bigger than he remembered, though that might have been because she was in a relatively small space. Baba Yaga looked old, very old. Her skin reminded him of an unwrapped mummy he’d once seen in a museum. That was it, she

looked like a mummy with lots of jet-black hair. A very pissed off mummy judging by how she was bouncing Max's head off the carpet.

"Stop her, she's killing him." Yelled Monique.

Monique had a knife in her hand, the kind used by special ops forces. That would be his second problem to deal with, after he'd stopped her yelling loud enough to wake up every guest on that floor.

"When I found the two dead boys, I knew it was him." Said Baba Yaga. "It's always Max behind these things. Ruby should never have brought him with us."

Max had been saying much the same thing about Kallina, to anyone who'd listen. To say they had a bit of history and bad blood between them, was putting it mildly. Baba Yaga was hovering off the floor, while holding Max up by his ankles. She bumped his head against the floor. If the ceiling was higher, she might have done him some serious damage. Judging by Max's limp arms, he was already unconscious.

"Stop her.....She's been doing that for an hour." Yelled Monique.

Todd wasn't keen on Max, but Ruby thought he was essential to their venture, mission, or whatever the hell it was. Max with brain damage wasn't going to be as useful as Max without it. Simple as that.....First though, Monique was still yelling.

"Stop shouting, Monique. Someone will call the cops.....And give me that knife."

Much to his surprise she handed it to him, before sitting on the sofa.

"Fine, now stop her hurting him." Said Monique. "She's always hated Max, always."

"He'll be the cause of Cal going missing." Said Baba Yaga. "You wait, it'll be him...These things are always him."

"Where did you find the dead boys?" He asked.

"In a car park behind the Zengezur restaurant. They'd had their throats cut, before someone had jammed their bodies between their car and a wall. It was him.....Local street gangs don't hide bodies."

Todd handed Monique's blade to Lily, mainly because he wanted it out of the room.

"Here, take this somewhere.....Did you get the details of where the bodies are?"

"Yes, I'll call Ruby and let her know." Said Lily. "She's right, street gangs don't kill like that."

"That doesn't mean Max had them killed." Said Monique.

Lily went into a bedroom to call Ruby, leaving him with the one last urgent problem. How to get Baba Yaga to cease bashing Max's head against the floor and put him down.

"Max is unconscious, Kallina." He said. "Put him in a chair and I promise you I won't let him out of this room, until he's answered a few questions. I'll even get McGill to lend us two of his people as guards. Max won't get an opportunity to run....I promise you."

"He won't run away; he hasn't done anything." Said Monique.

Baba Yaga was quite capable of engulfing the room in fire, or simply detonating that floor of the hotel, as though it was a huge bomb. It was quite a relief when she placed Max in a chair and turned back into Kallina. Todd began checking for a pulse and that Max was still breathing.

"He still lives, I can sense his heart still beats." Said Kallina.

Max's face had hit the floor a few times, he wasn't going to look pretty once the bruising and swelling had time to develop. He seemed to be alive, which was the main thing. There was a chance he'd wake up with brain damage, but that was a problem for later. Lily was back in the room.

"I told Ruby.....Charlotte and Sophie are on their way to the Zengezur restaurant." Said Lily.

"Thanks Lily, now call McGill, the reception desk knows where they are. Say I need two of his marauders for a spot of babysitting. He'll know what I mean."

Once Lily was talking on the phone in the bedroom, he touched Kallina's shoulder.

"Please don't hurt Max, I need to talk to him." He said.

"I won't, that moment has now gone." Said Kallina. "I've no intention of killing Max, until after he's had a chance to recover a little. Then I'll ask him a few questions and we'll see what happens then. Not that I intend to leave this room.....I don't trust that one to not try and help him escape."

Kallina nodded at Monique, who by all appearances, was fast asleep.

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Ruby needed their newly acquired car and she wasn't keen on involving Sanjar in the hunt for Cal.

"I've caused enough grief for that family in the past." Ruby had said.

