

Ruby

Chapter 14 - Pirates

“The Caspian is a dangerous place Max, everyone has a claim over it and all claims are disputed.”

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Ruby booked six rooms at the Marriott and of course, only three of them were slept in. They'd had a leisurely meal and a few bottles of wine and a pairing up had taken place. Ruby wouldn't normally have minded Sarah not using her room, but three rooms seemed a bit excessive. Serge had invited Ruby to join him for a nightcap and it had simply been easier to stay where she was, share his bed. That was what she told herself, but in reality she was becoming very fond of the cynical DGSE agent. Though now he was probably her agent and the DGSE had almost certainly taken him off their payroll. Olga and Leo had been a bit of a surprise, Ruby had seen them kissing passionately in the elevator, but had put that down to drinking a bottle of wine each.

“Olga and Leo used the same room last night.” Sarah had told her.

It appeared Sarah had called everyone just after breakfast and Leo picked up the phone in Olga's room. They were both consenting adults, their private lives were their own concern. Ruby told herself all that several times, yet she couldn't help giggling with Sarah about it.

“He has a certain rugged charm.” Ruby had said.

Of course she realised that Sarah would have had a similar conversation with Olga, about Ruby pairing up with Serge. It was what Sarah did, examining other people's relationships was her thing, it was what made her Sarah. Now Ruby was once again on the phone and listening to Sarah in full flow.

“I need to buy new clothes Ruby, please tell me we're not leaving town today.”

“No Sarah, we talked about this over dinner last night. The ferries don't work to a timetable; they leave port when they have enough freight on board. It might be a week before we leave, it might be two weeks, it definitely won't be tomorrow.”

Sarah was on the same floor, but about six rooms further along the hallway. Ruby concentrated and felt her mind and even at that distance she could feel Sarah relax.

“Nothing feels clean any more Ruby, everything has been left damp too long, even the stuff I bought in Paris.”

“Do you still have cash and the credit card I gave you ?”

“Yes, that's part of the problem. For the first time in my life I have enough money to buy what I want, but we haven't stopped anywhere long enough to even buy underwear.”

Sarah was laughing and Ruby joined in, just two young women having time to gossip again.

“Take Olga and Leo with you if you like, have a day shopping. Jalil doesn't live that far away and I have Serge to hold my hand.”

Ruby bit Serge on the shoulder, making him yelp.

“Are you sure you'll be ok, just the two of you ?” Asked Sarah.

“Yes, Kallina has known Jalil for years and Baku is a fairly safe City, as long as you're careful. Enjoy yourself shopping and we'll meet up for dinner. Oh and use local taxis to get around, leave our cars in the hotel car park, just in case someone is looking for them.”

“Ok, will we use the Audi again, I quite like it ?”

“I'm not sure Sarah, maybe not.”

“Ok. Do you want me to buy you anything ?”

“No, tomorrow I'll torture Serge by dragging him around clothes shops all day.”

Sarah hung up and Ruby leant across the bed to find her knickers.

"Come on," she said, "we need to shower, dress and get out."

"Should we call Jalil first?" Asked Serge.

"Kallina never did, we'll just show up."

~ ~

Penny looked at the encrypted email several times, making sure she fully understood what it was telling her. George had given her his password, just in case such a message came in. It appeared a senior police official in Romania had brought the body of a young girl back with him from the bandit country, the lawless area near the border with Bulgaria. He'd provisionally identified the body as being the remains of Ruby Anne Mason, but of course that was impossible. Penny's hand was actually shaking as she dialled George's number for about the eighth time, hearing his voice telling her to leave a message.

"This is just so much crap." She shouted at the PC.

Penny went to George's desk and found the secure number for Harry, written on George's desk blotter. His bank password was on there too, along with his verified by VISA codes and several other passwords she didn't recognise.

"Oh, George." She muttered.

She sat at George's desk and used the pay as you go that George had given her.

"Is that Harry?"

"Hi, this is Penny, Georges PA."

He remembered her, which was going to make it far easier.

"I have some urgent information for him and he has his phone turned off."

She waited while Harry tried to contact Terry and she could hear a conversation going on between Harry and someone he'd just called. Eventually he gave her a number for a car breakers in Kent and told her to ask for Foxy.

