

Ruby

Chapter 3 – Herding Cats

“Sarah talked to most of her household appliances and so far none of them had ever answered. That was good, that meant she wasn’t crazy.”

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Sarah woke up shivering and realised she’d failed to make it into the bedroom again. Her phone was on the coffee table and it showed no incoming calls. Not that she was expecting any, Ruby never responded to her angry calls.

“I’m not feeding anger and paranoia.” Ruby had once told her.

The cheap Pinot Grigio bottle had only about an inch of wine at the bottom, no wonder she felt so rough. Cheap wine and her medication, she might have a really bad day and be vomiting blood by lunchtime. She got herself upright on the sofa and the curtains let enough light in for her to see the clock, it was 9:30am. Oh well, no job, meant no boss to scream at her for being late.

Sarah opened the curtains and looked down into the grassy square below her flat. Just one old man walking his dog, who she recognised as Walter from number 78. The social housing flat was small but quite nice; she’d only been given it because of her ‘problems.’

“Another fucking day in paradise.” She muttered.

Her phone made the cheerful sound that indicated a text message. Sarah picked it up quickly, hoping it might be from Ruby. It was from Dean, reminding her that he wanted his Muse CDs back. Bloody Dean! She was going to give up on love and just have sex in future.

“Arsehole !” She shouted at the phone.

Sex was good. It not only gave her pleasure, but she felt better after it. The catharsis that went with feeling better than after a five mile run. Love was the problem. Love was just badness with no mitigating features. Love was just a way of bonding people together to look after children. It was just the way that whatever God that was up there, manipulated people into thinking a mortgage and two point four children was a good idea. Love was just programming from above.

“I’m going to break the programming !”

In future she was going to have lots of sex with lots of men and never fall in love. Use em and dump em was going to be her modus operandi from now on. Sarah had tried that idea before, but she always, always ended up falling desperately in love. One of her college lecturers had once said; “Sarah, you have an IQ off the scale and you can sort out anyone’s problems. Anyone’s problems but your own.”

Of course she’d had sex with him and briefly moved into his grubby flat in Hoxton. He’d been right about her, just a pity he’d become just another ex-lover she still loathed. The only good thing to come out of her college life was Ruby and she’d met her by accident.

“Can you point me in the direction of the bookshop ?”

Not a classic line to start the most important friendship of her life, but she had Spider beat. He’d tried to burgle Ruby one evening and ended up redecorating her whole flat. Well, she had told him it was that or she’d tell the police all about his career in housebreaking. Wine ! She had to take a decent bottle of wine when she saw Ruby.

“Not another two ninety nine bottle of Bulgarian Pinot Grigio ?!” Ruby often moaned.

Sarah got up to check what wine she had in the fridge, but first she had to reply to Dean. She picked up the phone and took a deep breath.

'Go fuck yourself.' She tapped into the phone, even adding a glum face.

Her finger hovered over the send button. Sarah knew that the racing heart and sweating would start if she pressed send, but she simply had to get the jerk out of her life. She pressed send and immediately jumped up and went to the fridge.

"Keep busy, don't think of him reading it." She muttered to herself.

"Let's see what you've got inside you." She said to the fridge.

Sarah talked to most of her household appliances and so far none of them had ever answered. That was good, that meant she wasn't crazy. Sarah had never had a therapist as such. An admission to a psychiatric unit once, but that was just because her boyfriend at the time had dialled 999. She never had intended to kill herself, it was just one of her regular ploys to stop everyone leaving her. Ruby never left her. Ruby was the one constant in her life. She did once screw a final year psychology student he'd given her lots of good advice.

"Talking to the kettle is fine Sarah. But if it ever answers you, ask your doctor to refer you to a psychiatrist."

Her doctor just gave her pills, lots of pills. The fridge just contained about eight bottles of cheap wine from the corner shop and a tub of flora. Her heart began to race, she could feel her face becoming hot. Sarah ran for her phone and called Ruby, not really knowing if she'd answer this time.

