

Ruby

Chapter 9 – All Aboard

“Ruby didn’t understand engines but she knew the sound of raw power when she heard it.”

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They needed to stop; only Ruby and Spider had been lucky enough to eat before the battle at Monique’s house. After filling their vehicles, they found a table in what looked like a newly built diner attached to the filling station. Heavy coats covered minor wounds and blood stains and after an inspection, Sarah declared they wouldn’t scare the locals.

“The diner looks nice.” Said Sarah.

“Tourism is huge in Bulgaria, lots of new construction.” Said Olga.

Ruby decided on a table in the window and they all studied the menu as though they were just another group of hungry tourists.

“There’s not a single vegetarian option on this menu.” Said Sarah.

“But you eat anything.” Said Ruby.

“I was just mentioning it.”

The food was the same bland all day breakfast type food, found in roadside eating places right across the world. It arrived fast though and after a few mouthfuls they all began to feel better. Even Ruby munched enthusiastically at her second breakfast of the day. After her third cup of coffee, she touched Serge’s hand to get his attention.

“Can I see your map ?” She asked.

He had quite a few pieces of paper rolled up in his inside jacket pocket and he was careful not to let Ruby see some of it. She wondered what she could see that was worse than the tearing apart of Cynthia.

“Is there a problem ?” Serge Asked.

“I think we’re going the wrong way.”

The map was a colour photocopy and someone had written the full address of Monique’s house and put three red rings around the road where it was. Then there were several red lines drawn that pointed at another ringed area on the black sea coast. Ruby read the address several times, looked at the ringed area and smiled.

“Is everyone’s map like this ?”

“Yes,” said Serge, “everyone seems to be working from the DGSE files. I’m assuming someone in Paris sold the contents of our files.”

Ruby leaned back in her chair and chuckled, a long genuine chuckle of relief, they were being given a much needed lucky break.

“Then they’re all going to the wrong place.” She said.

Olga took the map and looked at the ringed section, a promontory quite close to the Turkish border.

“I know the area,” she said, “quiet and secluded. Are you sure it’s the wrong place ?”

Ruby could hardly tell her that Kurt had come to her and given her instructions on how to get to his house...and oh yes, it might have all been in a dream.

“I am certain,” said Ruby, “I’ll drive this time, I know the way.”

“Are you ok to drive ?” Asked Sarah.

They were all looking at her a bit strangely. Ruby realised she had muttered some very strange things recently, but she was shocked that they might think she was too far gone to drive.

“Don’t all look at me like I’m some kind of crazy person, I can drive just fine.”

Everyone round the table laughed and even the waitress was caught up in the general good mood as she took an order for more pancakes.

“The vehicles are automatic,” said Spider, “and they have power steering, you’ll be fine.”

“Oh, we’re not going in those !” Said Ruby.

She was sat opposite Serge and she could see his jaw drop.

“What ?!” He said.

“They’re hire cars,” said Ruby, “and they’ll be fitted with GPS. Plus they do tend to stand out a bit.”

“Then what vehicles are we going to use ?” Asked Olga.

“Vehicle, singular. That one, the small motor home that arrived while we were ordering.”

Ruby smiled as she pointed out the cream coloured vehicle parked quite near theirs.

“It’s perfect.” She added.

“And it belongs to the young couple by the door.” Said Spider.

“Not a problem.”

Ruby stood up and walked over to the young couple, joining them uninvited at their table. There was a lot of smiling and chat that the others couldn’t hear. Ruby’s group finished their breakfast and for some reason Serge paid the bill. As they began to wonder what to do next, Ruby brought the young couple over to the table.

“We should go now,” she said, “we’re swapping vehicles with Dean and Kylie, they’re from England.”

“Harlow in Essex actually.” Added Dean with a grin.

They walked outside and it was as if Dean and Kylie had agreed to take part in some sort of college prank. They laughed as they helped swap the contents of their motorhome with the bedrolls and luggage that had been hurriedly put on board the two four by fours. Ruby had another private chat to the couple from Essex and then they were off, driving the two vehicles off towards the south.

“Where are they going ?” Asked Spider.

“Burgas,” said Ruby, “the next place on their holiday itinerary.”

The five of them got into their new motorhome and Ruby sat in the driver’s seat.

“What did you do to them Ruby ?” Asked Sarah.

“I made them feel happy. They believe this is all a massive joke of some kind and when they eventually do get stopped... They’ll remember very little about us.”

Serge was opening cupboards and smiling as he found a small fridge that seemed to contain nothing but cold bottled beer.