It made sense to Charlotte; they were expecting to find two bodies in a car park. Sanjar had a large extended family and didn't need any trouble with the police. Sophie and her had used a taxi to get to the Zengezur restaurant, though they had no intention of going inside. The car park wasn't full at that time of night, but there were still a few cars.

"This is wrong, no one would dump bodies in somewhere like this." Said Charlotte. "With people coming and going all the time."

"Did Todd at least give us a colour for the car Kallina saw?" Asked Sophie.

"A bashed about old blue hatchback."

"Ahh, the universal starter car for young drivers." Said Sophie.

There was just one blue car and it wasn't old or dented. They split up and began looking at the car parks for businesses to either side of the restaurant. After about fifteen minutes, Charlie heard the whistle sound in her head. Sophie had found something.

"The boys are behind the car." Said Sophie. "Jammed up against the wall, just like Kallina said."

Not really a car park, just an area of ground near a wall. The closest building was a warehouse, which had no external lighting. If the killers were lucky, no one would find the bodies for a while. Baku had a hot climate and eventually the smell would bring someone to find out what the stench was.

"Crap, they don't look much older than Cal." Said Charlie.

Sophie began to pull on a pair of purple rubber gloves, the kind used by police forensics teams.

Charlie knew what was coming, before Sophie spoke.

"I did remind you.....Did you bring gloves?"

"You're only asking because you know I didn't."

"Luckily, I brought a spare pair."

Sophie opened the front driver's side door and the smell of blood hit Charlie's nose. Some call it a metallic smell, others say peppery. Charlie just knew the smell; she'd had it in her nose far too often.

"There's a lot of blood." Said Sophie. "I think we can safely say they were killed right here, in their car."

"We should call the cops, when we leave." Said Charlie.

"Yeah, they must have families who are going frantic about where they are."

It was hard to get to the two bodies, but Sophie was quite small. There were the usual bits and pieces everyone carries in a pocket, or a wallet. Enough bits of information to give names and addresses, plus a few phone numbers for friends.

"Money, just a few dollars, but thieves would have taken it." Said Sophie.

Charlie had a decent memory, despite forgetting the gloves. Once they'd looked at everything on the boys and memorised anything worth knowing, they put everything back as they'd found it. Just as they were going to leave, Sophie's phone rang.

"Yes Ruby, exactly as Kallina described it. Doesn't look like a robbery."

As Sophie gave Ruby an update, Charlie noticed a large car moving slowly along the main road near the restaurant. It looked as though someone was looking for something, as they did a circuit of the Zengezur's car park. There was no hurry, as two men looked over the only blue car, the one they'd examined earlier.

"I think we're about to get company, Sophie." Said Charlotte.

"I'll have to go Ruby, call you later." Said Sophie.

It was going to happen, the men in the car were going to arrive at the dented blue hatchback, with the bodies hidden behind it. There was no sense of urgency about their search pattern, it took a while for the large bronze coloured Mercedes, to reach them. By then Charlie was sat on the bonnet of the blue car, while Sophie leant against the wall.

"Don't kill them, we need to talk to them." Said Sophie.

"Me ! You're always over reacting."

"Shush, they're getting out of the car." Said Sophie.

"Fine, but this conversation isn't over."

Two men got out of the car, the two from the front. One guy remained in the back, probably their boss. Better dressed than street robbers, the two men still didn't seem to be in a hurry. They almost sauntered over to where Charlie was sat.

"Are you friends of Samir ?" One of them asked.

If in doubt, say nothing. It was one of those things that should be a universal rule for such situations. Remain quiet and the one asking the questions, usually feels a need to fill the silence. Plus, at least according to Sophie, being quiet adds an aura of wisdom. Of course, Sophie would say something like that. She was usually taciturn to the point of being annoying.

"Or maybe Murad." Said the other man. "Are you friends of Murad ?"

"They're no one's friends now, they're both dead." Said Sophie.

Charlie had seen a few cops do it and a couple of cartel guys. The taller of the two men was wearing a leather jacket, which he pulled to one side. He had a gun on his hip. His shorter friend was wearing a beige safari jacket. He was busy glaring at Sophie, as though he'd only just noticed she was there. It was no good, Charlie had to say it.