"Breathe Sarah, you'll be fine."

"You always seem to know when I need you."

"That's my superpower. I'm calm the fuck down girl."

Sarah chuckled and her heart slowed down. She'd have the sweats for a while, but the feeling that she was going to die had passed.

"Where are you?" She asked.

"Working, I can't talk for long. I have an idea we can talk about tonight. Do you fancy going away with me for a while?"

"Yes. Where to?"

"Paris first and then Eastern Europe."

Sarah sat on her sofa and looked at the first few rain drops on the window. Paris seemed a very good idea.

"When would we leave?"

"In the morning. I know you have a passport."

Her heart began to beat a little faster.

"But my mail and the flat..... and I need to sign on this Thursday."

There was silence and the sound of a man talking to Ruby, but she couldn't make out any words.

"I have to go Sarah. Just think fuck the job centre and get ready to leave in the morning."

"But....."

"No buts ! I have money and you'll never have to set foot in a job centre again. Just pack one suitcase of essentials."

"It'll be alright Ruby won't it ? Tell me it'll be alright."

"I really have to go. But has there ever been a time when I haven't looked after you ?"

Sarah began to feel guilty. Lovers had come and gone with frightening frequency, but Ruby had never let her down.

"No."

"Then get packing. Ask the dotty old lady across the hall to pick up your mail. Oh and one very important thing."

“Yes.”

“Bring a decent bottle of wine tonight. No more Chilean Muscadet you bought from the corner shop.”

Ruby disconnected. Plans, yes she'd ask Helen to pick her mail up from the lobby, she had fed the crazy woman's cats over Christmas. There was a decent bottle of wine to buy and then she'd pack. As to signing on and her appointment the week after with an odious youth, to discuss her progress on the work programme. All they seemed to do was sap her strength and darken her soul. They could all go to hell.

Sarah needed to shower and change, her clothes smelt of last night's takeaway. She went into the bedroom, undressed and put all her clothes on the large dirty linen pile beside the wardrobe. She had enough clothes to last a few days away and after that? She trusted Ruby. She'd liked Ruby from the first time they met and she'd shown her where the college bookshop was.

“There's a cheaper bookshop just over the road.”

“I'll check that out tomorrow. My name is Ruby by the way.”

“Sarah, Sarah Simmons.”

They'd become good friends and although Ruby was a few years younger, Sarah always seemed to be the one asking for advice. Then there had been the terrible accident and Ruby had vanished from college and out of her life.

“I became her stalker.” Sarah said to the shower as she turned it on.

Sarah had gone to Ruby's flat and waited, waited for hours until her quarry arrived home. After a few days she began to get a feel for the routine of when Ruby went out and where she went. The night that turned a good friend into someone she couldn't live without now felt almost dreamlike. It had happened, even though Ruby refused to talk about it.

“Myriam, please wake up.”

Sarah had lost Ruby, she often did. For quite a while she seriously thought Ruby could sense when she was following her. Then she'd heard her voice coming from the car park of a seedy South London pub. The Alma, that was it. Named after a battle in a war everyone had forgotten, a pub with a very bad reputation.

“No, please no, you can't be dead.”

Ruby wasn't shouting, but her voice carried across the car park and into the dimly lit street. Sarah found her on the floor between a battered old car and a transit van. Ruby was holding a woman in her arms and it was obvious she was dead. Sarah had heard some people did survive terrible head injuries, but not half their head being caved in. The blood, that was the shocking thing, it seemed to cover the body, Ruby and the side of the transit van.

“They hit her and kept on hitting her.”

Sarah didn't like anything official, the police she saw as her personal nemesis. She knew Ruby had to get away, and anyway, the people who'd killed Myriam might come back.

“Do you have the car keys Ruby?”

She knew they'd come in the old Jaguar, she'd followed them, right through Blackwall tunnel and on into the worst part of South London. Ruby wasn't saying anything, but she was pointing at the dead body of her friend. More blood. This time over her, getting onto her hands as she dug in the dead woman's pockets.