“They’ll be able to trace the motorhome from them,” said Serge, “eventually.”

“By then we’ll be far out to sea.”

Ruby started the vehicle and drove slowly out onto the main road and then she too headed south.

No one said a word until they’d been driving for nearly an hour.

“Where are we going then ?” Asked Olga.

“The coast quite near to Dyuni.” Answered Ruby.

“The Dunes, that’s a resort town.” Said Olga.

“It’s all been rebuilt for tourists,” said Serge, “are you sure it’s the right place ?”

Ruby ignored the question, she was getting fed up with being constantly doubted and questioned.

“We’ll stop for lunch in Burgas,” she said, “and then press on to Dyuni. We should reach the house before midnight.”

It took Sarah to sum up the thoughts of them all.

“Oh great, another strange house in the middle of the night !”

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George Polandrous watched the wide screen TV on his office wall with a mixture of disbelief and horror. Max was no longer returning his calls and events in Bulgaria were taking on a surreal feel.

The footage was from a local Bulgarian news agency, but the BBC had added their own voice over.

“..... one local woman was left burning and hanging out of an upstairs window.....number of dead not known at present but likely to be at least five..... bizarre events in Varna...”

The story seemed to be everywhere and by now it would be un-killable. A dull winter for news and then a story arrives about strange and nasty deaths in the east. It was a wet dream to the media and pictures of the burning woman were already turning up on Facebook.

“At least we know Carlos isn’t involved in this.” He said.

Penny was sat opposite him, her face going quite pale as the list of horrors went on. The news report was now dealing with the discovery of a dead woman at the scene, who appeared to have been shredded whilst still alive. A medical expert had been found to discuss the matter. George noticed the expert was the same man who’d been giving an opinion on teen pregnancies the week before.

“Carlos is waiting near the town of Kiten. He’s about ten miles from the house and awaiting orders.” Said Penny.

George was a businessman and a good entrepreneur. He’d never have claimed to be a military strategist, that’s why he paid people like Max and Carlos a lot of money.

“Ruby can’t be there yet, it’ll take her another day to drive from Varna.” He said.

Penny was looking at him, a pen and writing pad ready. She needed orders to type out and then put in an encrypted email to Carlos.

“How about Max ? Can he get to Kiten ?” She asked.

“No Penny. I’m afraid that if anything, Max is now another enemy.”

He saw her look at him and then down at her pad, not wanting him to see the look in her eyes.

“We can’t let him kill Ruby.” She said.

“All we can do is trust in Carlos. He has a good team.”

George could have played back the last answerphone message he’d received from Max. It was over an open and insecure line, yet Max had gone on for minutes about owing more to the future of the human race than he did to George.

“I saw what she did to Cynthia, the girl has to die.” He’d ended the message with.

How could he play that to Penny, it was obvious Max had gone insane. Losing his people, letting Ruby and her friends get away from him. It had all obviously been too much for Max.

“So, let’s do these orders for Carlos.” He said.

Penny put the point of her pen against the pad.

“Monitor arrivals in Kiten and wait for Ruby to reach the house. Max is no longer reliable, assume he is now a threat to Ruby and her friends. Protecting Ruby is now imperative. You may hire local help as and when required. Cost is not an issue.”

Penny would flower it up and add a few comments about being safe and cautious, she always did.

“I’ll get that sent in the next ten minutes she said.”

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Max had arrived at the house a few minutes after the local police and a few Euros had given him access to the building. They all assumed he was either press or a foreign cop and Max told them nothing to confirm or deny that assumption.

“At least five dead. I’ve never seen anything this bad since the gang wars in 2009.” Said one of the cops.

Max had told Cynthia to only use stun grenades, yet it was obvious she’d used something far nastier. White phosphorus was the only thing he knew that could cause the burns on Monique and Cynthia had used it before.

“You silly girl Cynthia.” He muttered.

Everyone would know it wasn’t a local gang fight now, the Americans and Russians were bound to take an interest. When Max found Roland lying in a body bag he knew that any chance of a covert resolution to the problem was over. You can’t kill an active member of the DGSE without suffering severe consequences. For one thing the death would go on their computer and within twenty four hours, every security organisation on the planet would be interested in events in Varna.

“What do you make of this ?”

The young cop was pointing at a mess on the ground and it took Max several minutes to recognise the mess of blood and tissue as being Cynthia. Only years of experience and an iron nerve stopped him from crying out. Cynthia had meant something to him, she had often felt like a niece, or maybe even a daughter.