"Don't kill them, Sophie."

"Me !"

They laughed; the two guys had the nerve to laugh. Charlie delved into leather jacket's mind and found a mish mash of thoughts, all in the local Arabic. Given time she might have made sense of it, but they really needed Ruby and Sarah. Had these guys killed the kids, or were they worried relatives who also happened to be local tough guys ? Or were they.....

"Are you cops ?" Asked Charlie.

"Us, are you crazy ?" Yelled Safari Jacket.

The man in the back of the car got out and walked towards them. Maybe the slow pace was supposed to be intimidating. It took him a good couple of minutes to reach his two guys. He was taller than the other two and dressed casually in jeans and a plain white shirt. He looked as though he'd been enjoying a family night in, before.....Before what had happened ?

“Stop wasting time, they’re just friends of those idiots.” Said the boss. “Kill them, now.....Dump their bodies with the other two.”

“Remember Vladivostok ?” Asked Charlie.

“Of course.” Said Sophie.

They didn’t practise such things; it was just that Charlie had died in Vladivostok. Not a permanent death, but any kind of death is something no one wants to repeat. She’d made a mistake; one she wasn’t going to make again. No going too easy, even if they did want at least one of them alive. Men with guns were dangerous and they might have other weapons. As leather jacket pulled out his gun, the shorter guy went for his. Charlie leapt forward, towards them. Even the toughest gangster can’t take that in his stride. As the men stepped back a pace, Charlie used the power she’d been gradually drawing out of every living thing within fifty or sixty yards, including the three men. They’d be a little slower, but the real damage would occur when her force wall hit them. Ruby was probably best at it, but Charlie was getting pretty good too. An alternative to fire, that with luck, would leave their enemies alive.

“Now.” Said Sophie

Sophie poured power into her, mainly in case the first force wall didn’t do the job. Charlie concentrated and used her outflung hands, to focus the energy. The two men with drawn guns, were lifted off the ground and flung through the air. They hit the ground fifty yards away, rolled for a few feet, before becoming crumpled heaps on the ground. Their assumed boss didn’t do as well, he collide with their bronze coloured Mercedes. He slammed into the side of the car and was almost bent in two by the force. Charlie didn’t need to check to know he was dead.

“Fuck.....But there’s still the other two.” Said Charlie.

“Better them than us, as Ruby says.”

“Still, I think I overdid it a bit.”

The man wearing the safari jacket had landed badly, his neck looked to have been broken. While Sophie went through his pockets, Charlie went to see if Leather Jacket was still alive. He was lying face down, moving slightly and coughing. Charlie was almost too scared to turn him over. He swore at her as she rolled him onto his back. That was a good sign she knew that. All of them had received a little training in battlefield medicine. The noisy wounded would usually live. It was the quiet ones who needed to be treated first.

“Fuck.....I think you busted my arm.”

“Be grateful, the other two are dead.”

He yelled a lot and swore, as she checked him over and emptied his pockets. He’d come out of it pretty well, though his left arm was definitely broken. His driver’s licence was a surprise, considering he was a local.

“Rocky.....Who in Baku names a kid Rocky ?”

“Yeah....Fuck you.”

Sophie arrived with a proper plastic evidence bag, full of the contents of the other two men’s pockets. Charlie added Rocky’s wallet and resisted the urge to tease Sophie about her efficiency.

“Sophie..... Meet Rocky Carim Abadi.”

“We can’t use their car; the near side is a bit.....Bloody.”

“Did you bring any duct tape ?” Asked Charlie.

Sophie looked hurt that she’d needed to ask. They bound his wrists and ankles, before putting several layers over his mouth. They could still just about hear him swearing, but at a very low volume.

"I suppose we do need him." Said Sophie. "He looks a bit heavy."

That got Rocky's attention, he was suddenly very quiet.

"We'll take it in turns to carry him." Said Charlie. "Once we get to somewhere that doesn't look like a huge crime scene, we'll call for a pickup."