“On your feet Ruby, we have to leave here.”

She had the keys, her own car could stay in the side street where she'd parked. Ruby was like a rag doll and difficult to get in the car, but eventually she got her into the passenger seat. Neither of

them said much on the way back to Ruby's flat. Sarah had no idea who Myriam was, why she was killed, or even if the police ever called on Ruby.

Their friendship had deepened that night. Ruby refused to talk about that evening but once, when Ruby was about to do something reckless. Sarah had unconsciously said;

"No Ruby, remember what happened to Myriam."

It had worked, though she knew it was something not to be over used. There was another strange thing that night. Sarah had taken Ruby home, undressed her and put her under a hot shower. When she'd gone to find a towel she'd found a drawer with money in it. Not money from being a shop lifter, or even from being a drug dealer. This had been serious money, the sort that gets people's heads caved in behind pubs with bad reputations. Not that Sarah took any, you didn't steal from Ruby. For some reason it was impossible to steal from Ruby.

Sarah finished her shower and went into the bedroom, examining her naked body in a full length mirror.

"Skinny," she said, "let's hope Ruby feeds me well in Paris."

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Ruby turned off her phone, she needed to concentrate. The production assistant had just told them it was likely to be fifteen minutes until George was needed. Good, that gave her longer to delve into the minds of everyone else in the hospitality area.

"I hate these things," said George, "they only record it in the morning, so that they have all day to edit it. By tonight they'll make me look a complete fool."

The Polandrous Foundation was successful and controlled a massive investment fund. It was sort of inevitable that George would become a hate figure for the general public.

"I'll talk to the producer before we leave." She told him.

George smiled; he knew a quick word from Ruby could have a massive attitude adjusting effect on people.

"Would you like more coffee ?" She asked.

"Yes and see if there are any biscuits left. They should provide breakfast, asking us to be here for 9am."

She left George moaning and walked over to the refreshment table. Like everything else, hospitality wasn't what it had been, broadcasters were cutting back. There was coffee, tea and bottled water. A few biscuits were left, so Ruby piled them onto a paper plate before pouring coffee into two cardboard cups. It was a current affairs programme they wanted George for, get the opinions of the asset stripper. They'd edit it before transmission that night, add lots of pompous voice overs and make George look like a monster. They had to be there though. Despite the moaning, George knew that hour in hospitality could be worth millions.

"They had a few garibaldi's, I grabbed the lot."

"Thank you Ruby."

It was a rare fishing trip. There were a dozen people in the room, politicians, financiers, bankers and people with economic theories that varied from the mundane to the downright crazy. Ruby tended to ignore the politicians, there was rarely anything of interest in their minds.

"Just read everyone and see if you can pick up a few gems." George had told her.

A world famous economist was putting a lot of thought into why his hotel hadn't had poached eggs on the breakfast selection. A writer for the finance section of a popular newspaper was thinking about the guy she almost picked up a few nights before. Ruby wasn't shocked, she'd found that the minds of the famous and the ordinary were much the same and they all seemed obsessed by trivia.

'Grisham might move into biotech. Damn fucking Grisham.'

The financier was smiling at his secretary, but his thought had blotted out everything else for a seconds. He wasn't just annoyed, he was feeling raw hatred for a rival. Paul Reginald Grisham was sitting the other side of the room and unaware of the intense ill-will being aimed at him. Most of the world knew him as 'Reggie' the man with the golden touch when it came to investing in bleeding edge technologies.

'No biscuits left !' The thought was troubling him.

George had eaten the garibaldi, but she still had the only six remaining biscuits in the room. Ruby picked up the plate and walked across the room, sitting herself on the chair next to Reggie.

"I've been so selfish," she said, "I took all the biscuits. I had no idea there were going to be late arrivals."