“Ever seen anything like this ? What could do that to a person ?” Asked the cop.

“No weapon I’ve ever seen.” Answered Max.

“Exactly. I’ll be glad when the detectives arrive; they’re welcome to this mess.”

They were all dead, every single member of Cynthia’s team. Max decided then and there that he was going to get revenge.

“Fuck George.” He shouted as he got back in his car.

He knew a local helicopter pilot and he still had quite a bit of George’s money. Max called the pilot as he drove and managed to book a flight to Kiten that would get him there ahead of Ruby. His second call was to George, or at least George’s mail box. Max spent several minutes leaving the message that was to cause George Polandrous so much anxiety. Ruby obviously wasn’t human, or at least not entirely human. Max decided he had a new mission, a new self-selected mission to utterly destroy Ruby Anne Mason.

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It was a bit early in the year for the usual tourists who flocked to the shores of the Black Sea. The Dyuni area was famous for the long rolling dunes of clean sand that ran right down to the sea. There were lights on in some of the houses they went past and a few of the bars were open, but everywhere still felt shut for the winter. The snow had moved on though, the news on the radio was telling them that the weather for the day ahead was likely to be cold and dry.

“This place looks a shit hole.” Said Spider.

“Tourist towns always do off season,” said Olga, “everything is designed for the summer months.”

“Have you been here before ?” Asked Sarah.

“Once years ago, the dunes are beautiful in July and August.”

On past the usual fairground rides and beach front stores and the tiny road carried on, right out onto a rocky piece of land that jutted out into the sea.

“That’s the house.” Said Ruby, pointing.

“It’s large,” said Serge, “and there’s a garage to get the motorhome under cover.”

The house was old and built from bricks that had gone black with age and the effect of spray from the sea. As Ruby opened the vehicle door she could hear the rough winter waves hammering against the sea wall on the other side of the house.

“Shit, it’s cold !” Said Sarah.

The house was huge, four floors and what looked like windows in a converted loft area. A large double garage was next to the house, but the doors were locked when Spider had an experimental pull at them. The cold was the thing that demanded attention, none of them were really dressed for a wind chill that seemed intent on freezing them to the marrow.

“We need to get inside,” said Olga, “I’ll break a window around the back.”

“I know where the key is.” Said Ruby.

She beckoned Spider over to a corner of the garage and pointed up.

“I can’t reach them Spider. On a hook, behind the guttering.”

Spider put his hand up where she was pointing and after a bit of cursing he had a bunch of keys in his hand. Ruby took them and opened the two dead locks on the heavy front door and then the simple everyday lock.

“Is it any good asking how you knew where the keys were ?” Asked Serge.

“I was told in a dream that might not have been a dream at all.”

Ruby gave him a mischievous grin and pushed the door wide open, revealing the usual pile of junk mail on the mat and a house in darkness.

“I’m not going in there without the lights on.” Said Sarah.

The light switch was a few feet down the hall and once Ruby had pressed it the house looked far less sinister. It was clean and the carpets were bright and cheerful. The only things that indicated the house had been unoccupied for a while was the pile of mail behind the door and the unwound grandfather clock, which was stuck at three o’clock.

“I’ll put our motorized caravan in the garage.” Said Ruby.

Spider followed her, so quietly that only her new senses told her he was keeping about five feet behind her. She unlocked the garage doors and rolled them to the side, folding them right back before pulling the cord to turn on the lights.

“Looks like they left in a hurry.” Said Spider.

Four long fluorescent tubes showed that tool racks had been emptied, cupboards had been left open, their contents half emptied. Nothing had been completely packed and taken away, even the odd spanner rested in its holder on the wall. Spider pushed a few empty packing crates to one side, giving Ruby more than enough room to get their vehicle into the garage.

“I’ll unlock the door into the house while we’re here.” Said Ruby.

Another two dead locks and the door swung open, revealing a corridor with the kitchen on the left. Sarah waved at Ruby and carried on past the kitchen and up the stairs to the rooms above. Ruby left the door open, but pulled at the garage doors and locked them from the outside. By now it seemed every light was on in the house, there was even a glow in the attic window.

“They’re settling in.” Said Spider.

“One night,” said Ruby, “one decent meal, one last night on a decent bed. Tomorrow we need to be heading out to sea.”

“We’ll need a boat of some kind Ruby.”

Ruby bolted the front door once they were inside, though she didn’t think any of their many enemies would know of their location for at least two days, perhaps longer.