"Thank you Harry."

She put her phone down and read the message once more. It made no sense, she'd read about Ruby being seen many times since leaving Romania, there was even a picture of her stealing fuel from a marina in Turkey. Penny brought up the picture again and it was definitely Ruby, even though she was some distance from whoever had taken the picture. Penny jumped as her phone rang, the one only George called her on. There was no number coming up on the phone.

"Hello." She said.

"Hi Penny, sorry I should have called you earlier. I promised to, but then things became a bit frantic. I'm Foxy by the way."

"I was just going to call you."

"I know, Harry said you might be in touch."

She didn't know Foxy well, but she knew George trusted him.

"I have some information about Ruby. Could you get it to George for me?"

She heard him rummaging and then rustle a piece of paper.

"You mean this DNA report from the Romanian police?"

"Yes, has George seen it?"

"No Penny, he hasn't. George left the country about an hour ago. Don't worry, he's with good people, though even on this phone, I don't want to say where he's going. You can probably guess where his final destination is."

"Yes I can and he's far too old for this nonsense."

"Aren't we all Penny, aren't we all."

"Can you get a message to him, about the DNA result?"

"I could and I will if you want me to, but I wonder if it's wise. George would never be reckless, but he is very fond of the girl and the news might make him..... Take less care than he should. I am in your hands on this matter Penny, do you want me to send the report to him?"

His voice sounded reassuring and kind, almost charming.

"It must be a mistake, we've seen pictures of her." She said.

"It is certainly a mystery. So we're agreed that telling George would be a bad idea?"

She felt a little pressured, but it seemed the sensible thing to do.

"Yes, he'll know one way or the other when he gets there."

"My sentiments exactly and you have my number now. If I can be of help in any way, just pick up the phone."

"Thank you."

She ended the call and went back to her own desk and looked again at the DNA report. She'd seen quite a few, usually saying that someone or other had a ninety seven percent chance of being another person's child. Usually the files were about parentage, but even the criminal evidence files rarely claimed to be irrefutable, too many had been refuted by clever lawyers. Contamination by accident or design all too often ruined what looked like irrefutable evidence.

"A hundred percent, no doubt." She muttered to herself.

That was what the report was telling her. The DNA of the body found in Romania was that of Ruby Anne Mason, there was no doubt, could be no doubt. The DNA match was perfect, a hundred percent certain.

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Max waited for the man from his office to arrive, lurking in the arrivals hall like any other civilian waiting for a friend or colleague to arrive. He knew Peter quite well, an intern who'd been offered a proper job after six months of filing and getting coffee. Tbilisi International Airport was quite new and the architect had actually designed it to be spacious, light and airy. A rare thing in today's cramped airport lounges. He saw Peter blink and stare into the crowd, before recognising Max and walking towards him.

"Normally I'd suggest going outside, but you look like you could do with a coffee." Said Max.

"Four long waits for transfer flights and then turbulence. And now I've got it all to do again going in the other direction. Yes, coffee would be great sir."

"No sir, Max will do."

The coffee chain was local, but Max knew it had a good reputation. He found a quiet corner and Peter sat opposite him.

"You probably want more than coffee, I think they do sandwiches."

"A Sandwich will be fine si..... sorry Max."

Peter handed him a small package with a passport in it and enough dollars to get him where he wanted to go.

"Any problems?" Asked Max.

"No, I didn't pick up a tail anywhere and I was looking."

Max smiled, he liked the confidence of the young trainee. Peter was drinking his coffee and looking awkward, Max guessed there was a message to go with the money, one he might not like.

"Out with it Peter, you'd never make a good poker player."

“The police have been looking for you and some military types came to the office. I was told to give you this.”

Peter pushed a sealed envelope across to him. Quite a thin envelope the sort used for letters of sympathy or notices of dismissal. Max opened the envelope and it contained a single sheet of paper, signed on behalf of the main shareholders. Max had always known it had been a mistake to sell off seventy percent of the business, but he never thought they'd have the guts to join forces against him. Now they had, he was summoned to account for his outlandish behaviour. Yes, they'd actually used words like outlandish and unsatisfactory and even untenable. He was being sacked as CEO, they'd just used much longer words.