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It had been a bad year for unexpected bills. They'd paid her, that was the most important thing to Lena. Gallaan had put the money into her account, via an intermediary of course. Einar had been worried they might be taken to a dark ops site for interrogation. The mission had ended badly, but Einar had checked in as soon as they were somewhere safe with a phone. That had to have come into the equation, Gallaan were picking up her medical bills. Lena knew she might have been looking at the grubby ceiling of a detention centre. Instead, it was the tiled ceiling of a private clinic in Stockholm.

"There, all done." Said the nurse. "I hope it wasn't too uncomfortable?"

Uncomfortable was an odd word for something that had hurt like hell, though Lena had been through worse. She'd lost a lot of blood and an infection had started up in the wound on her shoulder. Once there it wasn't keen on going. Lena had been ill for a while, very ill. No one had said anything about her nearly dying or anything like that, but she'd felt worse than she could ever remember feeling before.

"Whatever bit you had a jaw full of bacteria." The doctor had said.

She was alright now though, apart from when the nurse came in to change the dressings. A few more days and hopefully, they'd let her go home. Home would be a lot more pleasant, now she had enough in the bank to keep her going for a year or two.

"No, I hardly felt it." She lied. "Any news on a release date?"

"You'll need to ask the doctor about that. You were lucky, but things take a while to heal."

Yes, the bites had missed a major artery by a centimetre, though she had lost a lot of blood. Add on the concussion and some bacteria the doctor had never seen before and yes, she'd been lucky. Officially they'd been attacked by some wild creature, probably a rich man's pet that had escaped from a private zoo. Only Einar and her, the bodies of their four dead colleagues, had been dealt with by Gallaan. Gone, cleansed, families paid compensation, with a little extra to keep quiet.

"Would you like another pain killer." Asked the nurse.

"No, I've got visitors coming to see me."

Einar had been in the same clinic, though only for a day. He'd been to see her before leaving and they'd agreed to keep their relationship a secret, for a while. Once she was released, he was going to come and stay with her for a few days. After that? Lena had no idea, but you couldn't go through what they'd been through and not be left with.....Something. She knew there were deep feelings for Einar, still nervously hiding in her somewhere.

"If it works, it works." She muttered. "If not.....But I hope it works."

There had already been a recorded debriefing and a follow up, though neither had been that tough to get through. Losing four colleagues had been bad, but she hadn't really known them. The visitors she was expecting were senior Gallaan people.

"Nick Teems is head of security." She'd been told over the phone. "There'll just be him and one other. Nothing heavy Lena, we know what you've been through. Nick just wants to make sure everyone is on the same page."

Lena had seen the news, there had been a few deaths near Skagen. Civilian deaths that were beyond even Gallaan's ability to make disappear. Her debriefing had been all about what had bitten her and

easily killed four highly trained soldiers. Now Nick Teems would be aiming for damage control, giving the Norwegian authorities as little information as possible. Lena watched TV for a while, a cartoon channel where there wasn't likely to be a regular news bulletin. Nick Teems arrived a little late, but he was carrying a fruit basket and smiling.

"Lena, you're looking well." Said Teems. "The doctor told me you should be ready to go home on Friday."

Which was more than she'd been able to get out of the doctor, though he was being paid by Gallaan. Nick Teems put the fruit on a cabinet and pulled up a chair. No obvious recording device. Making sure they were both on the same page, meant her agreeing to go along with the official story as per Gallaan Industries. She'd seen a lot of people like Teems over the years, they all seemed to have the same smug expression.

"Thank you for the fruit." She said.

"No problem..... Don't worry Lena, this is an informal little chat. Completely off the record."

Lena didn't mind lying, it came with the territory. Gallaan had paid her, the full rate as agreed and a completion bonus. If they wanted her to tell the police that Thursday was really Friday, she'd do it.

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Abshir Duale, was now known as Abe to everyone. He'd wanted to be with the group looking for his sister, but respected Ruby's decision to leave him at the hotel. Not that she'd explained things to him, that had been left to Nari. He liked Nari, though he was a little annoyed at Ruby leaving the hotel without seeing him. Cal was his sister after all.