“I’m hungry, let’s find the kitchen.” She said.

Olga and Sarah had the doors open to three large freezers and they were arguing, which didn’t really surprise anyone. Serge had found a packet of only mildly out of date biscuits in the pantry and he’d claimed them all for himself.

"It's late," said Ruby, "any chance of a quick meal?"

"There are lots of meals in the freezer, but Olga won't heat them up." Said Sarah.

Olga was looking at Ruby, appealing to her with sad eyes and a fed up expression.

"It makes sense," said Ruby, "no idea what might be in them, or how long they've been in there."

"There are lots of chicken portions still in supermarket packets and chips. I can do something with packet sauces and have a meal ready in an hour." Said Olga.

Serge looked up a huge grin on his face.

"Chicken and chips sounds good to me." He said.

Spider took one look at the expression on Sarah's face and kept well out of the argument. He did have hopes of a night of passion with Sarah once they'd eaten.

"Sounds good to me," said Ruby, "let's have chicken and chips then."

"I'll help." Said Sarah.

The comment surprised everyone and Ruby wondered if the trip was doing Sarah some good after all.

"Anything useful in the rest of the house?" She asked.

"There's a makeshift barracks in the attic," said Serge, "with enough bunks to sleep a dozen people. Lots of weapon racks, but they've been mostly emptied. I found a pistol that might be useful and a machine gun with old soviet markings. Whoever left here, left in a hurry."

"Same story in the garage." Said Spider.

"We've got beds for tonight," said Olga, "as long as you don't mind sleeping in sheets someone else slept in."

"Doesn't worry me. Anyone check out the basement?" Asked Ruby.

Four blank faces looked at her and Ruby assumed that none of them had noticed the door handle underneath the old coats hanging in the hall. It was unfair of her of course, she knew the door was there.

"Some secret agent you are." She said to Serge.

They all followed her into the hall and in her mind Ruby saw Kurt doing what she was about to do. She picked the coats off the hooks and threw them into a corner, revealing a large round door handle that seemed to be fitted in the middle of the wall. She pulled at the handle and a door sized section of the wall opened up, revealing stairs leading down. Ruby used the light switch at the top of the stairs and then descended into the basement.

"It might not be safe." Said Spider.

"There's no one here but us," said Ruby, "and no traps."

The stairs turned and the vast extent of the basement could be seen.

"You could hide an army down here." Said Serge.

Desks had open drawers, filing cabinets had contents strewn over the floor.

"They didn't leave in a hurry," said Olga, "they left in a panic."

Enough weapons had been left to equip a dozen fighters and there was more ammunition than they were ever likely to need. Serge seemed especially interested in the assault rifles and slung one over his shoulder.

"Now I feel dressed for the occasion." He said with a grin.

"I'll get the meal started, or we'll be eating as the sun comes up." Said Olga.

Sarah left with her and it was Spider who noticed the briefcase wedged in the gap between a desk and a wall. He opened it and showed the contents to Ruby.

"Forgotten in the rush to leave." Said Serge.

"There must be a million Euros in here." Said Spider.

"Money is always worth taking," said Ruby, "bring it with us."

Spider held onto the case as they explored the cellar. Everywhere there were signs of a hurried departure. Ruby almost missed the set of keys in a small office, they were on a hook behind the door. They had a cheap plastic fob, the sort bought for next to nothing in tourist centres like Dyuni. The fob had a picture embedded in the plastic, a picture of a bright red poppy.

"Are you ok Ruby?" Asked Spider.

"Yes, I think these keys are important."

Ruby looked at the four keys on the ring and they told her nothing. There was also a large red ball attached to the key ring, which seemed out of place.

"Boat keys," said Serge, "the float is to stop them sinking if you drop them into the sea."

"A boat, yes of course, that's why we needed to come here!"

Ruby was running up the stairs two at a time, Spider and Serge trying to keep up with her. She ignored the cold and ran up to the back door, slamming it back against the wall in her eagerness to get outside. The numbing cold hit her, but she kept running. Over the pebbles and then onto sand and there was a small jetty in front of her. Spray from the sea drenched her blouse, making her even colder.

"Ruby, you'll hurt yourself. Slow down." Shouted Spider.

She ignored Spider, she ignored the cold, she ignored the stitch in her side that told her not to run. Tied up securely to the jetty was a long and low military looking boat. Ruby had no idea what type or make it was, but she knew it had been left for her.

"We have a boat." She said, as Serge and Spider caught up with her.