“I've been a bad boy Peter.”

“I'm sure if you returned with me, it could all be sorted out.”

Max sighed, Peter was a bright kid, but he'd never get his head round Ruby and Das Geheimnis.

“I doubt if I'll be going back Peter.”

“Is there any reply to their letter?”

“It's tempting to write 'fuck you,' but then they'll always view you as the deliverer of the bad news. Best if you just report that you delivered the letter and I said nothing.”

Max finished his coffee and left enough money to pay for what they'd had. He stood, nodded at Peter and walked across the spacious lounge and out of the automatic doors. At one time he'd have taken a taxi to the zoo to lose an hour or so, but he wasn't in the mood. Max simply sat on a bench near the taxis and gave Peter a good seventy minutes to be gone. Peter was a good lad, but he might say something to the wrong person and Max was taking no chances. There were at least two flights a week from Tbilisi to Baku, maybe three, his memory rarely let him down. Max put on his full American out to see the world accent and enquired about cheap flights to Baku.

“Azerbaijan Airlines,” said the girl, “have a flight in the morning, three hundred dollars return. Or on Thursday there is a Qatar Airways flight.....”

“The flight in the morning will do just fine young lady. Do you accept dollars?”

“Yes of course sir.”

Max was enjoying himself now. She enjoyed being flirted with and by the time he had his ticket, he also had a date to occupy his last night in Tbilisi. He didn't have any weapons with him, but you could buy almost anything in Baku. Something large this time, something that needed both hands to lift.

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The taxi was an old black cab imported from London and it was in perfect condition. There were fake taxis, made in China that looked like London black cabs, but Ruby pushed that memory of Kallina's from her mind. She leant back in the comfy leather seat and closed her eyes, imagining herself back home again.

“What are you doing?” Asked Serge.

“I'm picturing myself on the way to the office.”

The hotel had recommended a local taxi company and the driver spoke fluent English with just a trace of a local accent. Jalil lived about fifteen kilometres north of where they were staying, an area of Baku known as Bilgah. As Ruby gave the address to the taxi driver she felt his mind and found that the area was a good one, no bad connotations popped into his head.

“You've been to Baku before?” Asked the taxi driver.

“Yes, quite a few times.” Answered Ruby.

It didn't feel like a lie to her, with all of Kallina's memories in her head. Ruby rarely admitted to being a stranger in any town, strangers tended to be ripped off.

"I haven't been here in a while, has Bilgah changed much?" She asked.

"No miss, Bilgah still has the best restaurants in town."

He wasn't lying and Ruby relaxed, enjoying the streets go by, seeing them through the lens of Kallina's experiences. One street corner was different, a new store had replaced a crumbling ruin. 'Baku has the most vibrant and eclectic nightlife in Azerbaijan,' Ruby read on a poster stuck on the inside of her door.

"There are worse places to spend a week waiting for a ferry." She said to Serge.

"You want Ferry tickets? I can arrange tickets with a reliable captain, no ripping you off."

Serge looked a bit put out, but Ruby was used to London cabbies, who considered a constant stream of chatter as almost a sacred duty.

"We've already got a contact for tickets." Said Ruby.

The taxi driver almost collided with a bus going the other way, so keen was he in getting one of his cards out of his pocket.

"Here, just in case your contact lets you down. There are a lot of fake ticket sellers in the City."

"Fine just get us where we're going in one piece." Said Serge.

There was a lot of writing on the card, much of it in Azeri, which strangely enough she could understand, it seemed Kallina had given her more than just memories. Ruby turned the card over and most of the information was repeated in French and English. Their taxi driver was called Sanjar and he was a one man entrepreneurial marvel. Everything from day trips to the local ruins to a full business conference, Sanjar could arrange it.

"Call me anytime, day or night." Said Sanjar.

Ruby pushed the card into her bag and became slightly dizzy as she looked down at her much loved Gucci bag. She would have fallen if Serge hadn't held onto her.

"Are you ok?" He asked.

"Fine. We have a saying in England about feeling as though someone just walked over your grave."