"The way to think about is, if you were in the police, you'd never be allowed to investigate the disappearance of a family member." Nari had said.

The police analogy was probably true, but not a good one to use on him, about his sister. The police in Somalia had never seemed to be on his side. Some of the worst had been more like criminals than cops.

"I do understand, I really do." He'd said. "Maybe I could get a taxi and drive around the tourist areas ? If I see Cal, I promise to call in."

"Then there are your gifts, Abe. You're doing remarkably well, but lack control. If you get to be upset in a public place.....I'm sure you understand."

Of course, he did, they didn't want him going full psycho wunderkind in the centre of Baku. She'd probably been right; he didn't know how he'd react if they found Cal and she was dead. Abe had agreed to remain in the hotel and help Todd with the phones. Todd was alright, an obvious tough guy with a soft centre. After a couple of hours being good and being the smiley guy in the room, Abe made another bid to at least get out of the hotel for a while. Cal had mentioned seeing a park from her window. A small chance she'd be there, sobbing and feeling lost. There was a chance though, even if it was a slim one.

"I need some fresh air." Said Abe. "I'll only be gone for half an hour. Is it alright to go for a walk outside ?"

"Fine, but don't go too far. No one should wander off, there may be someone targeting us. Unlikely I'm guessing, but we shouldn't take risks." Said Todd.

"I won't go far, just to the small park over the road."

"I've seen that from the window." Said Caleb. "I wouldn't mind going too, if you fancy company ?"

Abe didn't dislike Caleb Friedman, or like him that much either. Everyone knew Kallina had put some sort of whammy on him, to make him more likeable. It had worked, though Abe was still.....There

was that wonderful word Sophie liked; ambivalent. Abe felt ambivalent about Caleb and definitely didn't want his company. Sadly, Todd put the finishing touch to a bad idea.

"There you go Abe." Said Todd. "No need to go out alone. You and Caleb can watch each other's backs. Just be back in an hour."

That was it, Abe left the Marriott with Caleb in tow. There wasn't much to the park, it didn't even appear to have a name. Some tidy grass and few trees, but it was better than sitting in a hotel room.

"So, is this your first time in Baku?" Asked Caleb.

"Yes, I've never left Somalia in my entire life, neither has my sister. Have you been here before?"

"I was a document courier; it'd be easier to list the few large cities I haven't been to. So yes, this'll be my fourth time in Baku. Not that I saw much of the place. You deliver something, get a signature and it's back to the airport. Oh, are you alright Abe? You look awful."

It had been so sudden, hearing Cal scream. Loud, as though she'd had her mouth right up against his ear. Abe felt giddy, sitting on the grass before he fell over. It came again, another scream.

"Are you alright, Abe?"

"Did you hear her?"

"Who?"

The vision came with the next scream, a full colour high-definition vision. Someone had just hit his sister with something. There was blood on her arm and Cal was scared. Actually, well beyond scared, she was terrified.

"Abe, get up...What are you doing?" Asked Caleb.

The vision went, Caleb had stopped it by grabbing him. Abe was angry, grabbing Caleb by the collar of his shirt.

"You asshole....I could see her." He yelled.

"See who? Was it Cal?"

Ruby called her special abilities her gifts, but Abe wasn't sure if his were a gift, or a curse. Strong emotions tended to trigger his gifts, everything from burning down their kitchen when he was a kid, to flipping over a police car. He'd been in trouble since barely being a teenager, most of it caused by his 'gifts.' There was a sound like the popping of a massive balloon.....

"Where are we?" Asked Caleb. "Did you bring us here?"

"I think I must have, though I have no idea how."

They were on a hillside and it was still dark. The usual glow from the milky way gave enough light to avoid holes in the ground, but only just. A few trees were scattered around, but the main thing to be seen was a small house. Nothing flashy, just the kind of house a farmer might call home.

"Where are we, Abe? Where have you brought us to?"

Abe ignored him, his emotions were triggering all sorts of abilities he'd never used before. He knew Cal was in the house and he knew she was alive, but hurt and terrified.