"Zhuk-class patrol boat," said Serge, "very good, very reliable. The KGB used these, it'll get us wherever we need to go."

"We can check it out in the morning," said Spider, "we all need to dry out and get something to eat."

For the first time Ruby realised that they were just in shirt sleeves and as cold and wet as she was.

"Yes of course, Olga will have a pot of tea made by now." She said.

Ruby gave the boat one last look, making sure it was real and not an hallucination. Spider on one side, Serge on the other, she walked back to the house.

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Unlike Carlos, Max didn't bother waiting for Ruby and her team to arrive at the house near Kiten. The helicopter pilot had dropped him and his gear off less than a mile from the house and Max intended to wait quietly in the house until someone opened the front door. There was no subtlety in his plan, he was going to gun down Ruby and all her friends as soon as they entered the building. He didn't even notice Rose watching the house, but she had hidden herself well amongst the roadside hedges. Rose had none of Max's reservations about using phones and called Carlos once Max was well out of earshot.

"Max has just entered the house."

She listened for about a minute before simply saying;

"Very well."

Rose obeyed orders, it was what she did. Sometimes, as now, the orders seemed to make sense to her. She was to wait; watch and contact Carlos again when and if there were developments.

Max crept through the house, using the smallest beam his tiny Maglite torch would give. Room to room he went, finding only dust and the odd piece of litter. In the kitchen he found an old flip top bin that someone had forgotten to empty. The newspaper stuck to the bottom was ten years old,

which only proved they weren't good at cleaning. The use by dates on the food boxes though were five years old.

"No one has lived here in years." He muttered to himself.

Max was thorough, he went through the entire house and everything indicated the place had been abandoned long ago. They'd all been sent on a fool's errand. It might have been deliberate, or just bad intelligence, the DGSE had the wrong house marked on their maps. He looked for something to take his annoyance out on and kicked the old plastic bin across the kitchen. He didn't feel better and he'd managed to make his bad leg hurt. They weren't far, he knew it. Ruby and her gang of misfits were somewhere near, still in Bulgaria. He thought about his various options and decided on a plan that was simple and just might work.

Rose saw him leave the house and walk north following the track she knew would take him to the main road towards Primorsko. It was a long walk, especially for a man with an iffy leg, but Rose thought Max would make it. She was about to call Carlos, but decided to check out the house. There had to be a reason for Max to simply leave without waiting for Ruby. She found the battered bin and the food boxes strewn over the kitchen floor and the implication of the dates wasn't lost on her.

"No one has lived here in years," she told Carlos, "this place is a dead end. Max just left, took the road towards Primorsko."

"There's been a development," Carlos told her, "we'll come and pick you up."

It seemed to take a long time for the huge motor home to arrive, lights blazing from every window. Rose just hoped Max was long gone; they were hardly a difficult target in their family recreational vehicle. Carlos opened the door for her and Leo drove north following the road Max was likely to be using.

"Here, you probably need warming up."

Carlos handed her a mug of coffee, just the way she liked it. Rose followed him into the lounge area and enjoyed the feeling of a soft sofa against her back.

"We should always use one of these." She said.

"It's not often the budget runs to such luxuries."

Leo found a pothole and the vehicle crashed into it, before carrying on and back onto smooth road. They both new Leo's main claim to fame was finding every hole in the road and they exchanged a knowing smile.

"So what's the development?" She asked.

Carlos had his laptop on the table and turned it towards her. Rose didn't know that the rather plain looking couple in the photo were Dean and Kylie.

"The Bulgarian police found the two hired vehicles that were being driven by Max's people. They waited and these two returned from a shopping trip without a care in the world."

Rose examined the photo and they just looked like members of the public. Rose quite liked some people, but the public were always irritating.

"Who are they?" She asked.

"Just two Brit tourists who exchanged their camper van with a very nice young brunette and her friends. They seem to view it as some huge prank. The police can't get anything out of them, they don't remember any details of their own vehicles, nor can they describe the young brunette."

"So we're back to square one."

"Not quite."

Carlos brought up a picture of Dean in front of the cream coloured camper van, its registration number clearly visible.

“They had a camera and several SD chips and this camper van is in lots of pictures. A trace found it on traffic cameras in the city of Burgas. So we’re heading north and just about every contact George has in Bulgaria is looking for signs of the camper van.”

“Still a needle in a hay stack.”

“Not when George is offering a fifty thousand dollars finder’s fee.”

Rose smiled and finished her coffee, they were back in the game again.