She gave him a smile at about three quarter power and he blushed slightly. Middle aged financier with a slight paunch and hair loss, versus twenty two year old girl with a perfect figure....no contest. He took a biscuit off the plate and she had him. Ruby looked around the room, he seemed to have come on his own.

"I'll get you a coffee if your PA is late ?"

"I rarely come to these things, just a waste of time. Yes, please, white no sugar."

It was twenty minutes before a bored looking girl came to get him to record his piece and by then Ruby knew more about him than his wife. Or the mistress he kept in a rented house in Tallinn for that matter. George had gone;

"It'll take about an hour to do his bits." One of the production team told her.

It didn't matter. Ruby took her laptop out its case and began to write about the seven high tech deals that Grisham was about to invest in. She quite liked Reggie, so she didn't mention the mistress, or his experiments with a certain class A drug. Ruby was loyal to George, but the information about the deals would be worth at least a billion Euros. That was enough, no need to risk ruining Reggie. Normally she'd have pressed the save button and left, but she actually had a proper PA role to do, she had to wait for George. She found a bottle of water that hadn't quite reached room temperature and sent a text to Sarah.

"Stop worrying about Dean and buy the fucking wine."

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Spider looked at his passport photo and cringed. He knew most people hate their passport photo, but they probably didn't have a deep scar that ran from forehead to lower jaw.

"I didn't have enough money to pay a gambling debt." He told people who asked.

Not that many did ask, they tended to cross the road, or walk back the other way. The strange thing was that Spider was a hero, he even had a medal to prove it. Rupert Bailey had saved two of his fellow soldiers from certain death, in a one dog village in a country with a name he couldn't spell. Sometimes he took the medal out and it felt like he'd stolen it from whoever Rupert was then. He had shown it to Ruby once;

"You're a regular hero Rupert. Why don't you tell people ?"

"Nahhh they'll just take the piss."

It was the same awful photo in all five passports, the question was... which one to use ? He'd already ruled out his genuine passport, he was likely to be on too many watch lists. It had been a year since he'd paid a crooked civil servant to look, but then the news wasn't good;

"You're right. You're on UK and Interpol lists and don't bother trying to enter the USA."

"Can you take me off the lists ?"

The guy had laughed at him, but only after taking his money.

“Do what everyone does.... buy a fake passport.”

Spider had bought four of them, two British but under false names, one Swiss that had cost a fortune and one Canadian. He'd used the two British ones to visit suppliers and the Swiss one was his emergency escape identity. That left the Canadian passport in the name of Rupert Poole.

“Always use your own first name. Then if some smart arse immigration official shouts it out, you will respond.”

The forger was one of the best and well respected, so all the passports were in the name of Rupert someone or other. He didn't want to tell the guy everyone called him Spider. His phone vibrated, showing that the ancient Nokia had received a text.

“Will U beat a guy up for me b4 we leave – Sarah.”

He sighed, but saying yes made it almost certain that he'd be getting his oats for a few weeks.

“Sure thing princess – who's the lucky guy ?”

She sent him the name Dean and an address out in Stockwell and the fact that he seemed to be at home.

“How bad ?”

“Huhh.” She sent back.

Spider hated texting, it took him ages to work out what half the stuff meant. He dialled her number;

“Do you want him to need a few elastoplasts, or a week in hospital ?”

He waited. The delay in replying didn't surprise him, he was getting to know Sarah.

“Somewhere in between those Spider.”

“Ok, leave it to me. He'll be waiting in A & E by tonight.”

“Don't kill him.”

“I won't.”

She hung up and Spider finished wrapping his gun up and hiding it in the shed. It was impossible to take a gun through immigration anywhere, but finding a gun to buy was never difficult in any city he'd ever visited. By the time he'd put a few clean shirts and some underwear in a case, another four texts had appeared on his phone. It appeared that Sarah wanted Dean to know who had sent him and she wanted him kicked hard in the balls.

“Jeezuz.....women !” He muttered to himself.