"We're still in Baku, somewhere." Said Caleb. "My phone is connected to Bakcell."

"Come on, we need to rescue my sister."

Caleb grabbed him, pulling him back by his shoulder.

"Let me call Todd, Abe. That way backup will be on the way."

"Fine, just do it quickly."

Listening to one side of a conversation was frustrating, especially as it went on for longer than he'd have liked. It seemed Todd had traced Caleb's phone to somewhere near Khirdalan, not that far from Baku. Help was on the way, in the form of Ruby, Sarah and Spider. It almost made Abe feel

sorry for the bad guys, almost. As soon as the call ended, Abe walked towards the house, picking up a broken house brick on the way.

"Look for something heavy, Caleb. Something to use as a weapon."

"That's alright, I have this." Said Caleb.

The gun came out from the back of his jeans. A small automatic, though it looked large enough to get the job done.

"I know Ruby said no guns in the hotel, but you know.....Just in case. Don't snitch on me."

"I've no intention on telling anyone." Said Abe. "Are you any good with it."

"Oh yes."

"Come on then."

Shutters on the windows, with just a slight glow of light showing that someone was at home. Abe knew his sister was in the house, with the same certainty that he knew the sun would rise in the morning. No visions of Cal, but he was fairly sure where she was in building. Two doors, both locked and rattling doors to find that out had probably ruined any element of surprise.

"We need to wait for backup." Caleb hissed in his ear.

"No, we're going in.....About here."

The door would have been a mistake, they'd be waiting for that. Abe chose the section of wall as far away from Cal as possible. A wooden single floor house, with probably three or four rooms inside. Hopefully, internal walls would help shield his sister from what he was about to do.

"Have the gun ready and follow me inside." Said Abe. "And you, er.....Might want to step back a bit."

Abe placed his hands on the wall, as if trying to push his way inside. His ability to crush and then un-crush a dumpster had surprised him. He knew the trigger was in his mind and he remembered how it had felt. Just the memories were having an effect, the wall was vibrating under his fingers. Abe closed his eyes and as an extra precaution against flying splinters of wood, he lowered his head, right up against his chest. Hot weather clothing wasn't going to protect his skin, but there was nothing he could do about that.

"Please let this work." He mumbled.

The air seemed to rush past him, as though he was a huge fan. After that there was a crashing sound, followed by the worrying sound of something collapsing. He'd overdone it, he was certain of it. Nari had accused him of lacking control and he'd just proved her right. The only thing on his mind as he lifted his head, was the possibility of him hurting his sister.

"Cal, are you alright?" He yelled.

The section of the house near the hole in the wall was gone, turned to nothing but pieces of wood, plaster and dust. Abe walked into the house and heard Caleb behind him. There was a body up against the far wall, a man judging by the clothing. His head was deep inside a pile of debris. There was a gun in the man's hand, so Abe felt relieved. In a situation where he had no idea who they were fighting, there was one certainty. Men with guns weren't on their side.

"Calaso, shout.....Let me know where you are?" Abe Yelled.

"Keep over to the left, you're blocking my line of fire." Said Caleb.

Abe strode through the wreckage and into the rest of the house. A small fire had begun somewhere over to his right. There were bright red flames, streaked with yellow. It was a wooden house, there was no time to lose.

"Calaso!" He yelled.

"Here.....I'm here."

It was her voice; he now knew she was alive and well enough to shout. As he headed towards the sound of her voice, someone fired a gun. He had no idea where the bullet went, but it hadn't hit him. From a little behind and to his right, Caleb fired back.

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Luck seemed to be on their side. Spider was driving the car, with Sarah next to him. Ruby was in the back with Luca, when Todd called with a location. A location for what they hoped, was where Cal was being held.

"That's pretty close. The satnav puts us about two kilometres away from Khirdalan." Said Spider.

"We're due a piece of good luck." Said Ruby.

"What were Abe and Caleb doing that far from the hotel?" Asked Sarah.

"If they've found Cal and she's alright, I don't care." Said Ruby. "Step on it, Spider. We need to get there sometimes this year."