"And we have a saying in France about all the English being a little crazy."

They were both still chuckling when Sanjar pulled up outside a very impressive house and told them they'd reached their destination. The garden was green and there were palms, though the temperature still didn't feel hot, more like a pleasant spring morning in London. They approached the front door to the house and Serge pressed a button which activated the door chimes. Quite quickly a young man opened the door, allowing them to enter a small reception area, then he looked at them enquiringly.

"I've come to see Jalil about an urgent matter." Said Ruby.

The boy looked towards a slatted screen at the far end of the room and obviously received some kind of signal.

"My master only deals with people he knows, I'm sorry."

The door was being opened and it was obvious that they were expected to leave. Ruby decided there was no point in having her gift if it was never used.

"You're mistaken, my name is Ruby Mason and I know your master very well." She said.

She pressed the idea into his mind, moulding it into his memories until the young boy firmly believed he'd seen Ruby on numerous occasions.

"Of course, I'm so sorry, please forgive my stupidity."

He spoke with the same almost perfect English the taxi driver had used. As he began to lead them along a corridor there was the sound of a chair being moved back and a tall man appeared around the side of the screen.

"I know all my masters clients and he doesn't know you."

"But I know you Jalil," said Ruby, "and Kallina says that you still owe her a meal at Nargiz restaurant."

Jalil looked younger than his years, Ruby knew he was over sixty. He was wearing a suit that fitted well and he still hadn't allowed his waistline to get too out of control. He waved the lad away.

"No visitors, I'm out until I tell you." He told the boy.

Jalil took them behind the screen, past the desk where he worked at a PC and had his cash books spread across a table. He nodded at the various files open on the desk and frowned.

"I used to have a bookkeeper, but times are hard."

Ruby knew all about his constant claims of poverty, Kallina had given her most of those memories. She also knew about his mansion in Bucharest and the mistress he kept there. There was a wife, but she was rarely seen and seemed to be content with giving him three sons to carry on the family business.

"Please excuse my humble abode." He said.

It was hardly that humble, the carpets alone were likely to have cost more than the entire contents of Ruby's flat in Hackney. They crossed a large lounge, through a set of glass doors, and they were beside a pool that was still covered for the winter.

"We can speak privately out here, unless you're too cold?" Asked Jalil.

"This is summer weather in London, I'm fine." Said Ruby.

They sat at a pool side table and another young man quickly arrived with a jug of water and some glasses.

"Are you hungry? My staff make a superb brunch."

"We just had breakfast at the Marriott." Said Serge.

Jalil waved the boy away and gave Ruby a huge grin.

"I should have known you were like Kallina, she used to play games, making the boys think they were chickens."

Ruby looked gently into his mind and understood, the young boys were his sons. Jalil believed in family, you can trust family.

"Are you both.....?" He asked.

"No, just me," said Ruby, "I sort of kidnapped Serge on the way."

"I was with the DGSE." Added Serge.

Jalil gasped and looked concerned, drinking almost half of his glass of water.

"Well, well, these are strange times. I take it you no longer work for that organisation?"

"No, they either think I'm dead, or want me that way."

"Good, good. So what will it be this time? Kallina hasn't bought weapons in quite a while, but I still know people."

"We need six tickets on a ferry, plus all the paperwork and visas, all under false names of course." Said Ruby.

"I've helped Kallina in that way before, though it won't be cheap. I'll need to consult my diary."

Jalil called over one of his sons and sent him to fetch a book and his reading glasses. Jalil then made the sound car repairers make when they're about to add a large sum to the bill, the sound of sucking against their teeth.

“Umm you just missed a nice clean boat to Aqtau in Kazakhstan.”

“We want to go to Turkmenbashi.” Said Serge.

Jalil made the sucking sound again and turned a few pages of his book.

“No clean ships to Turkmenistan, you’ll need to take your own food and water too. Very expensive and there is always the threat of pirates. Of course the authorities call the men in patrol boats pirates, but most of us think it’s really Iranian soldiers.”

Jalil stabbed his finger at a page in his notes.