He wasn't using the car, there wouldn't be much left of it, if it was left parked in Hackney for months. Spider found the plastic wallet with his Oyster card in it and headed for the tube.

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Carlos drove her home after she'd given George her laptop for safekeeping and a brief idea of where she was going. It wasn't the first time he'd dropped her off at the flat in Hackney, but he still looked at the area as though it might bite.

“This really is an up and coming area ?” He asked.

“I've never had any trouble here.”

She was lying of course, she felt defensive of her neighbourhood, it was natural. Spider had been in her flat one night, digging through her valuables and looking shocked at finding a bag with over a million pounds in it. He'd been easy to control, but anyone who thought Hackney was now gentrified, had obviously not seen the blood stained pavement outside her local pub.

“At least let me see you to your door.”

She was going to simply say no, but Carlos was a decent guy and she was growing quite fond of him.

"I don't like mixing the different parts of my life," she said, "George means staying at the company flat in W1, wearing smart clothes and arriving home in a Mercedes...."

"And Hackney means ?" He asked.

Ruby felt for the door handle, the conversation was becoming far too deep.

"Hackney means slightly crazy friends and cheap wine. Most of all though, it means being myself."

She was on the pavement before the goodbye became a snog and fumble, she didn't need any further complication. Carlos was leaning over the passenger seat.

"George is worried about you. I'm worried about you. If you have any problems, call me and I'll be on the first plane out."

"Thank you, I do appreciate that."

He waited until she was inside the heavy outside door to her building and then she heard the Merc move off. There were two letters for her on the table in the hall and a bunch of junk mail flyers. Bob, the tenant of the ground floor flat had a thing about her, he'd pile up her mail in a neat heap without being asked.

Home, the cheap rented flat in an iffy part on Hackney. The hallway and stairs always smelt slightly musty, but even that was now the smell of home. Anyone who complained to the landlord about the damp, was told to leave their windows wide open all winter. No lift of course, just a lot of stairs and Ruby was at the door to her flat.

'I have a parcel for you – Bob.'

The note was pinned to her door. Books from Amazon, she hated electronic books and still bought the real thing. She'd bought a Kindle once, but now used it as a bookmark. Ruby went straight into her kitchen and put the kettle on, Sarah would need tea when she arrived. She liked the flat, with its old fashioned sash windows and creaky floors. She'd found it after the accident, when she'd needed somewhere to be alone. The building probably broke every safety and health rule, but it was her sanctuary. Renting the flat had been possible because of Myriam and her seed money, as she called it. In those days Ruby was happy to show her gift to any new friend.

"Oh come on Ruby. It's clever, you're very convincing, but it has to be a trick."

Everyone reacted like that. She had to be a charlatan, no one could read minds. People saw too many street magicians on the TV, it blinded them to the possibility that there were those with exceptional gifts. How to convince her ? Myriam was a Lesbian, so it was quite easy.

"Right now you're wondering if I have a bush and what my pussy tastes like. You're also wondering if I'll let you tie me up and spank me. Now you're realising I've known every thought you've had tonight..... even the one about using a cane on me until my backside bleeds."

She saw Myriam go pale, that was the usual response when people realised she was genuine.

"Stop it Ruby. I feel naked."

"But you believe now, don't you ?"

"Yes."

Myriam was a mature student from somewhere in South East Asia. She didn't like to talk about her home life and Ruby never delved into that part of her mind. One night Myriam had given her about two grand in used tenners.

"Seed money Ruby. One has to speculate in order to accumulate. I am a very good card player and with your help, we're both going to be very rich."

Ruby had found the flat in Hackney and moved out of her student accommodation. Of course that meant dropping her degree course, but Ruby had lost interest in it anyway.

Myriam had shown her the pleasures of sex with another woman. Ruby enjoyed the sex and the cuddles afterwards, but she was purely Lesbian to please Myriam. She'd once discussed the relationship with Jurgis of all people;

"It all seemed nothing but foreplay. I kept wanting someone with a dick to turn up."