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The meal had hardly been plain fish and chips. Olga had found several packet sauces and some frozen vegetables and the meal was one of the best Ruby had eaten since leaving London. Brandy and coffee for dessert and Ruby found herself looking for a hot bath at about three in the morning. It had been a long day and she found herself drifting off in the hot water and decided to dry herself and find a bed with sheets that didn’t look too grubby.

“I thought you’d have found a bed long ago.” Said Serge.

He was looking out of the hall window, watching the waves on the sea by moonlight.

“Are you having trouble sleeping ?” She asked.

She noticed Serge look at her body through the open gap in her bathrobe. He was easily old enough to be her father, but as she did her up her gown she wasn’t angered by his attention. He held up a bottle of brandy he’d been drinking from.

“Fancy a drop of this ? I can get glasses.”

“From the bottle is fine.”

Spider and Sarah had gone to bed straight after eating their meal, claiming the master bedroom at the front of the house. Ruby opened a bedroom door at the rear and switched on the light. There were three chairs and a table and while Serge settled himself at the table with the bottle, Ruby pulled back the bedding.

“It doesn’t look too bad. This bed will do for me.” She said.

Ruby often said she had no sense of shame or embarrassment. She collected her dirty clothes from the bathroom and threw them into a corner of the bed room, enjoying the way Serge observed her discarded underwear. She sat herself at the table and took a long gulp from the bottle.

“I’ll find clean clothes in the morning. So why aren’t you sleeping Serge ?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t even like Roland that much. He was a box ticker who just wanted to do his time and get his pension.”

Ruby didn’t feel guilty for looking into his mind, she already knew that Serge wanted her to. He needed some kind of absolution, but Ruby seriously doubted if she was qualified to hear his confession.

“You did grow to like him.” She said.

“I suppose so. He had a wife, quite pretty, he showed me pictures. I can’t even call her, wouldn’t know what to say if I could.”

The brandy was dulling his mind and Ruby was picking up emotions rather than coherent thoughts. Serge believed he’d driven everyone away who’d ever cared for him and his main emotion was loneliness. She held his hand and found it impossible to form the words to comfort him. Ruby stood and let her gown fall to the floor, her skin instantly shivering in the cold. Her hands went for Serge’s belt, undoing it so that she could undo his trousers.

“Sleep with me,” she said, “just for tonight.”

He kissed her with the hunger of a man who’d been a long time between enjoying intimacy with a woman who wasn’t paid by the hour. Ruby was no longer interested in looking into his mind, she

just wanted a night of uncomplicated sex. She'd slept with other men in their fifties and wasn't surprised that he had plenty of stamina. All thought of needing an early start in the morning was forgotten. All that filled Ruby's mind was the steady thrusting between her legs and the waves of pleasure it gave her. It had been a while for her too, perhaps her need was even greater than his.

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Max hadn't been long gone at all, Rose had been completely wrong about that. He'd missed her waiting outside the house, but he knew someone would be watching. Police, DGSE, rival group of private investigators. It didn't really matter who, all that mattered was that they would have access to intelligence and Max was now on his own. It had been a fairly basic plan, but waiting for someone to show themselves and then follow them had paid off. Max had quietly returned to the trees near the house and had seen Rose picked up the motor home.

"More money than sense." He'd muttered.

As the heavy vehicle turned and headed north he made a note of its registration number. Then Max made two calls, the first being to an old friend who worked for the Bulgarian police. An old friend who always needed money.

"Why did God curse me with four daughters, all of them idiots?"

Four daughters meant a lot of expense and Petr had agreed to tell him about any sightings of the motor home. For a fee of course and to repay a very old favour, an indiscretion in Petr's past that Max had tidied up.

"I never knew she was married Max, God strike me down if I'm lying."

The second call had been to an old enemy. Max was sensible enough to know that warriors in the cold war rarely believed in the ideology of their own side. Marko had served in various parts of the Russian army and had been thrown out of most of them. He had a love of money and a hatred of authority, which didn't lead to an easy life in soviet Russia. Max had threatened to kill Marko if they ever met again, but Marko did like money.

"Marko, it's Max."

There was laughter down the line and Marco was telling someone that the crippled bastard was calling him.

"There's money in it Marco, lots of money. Euros, not your shitty Russian money."

It took another ten minutes to convince his old enemy, but Marco knew Max never lied about money. Max had given up on finding Ruby in Bulgaria, but he knew she was heading further east. The Das Geheimnis file may have been wrong about the house, but everything talked of them going further east, running from some awful threat or enemy. Max suddenly smiled as he thought of not only killing Ruby, but perhaps also the last surviving group of monsters like her.