"Speeding might get us noticed." Said Spider. "Mainly by the cops."

"Then I'll put the whammy on them.....Hit it! Go as fast as you can." Said Ruby.

Narrow roads with nothing much in the way of street lighting. It looked very rural for a town that close to Baku. Ruby hoped they'd get there in time.....They had to get there in time. Driving that fast, the two kilometres didn't take them long.

"There.....I can see a house on fire, it must be them." Said Sarah.

Strangely no one argued about it, or challenged her assumption. Were they becoming that predictable? Ruby hated to admit it to herself, but they probably were. Red sky at night.....Ruby's wunderkinds were probably in town.

Todd chose that moment to call her, letting her know Sophie and Charlotte had been picked up by a taxi driver sympathetic to their cause. Probably one of Jalil's friends. A man called Rocky was with them, though all that could wait.

"Wow, that is well ablaze." Said Spider.

A house on fire in a quiet area on a dark night. That was going to get noticed far more than Spider's driving. It had to be a quick in and out, with them miles away before the State Fire Protection Service arrived. Not that being in a hurry meant they wouldn't get the guns out of the boot. Ruby wouldn't have said she was hoping for a chance to use her newly acquired expertise with her Glock, but if the opportunity arose.....

"The new, extra wide front door looks like Abe's work." Said Sarah.

No time to dawdle and hearing a gunshot added to the need for speed. Ruby ran into the part of the building that wasn't burning. There was a dead body there, luckily no one she recognised. Caleb was a little further along a corridor, tying a grubby towel around a leg wound.

"The bedroom.....Abe is in the bedroom." Said Caleb.

"Is Cal in there?" Asked Ruby.

"Yes."

"Get him out to the car, Luca." Said Ruby. "Get Sarah to help, but I'll be needing Spider."

"But.....I'm your lucky charm." Said Sarah.

"No arguments, help Luca look after Caleb."

The bedroom door was hanging open on just the top hinge. Ruby had no idea what Abe had done to the house, but it had been something massive. There wasn't much in the bedroom, apart from a bed. A small set of drawers and a hall cabinet. A narrow kind of wardrobe that Ruby remembered from student digs. No matter how carefully she hung up her clothes, they always came out crumpled. On the bed was Cal, with her brother untying the rope around her wrists.

"Is she alright?" Asked Ruby.

"I'm not sure.....She called out to me, but now she looks drugged." Said Abe.

Pulling the tape from her mouth woke Cal up, just in time to begin screaming. He'd come out of the hall cupboard, carrying a gun. He had a few cuts and grazes and his clothing was torn, but the man had hate in his eyes. No chance to put the whammy on him, he already had his gun aimed at her. Spider was helping to lift Cal from the bed. The screaming, the sound of a commotion outside the room. Add on the crackling sound of the fire and it was beyond pandemonium and well into hell on a bad day.

"Don't.....No.....Ruby, get down." Yelled Abe.

One emotion blasted its way into Ruby's mind. In the middle of all that it was guilt, Cal was feeling guilty about something. Ruby began to lift her gun, knowing she was fast, but not that fast. She might not die of course, even from a bullet in her forehead. There was a good chance the forces she didn't fully understand, would bring her back, again. She'd died once before and it had been dreadful. Painful, confusing and definitely not something she wanted to experience again.

"Let go of me." Yelled Caleb.

Sarah was still pulling at his arm, as Caleb shouldered his way past a stunned Abe. Caleb Friedman had boasted many times about being good with a gun, but then again, he'd boasted about a lot of things. With Sarah still trying to get him out of the room, he turned and dropped at the same time. The bullet Ruby had been expecting to hit her never arrived. It seemed her would be assassin was as shocked as her by what was going on in the room. As he hit the ground, Caleb fired his small automatic, twice. Ruby saw it all, though mercifully not in the slow motion that had accompanied a few previous violent events. One bullet hit the man in the throat, while the other hit him in about the middle of his nose. He'd be dead, not one could survive that. He fell back into the hall cabinet where he'd been hiding.