"That's because you were just being gay for pay Ruby."

She argued with him, but she knew he was right. They'd been so naïve, her and Myriam. The big gaming clubs had realised something was amiss when Myriam started to win a lot of money on a regular basis. She was already a superb poker player and knowing all the other hands around the table..... it made her unbeatable. They weren't cheating and no club owner would even think of mind reading. But casinos reserve the right of admission and they were soon banned from everywhere. It seemed admission was reliant on being a consistent loser and definitely not for winners.

"There are back room games," said Myriam, "I know people."

"Aren't they dangerous?"

"No, we'll be fine."

It was a world of old time gangsters, who thought of Myriam as the real problem and Ruby simply as her pretty young lover. Several of the men took a shine to Ruby and that may well have saved her life. They may have thought of themselves as gentlemen gangsters, but no one likes to lose money. Myriam took them to a game every night, they crossed into the turf of rival gangs, they attended high stakes games across the country. Eventually they had over a million pounds each, all stuffed into carrier bags from Sainsbury's.

Word spread, gangs who rarely talked to each other began to think there was something decidedly iffy about the dyke and her jail bait. Even if they weren't cheating, something had to be done and they weren't known as men of tact and diplomacy.

"South London tonight Ruby. Seedy pub in a side street."

They'd won about five thousand, not a huge amount, but they were being a bit more cautious now. There had been a few too many hard glances when they'd cleared everyone out in a few games. Myriam was talking to a guy about a high stakes game coming up in the area and their discussion had taken them into the car park.

"Fancy a drink while your friend is busy?"

The man with the flattened nose had been twice her age, but she was picking up no unpleasant desires from him.

"Yes please, Vodka with ice."

He started telling her about the good old days, when people had their legs done for sleeping with the wrong woman. It was all said in such a matter of fact tone, she was thoroughly enjoying his company. Then she picked up that he was keeping her occupied and away from Myriam. Ruby attempted to get off her bar stool, but he held her arm in a very strong hand.

"Best if you stay with me until it's over."

Ruby hadn't used the broadcast side of her gift much, but she gave him her full smile.

"There's no need to hold into me."

He let her go of her and Ruby was across the bar and into the dimly lit car park. They were hitting Myriam. Three of them were punching her, but one large guy was pounding her head with his fists. Ruby felt for Myriam, but pulled away, the pain in her mind was too much to take. Perhaps they were just teaching her lesson? Perhaps Myriam would be alright once she'd been to hospital? The big man stopped punching Myriam and picked up an iron bar. He hit her three times, but the first

blow was enough. Her head broke open and blood poured everywhere. The second blow destroyed the left side of her head completely. Her body was on the ground when he hit her for the third time. Ruby ran to Myriam and cradled her ruined head in her arms.

“Stupid kid. Be more careful who you choose as friends.” Said one of the men.

They went to their cars, muttering about Ruby.

“Poor kid.” She heard one say.

They hadn’t even taken their money back, Ruby still had it in her bag. The death would be reported in the papers and a message would be sent to anyone else who might think of cheating them. Then Sarah had arrived.

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The tea was made and Ruby had found the clean sheets for the sofa bed in the lounge. The doorbell rang, there was no entry phone, that would require the landlord actually spending money. She looked out of the window and threw a yellow rubber duck down to Sarah. It might have looked strange to onlookers, but the duck had a key to the front door attached to it. A few minutes later there was a knock on her door and Sarah had arrived, carrying a bag from a well-known wine shop.

“About time you gave me a key.”

“Maybe, when we get back.”

Never was her real thought, but she wanted to keep Sarah in a good mood. The thought of coming home to find an angry Sarah camped out in her flat..... No, she was never getting a key.

“I made tea and there’s some chocolate cake in the fridge.”

While she poured the tea, Sarah pulled two decent bottles of red wine from the bag.

“It felt like an occasion that required a good Merlot.” She said.