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Ruby smelt something wonderful and it woke her up. She clambered over Serge to get out of the bed, ignoring his protests.

"It's only six am, where are you going?" He asked.

"To get a fry up."

"A what?"

She ignored him and pulled on the dirty clothes she'd taken off the night before. She had no idea where her bag of clean clothes had got to. Ruby remembered Sarah talking about putting everything in the washer and hoped it had been another thing Sarah forgot about doing. Serge was asleep again as she closed the bedroom door and headed for the kitchen.

"I knew you'd be here, did lots of extra bacon." Said Spider.

Ruby didn't know how he'd done it, but Spider had eggs, bacon, tomatoes, he'd even managed to find some fresh bread to fry.

"The bread was the hardest, they always want to put stuff in it, in these foreign parts."

Ruby laughed as Spider put a plate in front of her that smelled wonderful and coffee that smelt freshly made.

"How did you get all this food Spider?"

He joined her, putting his own plate opposite hers and tucking into the fried culinary masterpiece.

"There's a shop for the year round tourists, I knew there would be."

"And it was open at this time in the morning?"

Spider was giving her his best lopsided grin, the one that had been known to scare pit bulls.

"Not so much open, as openable."

Ruby tried to look disapproving, but the food was just too good.

"We'll be gone by the time anyone notices anything missing." She said.

The fried bread tasted of something that she couldn't quite place. What did they put in bread in Bulgaria? Ruby decided that it still tasted great and the addition of a few herbs wasn't going to do her any harm.

"Cumin," said Spider, "but it tastes alright, doesn't it?"

"Is my gift rubbing off on you Spider? Yes it tastes great."

"I saw you pull a face."

She got him to fry an extra slice for her, it was good despite the cumin.

"Did Sarah put all our clothes in the washer?"

"No. She took the bags into the basement and then forgot all about it."

They both knew Sarah very well and Ruby was actually pleased that her clothes were still crammed into a grubby bag.

"Good," she said, "I can take a bag of dirty clothes with me, but wet clothes are a different matter."

She left him to do the washing up and went into the hallway and put on one of the old coats from the hooks. It smelt of stale sweat, but it felt wonderfully warm. She returned to the kitchen and picked up the fresh coffee Spider had poured for her.

"Don't let Sarah wash my stuff."

"I won't."

She still had the keys to the Zhuk-class patrol boat that appeared to be theirs now. The jetty was further away than she thought, but she had been running the night before. The craft looked to be lurking at the jetty rather than tied up. Low and long, it gave the impression of barely controlled power. By the time she'd stepped on board, Serge was behind her and looked to have found clean clothing from somewhere. Then she remembered that Olga would have had a bag of Andrei's things. Sad, but he wasn't going to need them now.

"Someone has kept it in good condition." He said.

Ruby tried a few of the keys before finding one that turned the electrics on. Several lights came to life and the fuel gauges went round to about half full.

"I wonder how far that will get us?" She asked, not really expecting an answer.

Serge was examining several of the gauges and looking over the navigation system.

"Two hundred miles, maybe two hundred and fifty. We've got a gas guzzler and we'll be searching for the next fill up right across the Black Sea. That is if we don't get sunk by the Russians or the Americans."

"Or we find another boat."

“Yes, we could get passage on a larger ship.”

Ruby noticed the guns, not in their mounts anymore, but flat on the deck. She pulled aside a tarpaulin and found two heavy machine guns, ready to be mounted on the side.

“They obviously didn’t use this boat for picnics.” Said Serge.

Ruby looked West, at the dull cloudy sky. She had the same feeling of being chased that she’d felt since leaving Budapest, but now the feeling was more insistent. Her heart began to pound in her chest and for a brief second or so she felt like someone or something was suffocating her. Serge held her, stroking her hair, saying nothing.

“We need to go,” said Ruby, “get the others and bring our things to the boat.”

“Are you sure, we could all do with a rest and another decent meal.”

She pushed him away, glaring at him, wondering if he needed more proof that she wasn’t just a silly girl. Serge backed away and sat in the chair one of the gunners would have used.

“I’m on your side Ruby, I really am. But there is a lot of food in the house and weapons and clothes come to think of it. I can’t keep wearing Andrei’s things; they’re about three sizes too big.”

Ruby had to laugh; Serge’s hands were lost in the sleeves of a jumper that was obviously bought for a far larger man.