“Yes, the gecə şahzadə, the Night Princess in your tongue. A very pretty name for a very ugly boat. The captain is fine though, once you’ve paid him what he asks. He won’t try to take all your possessions en route.”

Jalil stopped and gave Ruby a long hard look.

“If you’re like Kallina, I can’t see the captain of any ship being a real worry to you. You’ll need to take bug spray, all these ships are infested.”

“What with ?” Asked Serge.

Ruby felt the urge to scratch, she always felt like that when someone used the word infested.

“Everything,” said Jalil, “Lice, mites, fleas and bed bugs and then there are the really nasty parasites.”

He noticed the look on Ruby’s face and put his hand on her arm.

“You’ll be fine. Take bug spray and your own food and water and don’t eat or drink anything on board. Come to think of it, take enough to last until you get to wherever you’re going.”

He gave Ruby a long direct look.

“The Turkmenistan desert is a shit hole. I assume you have weapons.”

Ruby nodded at him.

“Good, the captain won’t mind what you take aboard. Now departure date, always a moving feast with these boats.”

Jalil nodded his head from side to side, as though adding up a column of figures.

“The Night Princess will leave harbour somewhere between seven and ten days time. It all depends on how quickly his cargo hold fills up and I’ve been told he has almost a full load.”

“Can I pay him to definitely leave in seven days ?” Asked Ruby.

Again there was the teeth sucking, which was beginning to annoy her.

“Not a good idea, everyone in Baku knows the routine with these ferries. If he suddenly leaves, people will think he has an expensive cargo and then you will definitely be met by pirates. My advice is to become tourists for ten days, enjoy Baku, it is a beautiful city.”

Ruby looked at Serge and he nodded at her, it seemed being tourists for a while was their only option.

“Sarah will be happy,” she said, “seven or so days to go shopping.”

“I will need details of all six people who need paperwork,” said Jalil, “and of course, there is the question of my fee, which will include the ferry tickets.”

“How much ?” Asked Serge.

He nodded his head from side to side and then gave them a figure in dollars. It was an absurdly large sum for six tickets on a fourteen hour ferry trip. It was also a very small sum out of the money she still had in the hotel, hidden under the false bottom of her wheelie case. When Ruby thought about it, she had that much on her, folded up in her Gucci bag, for emergencies. Ruby almost asked him to bring the figure down a little, just because that was probably expected. Then she remembered Kallina’s comment about Jalil being loyal as long as there was money in it for him.

"I'll bring your money over here in the morning," she said, "unless that is inconvenient?"

"Money is never an inconvenience, I'll be at home all day."

They said their goodbyes and left the house and Ruby wasn't surprised to see Sanjar parked across the street. He leapt out of his taxi and opened the rear door.

"I knew you'd need a taxi back and there are a lot of crooked cab drivers in Baku." He said.

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Max thought about trying to disguise himself, but realised he'd just look like himself, but with a silly hat over his face. Airports were one of the places where it was impossible to be furtive; too many officials wanted a good look at your face. He was through immigration quite quickly, no one even bothered to check the biometrics on his passport. Max had no baggage, only a small bag which he was carrying. Less than fifteen minutes after landing, he was striding through the arrivals lounge and trying not to make eye contact with anyone. It was pointless of course, someone would be watching, perhaps several people. By now everyone would know that Ruby was heading for Turkmenistan and the only way for her to get there with only moderate discomfort, was a ferry out of Baku. All eyes would be on Baku and that meant at least one CIA informer watching arrivals around the clock. Max easily found a taxi and the driver didn't quibble about going to the bad part of town.

"Will you wait for me when we get there?" Asked Max.

"Of course I'll wait, I'm from Russia, in the army for ten years. I don't take crap from the locals."

The taxi driver opened the glove compartment, showing Max the large automatic it held and the two spare ammunition clips.

"The local drivers get involved in politics, but not me. I'll wait for you and if anyone tries to give me trouble, they'll be sorry."

The taxi stopped and his now smiling driver accepted a fifty dollar note to wait, with the promise of more to come.

"What's your name?" Asked Max.

"Ali."

"You don't look like an Ali."