“Wow that must have been more than two ninety nine a bottle.”

Sarah had a furtive look about her. Her friends knew Ruby was sensitive to their moods, but they didn’t know the full extent of her gift. That meant Ruby felt obliged not to delve into their minds at every opportunity. She assumed Sarah had used her credit card and felt guilty about it.

“There was forty quid in the electric jar.” She blurted out.

It was a fortune to Sarah, Ruby hugged her friend and then cut two large slices off the chocolate cake.

“You’ll love this. Made in a little patisserie in a street behind Harrods.”

The cake was good and they both ended up on the sofa in the lounge.

“I have something to ask you..... About Spider.” Ruby said.

There was that furtiveness again in her friend.

“What about Spider ?”

“I know you’ve been screwing, which is fine. But we’re going to be spending a lot of time together. There might be problems if you get..... Too attached to him.”

How to call her best friend a crazy bitch, without calling her a crazy bitch, it was difficult. But Sarah was actually laughing at her.

“You think I might fall in love with Spider ? Give me some credit, the guy is a complete asshole.”

“So what did you think I was going to ask you ?”

Sarah was in furtive mood again.

“I sent him to beat Dean up.”

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Spider arrived just as the flat was smelling of Pizza and garlic bread. He’d brought a bottle with him, so they seemed to have a boozy night ahead.

"You're just in time Spider, I bought enough Pizza to feed eight people." Said Ruby.

"Garlic bread too, lots of it." Said Sarah.

Ruby let Spider have a drink of the excellent Merlot and allowed him to get a mouthful of pizza, before asking him;

"So Spider, how long will Dean be in hospital?"

He disappointed her, there was no spluttering or choking, but he did look straight at Sarah.

"I had to tell her!"

Spider finished his mouthful of stuffed crust.

"I only gave him a couple of taps, he'll be fine. I broke a finger, just so he remembers to keep his mouth shut."

Sarah was looking devastated.

"You broke his finger?"

"Yeah and I kicked him in the nuts and told him it was from you."

Sarah was now trembling and looking like a rabbit caught in the headlights.

"You told him it was from me !!?"

"But you told me too!"

Spider shook his head and moaned about women in general. Then he picked up two pieces of garlic bread.

"Will he talk to the police?" Asked Ruby.

"No, he knows I'll crush his other bollock if he does."

Sarah actually seemed pleased, obviously less worried about Dean's manhood than her own safety. Ruby poured everyone more wine and went to her bedroom, digging some bits out of the escape kit that had been taped under a set of drawers for a year.

"No matter how secure you feel, always have an escape route." Jurgis had told her.

She took two piles of Euro notes from her bag and returned to the lounge. Ruby threw a bundle of notes at Spider and then Sarah.

"Ten thousand Euros each. I'll pay for travel and hotels, but you'll need to buy clothes as we travel around. Not enough to cause problems if it's found on you and with luck no one will search us at immigration."

Sarah was looking at the pile of notes as though it was Christmas.

"Not for getting stoned every night!"

"I won't."

Ruby brought out the two plastic cards that made up part of her own escape kit. She passed a card to each of them.

"Prepaid VISA cards, with chip and pin," she said, "the PIN number is on the post it note stuck to it. Obviously you need to remember the number and destroy the note."

"Who the hell is Gertrude Tanner?" Asked Spider.

"Oh she's real, or at least real enough to satisfy the money laundering rules. Gertie is a retired teacher from Yorkshire who's never left Skipton in her entire life."

"So I'm now Gertie?" Asked Spider.

"I'm Muriel Stubbs." Said Sarah.

Ruby drank her wine and remembered Jurgis telling her that organising any group of people to act as a team, was a bit like herding cats.

"The name doesn't matter, no one cares. Just put the card in the terminal and enter the pin number."

“How much is on here ?” Asked Spider.

“It’s mainly in case we get separated. Once we get back the money is yours anyway, to use for whatever you want.”