“There are washers and dryers in the basement and Sarah is keen to be able to wear the things she bought in Paris again. Give us another day Ruby, who knows what we might find in the house. We might even find more drums of fuel for our gas guzzling boat.”

“It might be better to leave in the dark.” She said.

“Yes, one more day to get organised and we’ll leave just after sunset.”

To Ruby it seemed that all four horsemen of the apocalypse were chasing after her, she could almost hear the sound of their horse’s hooves. She deliberately ignored the feelings of panic and looked towards the assortment of lights and dials in front of her.

“Very well, we’ll go tonight, but let’s at least see if the engine starts.”

“Engines Ruby, there are two powerful diesel engines.”

Serge knew which button to press and after a few splutters the engines purred into life. Ruby didn’t understand engines but she knew the sound of raw power when she heard it. Of course Sarah would moan about not flying, but the Zhuk-class patrol boat would be a good home for them, at least until they reached Batumi in Georgia, which was over seven hundred miles away. She didn’t even like to think where they were heading for after Batumi.

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Carlos quickly discovered what policemen had known for a long time. Offering a large reward can do far more harm than good. Shady contacts were claiming to have seen the camper van everywhere from Istanbul to Bucharest and all points in between. Rose was busy putting red dots on an old fashioned map of the area in case there was a pattern, but the spread looked random.

“A store was robbed in Dyuni and nothing was taken but food.” Said Rose.

“They’re unlikely to be in a tourist area like the Dunes, we’ll save that one for last. Anything in a more likely location?”

Rose had a handful of yellow post it notes and she flicked through them.

“A cream camper van was seen just south of Sozopol. It was a police patrol who saw it, they think the driver was a blonde woman.”

“Sozopol,” said Carlos, “quiet old fishing town, lots of secluded old houses. We may as well begin there.”

Rose gave Leo the target location and they set off at the best speed the huge motor home could manage over the twisting and often rough back roads. Carlos bounced about on the sofa and cursed the number of barely useable tracks they seemed to be driving along.

"We're not being clandestine Rose, tell him to use main roads."

"I could hire a vehicle at the next large town," said Rose, "we could cover more ground."

"Let's see how we're doing after we check out Sozopol." Said Carlos

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Their big break came once they'd checked out at least six false leads and had decided to head back to Burgas for the night. None of them knew Bulgaria that well, but TripAdvisor was showing some fairly good business hotels in the city. It wasn't a police contact that told them where to go, it was the local news playing on the TV in the lounge of the motor home.

"Serious fire today in Dyuni," said the female announcer, "police are investigating the blaze at a large house in the outskirts of town and say foul play can't be ruled out."

There were pictures of the burning house and the garage doors were buckled and half open. Carlos just saw the cream coloured front panel of a large vehicle and knew he'd been wrong to dismiss the tip about Dyuni. He ran to Leo, who was still driving their home on wheels.

"They're in Dyuni, drive as fast as you can."

It was getting dark, but they weren't that far away.

"How long?" He asked

"SatNav says fifteen minutes, so it'll be at least twenty."

Rose was checking her weapons when he got back to the lounge and the TV was showing more pictures of the burning house.

"It must be a big deal for local news." Said Rose.

"Maybe Max attacked them again."

Rose shook her head and put several spare clips into a shoulder bag.

"Max has no one left, he'll need time to assemble a new team. My guess is that they've burned the house to cover their trail."

It made sense, but Carlos was imagining Ruby being in the burning house and it worried him more than he was willing to admit.

"If you're right, it means we've lost them again." He said.

It was twenty minutes before Leo ran their motor home onto the driveway of darkened house only fifty yards from where fire services were fighting the blaze. Leo was going to talk to the local emergence services, while Carlos and Rose did a quick look around the vicinity of the house. It felt like trying to do a covert mission under spot lamps, the light from the blaze was that intense. At the back of the house they noticed the footprints in the sand, lots of footprints.

"Someone has been dragging something heavy." Said Rose.

Carlos knelt down and put a finger into a trace of liquid on the ground, sniffing his finger afterwards.

"Diesel fuel." He said.

The tracks and drag marks ended at the deserted jetty. Nothing had been left there apart from two large rubber bumpers tied to the jetty. Carlos ran to end of the jetty and stared out to sea, hoping to see the lights of a boat at least. There was nothing, the Black Sea stretched out into the dark and then there was nothing but stygian blackness.

"We missed them, again!" He shouted.

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