The heavy set Russian just shrugged and pointed in the direction of a grubby looking warehouse. Max had trouble finding any nameplate or bell and ended up kicking at the door with his foot. Then someone was pulling bolts on the door and shouting at him in Azeri, probably telling him to stop kicking the door. Max knew Russian and even a little Arabic, but Azeri was just noise to him.

"Əvvəl qapını salmaq etməyin!"

The man at the door looked about thirty and he looked angry. Max smiled and shrugged, the international symbol for not knowing what the hell the other person was saying.

"Sorry, do you speak English?"

"Of course I do. I was telling you to stop kicking the fucking door."

"My name is Max, I've sent quite a lot of my people to see....."

The man ignored him, beckoning him in and almost closing the door on his leg. Max was a bit put out, but tried to regain control of the situation.

"I have a number you can call to check my....."

"I don't care! Have you got money?"

"Yes, US dollars."

"Then that's all the ID I need. If you've got money I'll sell you anything, I don't care who you kill with it or where you take it. As you Americans say, if you have dollars, we're cool."

The man, who still hadn't given a name, unlocked a heavy metal door and seemed to cheer up almost instantly.

"My showroom," he said, "obviously nothing is loaded, but I can get ammunition within the hour. If you don't see it, ask, I can obtain almost anything."

Max was in grunt paradise, a well lit room containing just about every assault rifle, sub machine gun and sniper rifle that he'd ever seen or heard of. One table even had a few specimen land mines, though someone had carefully labelled them all as 'demo only.'

"Quite a selection." Said Max.

"Thank you, there has to be something here that takes your fancy."

Max was drawn to the AK-12, like a moth to a flame. The Russian army testers hadn't liked the way the AK-12 performed in sub-zero temperatures. Max had no intention of taking it to the arctic circle and to him, it had always been the perfect battle rifle. He picked it up and the weapon was in perfect condition, slide in a magazine and it was ready to use.

"How much?" He asked.

The price was high, but not excessively so. He agreed to buy the weapon and was reaching for his money, when something else caught his eye.

"They're becoming difficult to get hold of," said the arms dealer, "MRO-A Russian self-contained, disposable single shot 72.5 mm rocket launcher. The ones I have are fitted with an incendiary warhead. Perfect for clearing out those hard to shift insurgents."

Max picked it up and it was lighter than he'd thought, he'd be able to easily carry two of them strapped across his back.

"I'll take two and I'll need ammo for the AK-12, enough for a prolonged fire-fight."

"You'll need a backup, even Kalashnikov's have been known to jam. Here, I'll only charge you fifty dollars for this Makarov pistol and I'll include a full magazine."

His host threw a small Makarov pistol onto the table and Max nodded his acceptance. The final fee wasn't large and Max was offered coffee, while an assistant went to fetch the ammunition. The coffee was surprisingly good and his unnamed host seemed much more cheerful once money had changed hands. They chatted about nonsense for a while, Max even pretended to be interested in baseball to help the small talk move along.

"Are the ferries the only way to Turkmenbashi?" He slipped into the conversation.

"There are planes, but then of course you'd need the proper paperwork and you'd have to leave your new toys behind."

"I mean by sea, fishing boats, someone I could hire to get me across the Caspian."

"Let's go through to my office, there are a few decent chairs and a bottle of bourbon. I know you're Max, I'm Karim."

They settled themselves in the office at the back of the building and Max relaxed after taking a couple of sips of the excellent yellow liquid with ice in it.

"The Caspian is a dangerous place Max, everyone has a claim over it and all claims are disputed. Go too far north and the Russians will attack you, too far south and there are the Iranian patrol boats. The corridor in the middle is usually safe, but it's a good two hundred kilometres across and that's too far to risk travelling in a small boat. Then there are the pirates."

"I know Karim, I've seen the reports. I know Taxi drivers have been killed for getting too close to the border, I know it's a dangerous place. But there is always a way."

His host brought more ice from a battered old fridge and topped up their glasses.

"There is a way Max, but it won't be cheap."

"I can get the money, I just need to get across that two hundred kilometres of sea."

"I can arrange an introduction, but I can't guarantee your safety. There is a way across, but it'll mean travelling with the pirates and most of them are ex-Iranian soldiers. They're crazies Max, some of the worst I've ever seen."