“How much is on this ?” Asked Sarah, waving the card about.

“Seventy five thousand on each.”

“Euros ?” Asked Spider.

“No, pounds.”

Spider gave a long whistle, but Sarah was looking at the card as though it was Christmas and hot sex rolled into one piece of plastic.

“Again. Not for getting stoned on !”

“I won’t Ruby, I’m not a complete fuckup.”

Ruby went to the cupboard under the sink and brought back a bottle of Tequila. It was traditional among the three of them, to toast anything important with a glass of the yellow liquid.

“Here’s to finding whoever fucked with my head.” She said.

The other two drank the toast, but they were both looking at their new pieces of plastic and exchanging enquiring looks.

“How are you so good at all this stuff Ruby ?” Asked Sarah.

“You do seem into some odd shit for some rich guys PA.” Added Spider.

Maybe it was the half bottle of Merlot inside her, but Ruby decided they needed to know everything. Kurt, the accident, how she knew their moods so well. She’d gone from telling every friend about her gift, to telling no one. If they were going East with her, they had a right to know.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “we’ll be on the train for hours and I’ll tell you everything then.”

It was meant to shut them up, but seemed to have the opposite effect.

“Train... I thought we were going to Paris ?” Said Sarah.

“We are, we’ll go by Eurostar in the morning.”

They were disappointed and the Tequila had taken away the restraint of any politeness about it.

“Eurostar,” said Sarah, “I thought we’d fly from Heathrow.”

“Eurostar is a bit..... you know.” Added Spider.

Eurostar was a bit like spending the morning in a giant drain pipe, but Ruby was in no mood for objections to her plans. Not before they’d even left the country.

“We don’t need to book with Eurostar. Useful because I had no idea what name Spider might be travelling under. We just turn up and buy our tickets in the morning. More expensive doing it that way, but we’re not doing this trip on a budget.”

Sarah picked up the tequila and took a gulp out of the bottle, glaring at Spider as she did it.

“Yeah, what is your proper name Spider ?”

Ruby was content, an argument had started when Spider told her to mind her own business. Of course they were going to bicker, but she could put up with that. The pizza was cooling and congealing, but Ruby bit into a slice and relaxed. Her herding had worked and tomorrow they’d be on their way to Paris.

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George Polandrous should have been in the air, heading for New York and sat in British Airways first class. Instead he was in a fairly seedy hotel room near Kings Cross, the sort of room normally rented by the hour.

“Did you ever have kids Max ?” He asked.

“No. They don’t mix well with my line of work.”

Max looked quite old, he even used a stick to help him walk. George knew him quite well though. Max could make sure someone was taken care of, for a price. Sometimes taking care of meant they were never seen again, but George was hiring him for the more common use of the term.

“Ruby feels like family. Plus she is my most valuable asset, I won’t try to hide that. If the knowledge in her head got into the hands of the Russian mafia.....”

“You have your own team George, you even poached Carlos from me, he’s one of the best. Why do you need me ?”

“Carlos is too close to her. I’m sure you know what I mean ?”

“They’re screwing ?”

George simply nodded. He wasn’t going to tell Max that Ruby could look into the head of anyone around her. As far as he was concerned, Ruby was just a PA with a headful of priceless information.

“This will be expensive George. Round the clock protection, right across Europe.”

“I understand. She’s travelling with two misfits, a low level thug and a girl with a few mental health problems.”

Max was raising his eyebrows, it was one of the few things he did to exhibit any emotion.

“I know Max, she tends to pick up strays. If necessary they are expendable.”

“And if Ruby looks to be falling into the wrong hands ?”

George could feel his heart pounding in his chest, but he knew what he had to say.

“I’ve worked all my life building the Foundation Max. Your people need to protect Ruby at all cost, no expense spared. But no one girl can threaten the Foundation, even one who feels like my own child. She can’t be allowed to become a liability. You understand ?”

Max merely nodded at him.

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