"We should get out of here." Said Spider. "The fire will destroy any evidence."

Spider carried Cal out to their car, while Abe and Ruby helped Caleb. The car was over full, crushed as Sarah said before they'd even driven away. After a few miles, Luca had obviously decided there were limits to the sort of conditions she'd work in.

"We need to stop somewhere." Said Luca. "Caleb has a bullet wound in his leg and Cal has nasty gash at the back of her head. I'm not going to be able to treat those on the move. Then I think Abe has few deep lacerations from....Whatever he did."

It was rare for Luca to get pissed off, but it happened.

"Find somewhere quiet and secluded, Spider." Said Ruby. "We'll stop for a while."

"Oh thank you, I really need to pee." Said Cal.

Ruby often considered the night Spider had decided to burgle her flat, as a wonderful piece of serendipity. He'd redecorated her flat after that, all for free. Plus, he'd saved her life on at least two occasions. Plus, Spider got things done. Within a few minutes they were hidden behind a row of trees in a place that looked totally secluded. Just one or two lights to be seen and they were a long way off.

"Don't wander far." Ruby told Cal. "Sacrifice privacy for safety. In the long run, you'll live longer."

While Cal peed, not that far from their car, Ruby called Todd. Just a quick update and instructions on how to get to the house Jalil was letting them use to debrief Rocky. Debrief, the military term for thumping someone until they told you what you wanted to know. Not a romantic type of call, but there had been a mutual I love you, before Ruby hung up.

"I'm sorry for causing so much trouble."

Cal looked so battered and forlorn; it was impossible to feel angry at her. Luca would check the girl over and it was none of her business, but Ruby had to ask.

“Did they.....Interfere.....Crap, why is it so hard to ask ?.....”

“No, they didn’t....Luca already asked.”

“Good.”

“What are you going to do with me ?” Asked Cal.

“Do with you.....What do you mean ?”

Cal was crying and Ruby found it impossible not to hug her. It felt as though a lot of being an adult, was knowing when someone needed a hug.

“I’ve been such a nuisance and those poor local boys.....They were just trying to stop them taking me away.”

“Do you know why they grabbed you ?” Asked Ruby.

“I’ve no idea, they didn’t say much. Maybe I was just bait, to get to you ?”

“Yes, maybe.”

“So, are you going to send me away ?” Asked Cal.

Until entering that burning house, the answer would have been yes. It wasn’t just Cal being in danger, Caleb had completely redeemed himself. And Kallina was right, doing the right thing was what mattered, even if it took a little witchcraft to make him do it. Spider was always.....Spider, but Abe had proven himself.

“I was going to leave you in Baku.” Said Ruby. “Not just you, there were a few others, I thought of as being natural civilians. This though, what happened tonight. I now realise that once we get into a dangerous situation, there are no civilians. I’m leaving no one behind, we’re all going to Norway, everyone.”

Cal looked so happy, but Ruby had to spoil that. She had no intention of telling another living soul, but the girl had to know, that she knew.

“Are you going to tell Abe what the man made you do ?” Asked Ruby.

“What ?”

“I will never tell anyone, but Abe heard you call out. Yet your mouth was covered in duct tape when Abe was untying you.”

“I don’t see what you mean.” Said Cal.

“Don’t play dumb, or I’ll get angry. I’m assuming he told you to call for help, before putting the tape back. Was that what happened ?”

“He had a knife and threatened to do terrible things to me.” Said Cal. “All I had to do was call out, just the once. Will you tell Abe ?”

“No, I said I wouldn’t though you might want to, one day. I think you’ll find he’ll understand.”

Poor Cal, the tears were rolling down her face. There was hope for her, there was hope for anyone who cared that much about letting down a member of their family.

“So, you don’t hate me ?” Asked Cal.

“No, you survived a terrible situation. You came out if it alive, just a few cuts and bruises. There is nothing to hate you for.”

As Ruby hugged Cal, she realised her nineteen year old self would have hated the girl’s weakness. At twenty seven, she now understood that nothing that helps you survive, is ever a weakness.

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