Max sipped his drink and once again contemplated going home. Perhaps a few nights in Baku and then back home, maybe even pick up the reigns of his business again. Then he thought of the DGSE file and the pictures of what Das Geheimnis could do.

"Arrange the meeting Karim." He said.

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Ruby had no problem in obtaining alcohol in Baku, but the hotel staff had advised against drinking on the beach, or wearing skimpy clothing anywhere outside the hotel grounds. Having seen Sarah's idea of clothes suitable for their trip, Ruby decided it was safest to use the hotel gardens for her after dinner get together. After their meal, Ruby had taken them across the lawns and into the trees, to a spot she'd bribed the duty manager to let them use. She looked Sarah up and down as Spider spread several bath sheets over the grass.

"I'm glad we didn't use the beach Sarah, you'd have given the locals apoplexy."

"Why?"

Sarah spun around, showing her knickers as her tiny and diaphanous skirt rose up to her waist.

"I've seen Miley Cyrus wear more." Said Serge.

"It's not my fault if they're small minded in this city." Said Sarah.

"It's a Muslim country and we're trying not to be noticed," said Ruby, "so it's long skirts and head scarves in public."

Sarah flounced down onto the ground and looked like a scolded child.

"I know, I'm in the wrong again, Sarah always in the way or in the wrong, story of my life."

Spider was putting the cool box on the ground and rolled his eyes at Ruby.

"I saw that." Spat Sarah.

"Sorry babe."

The trees gave them privacy and Ruby had brought candles. It took them a while to get organised, but they eventually all had a glass of champagne and enough light to drink it by. She looked around the group and lifted her glass.

"To Carlos," she said, "some of you didn't know him well, but he was a good friend to me."

"To Carlos." They all replied, taking a large drink from their glasses.

They all began to chat about their day, Sarah showing off the shoes she'd bought.

"Before we get drunk," said Ruby, "I need to say something."

They were all looking at her, the five friends who'd been through so much with her. Even Leo, who said little, but had become part of their family.

"This is the last civilised place on our journey," Ruby said, "once we get on the ferry, there is no turning back. If any of you have any doubts, now is the time to say so. There's no shame in it, I'll buy you an air ticket from here to wherever you want to go."

"You're not getting rid of me that easy." Said Spider.

Sarah simply cuddled up to her and kissed her cheek, while the rest smiled at her.

"None of us are going anywhere," said Leo, "we had a chat about this while you were away this morning and we're all going with you to Oboy."

Ruby sat there, staring at Leo with her mouth open.

"Yes, he does speak occasionally." Said Olga.

Spider opened another bottle of champagne and they all relaxed and settled themselves comfortably on the bath sheets. Ruby felt all their minds and there was no weak link, no one person who might let her down when she needed them most. Sarah of course was the unpredictable one, the one who'd need to be watched.

"What are we doing tomorrow?" Asked Sarah.

"Whatever you want," answered Ruby, "I have to pay Jalil for the ferry tickets, but you guys can enjoy the next seven or so days. Be tourists and have fun."

Sarah was grinning from ear to ear.

"Just don't go out of the hotel grounds dressed like you are now." Added Ruby.

~ ~

It had been difficult to be certain in the airport arrivals hall, but now he had the pictures in front of him, he was certain. The young man dialled the number he'd been given by his handler, though he thought of him as Carl, the nice man from the American embassy.

"You're certain it was the person in picture H?" Asked Carl.

"Yes sir, no doubt about it."

"Anything else you remember about him?"

"He was using a stick to walk, he seemed to find walking quite painful."

"Good, I'll arrange a little bonus in this month's envelope."

Carl hung up and typed out an internal electronic memo, telling everyone who needed to know that Max had arrived in Baku. Everyone who needed to know was a very large group, some of whom weren't above selling on that information. As often happens, Carl had just told a lot of people he'd never intended to tell, some the USA would consider to be enemies. Eventually the Russians would move the Black Sea fleet north and leave the problem to others, but the Iranians would decide that the Caspian Sea was their backyard and they needed to make sure everyone knew that, including Ruby and her small army of friends.

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