

Ruby

Chapter 5 – Budapest

“Screams should bring people running, it should make thugs run away. It didn’t work though.”

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Serge had been with the Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure for many years, though most people simply called it the DGSE. He was normally deployed overseas and was happiest hunting terrorists across the deserts of the Middle East.

“Have the police searched the house ?” He asked.

Serge already knew the answer, the house was neat and reasonably tidy. If the local police had been through the house it would have been a mess and in all likelihood a great many useful clues would have been destroyed.

“No, they were warned off.” Said Roland.

“Good.”

Why him ? He’d been wondering that on the flight back from Algiers. There were lots of good people in the Paris office, many of them knew far more about Henri Gervex and why he might have thrown himself off a roof.

“Run the bug detectors over the place.” He ordered.

“Both of them ?”

“Yes both, these things are never perfect. Use the newer one and the old heavy one.”

“But...”

“Just fucking do it !”

Roland muttered and wandered out to their car. He’d probably complain to their boss about the bad language, but Serge didn’t care. He doubted if Roland had ever seen active duty, or for that matter most of the new bosses in Paris. The old DGSE had been full of good men, men who’d served when France still owned Algeria. Now they were all just box tickers. Roland returned, making a huge fuss about how heavy the old bug detector was.

“Do it carefully while I look over the kitchen.”

Serge went through the cupboards and found nothing unusual, or much in the way of food either. A large stainless steel fridge appeared to be just there to make ice and the coffee maker had several cobwebs over it. Henri, it seemed, ate out a lot.

“Nothing here.” Shouted Roland.

“Now use the other one.”

There was more muttering, but Roland was learning not to argue. Maybe he’d been chosen because there was a political element ? The DGSE had always been known to have political leanings in a certain direction. A few governments had tried to clean it up, but Serge had carried out a few assignments that never appeared in any official paperwork. He found a tray of cutlery in one drawer and behind it was a new looking Glock 22. So why would Henri need one of those in his kitchen utensils ? Serge put a fork handle through the trigger guard and carried the heavy weapon into the lounge.

“Did you bring evidence bags ?” He asked.

“In the black case by the door.”

As he put the gun in the bag he noticed the serial number had been removed. He was getting to like Henri, he seemed to be like him, old school. Serge too had a gun in his home that he could use and throw away, if he'd used it in a way his bosses might not approve of.

"I've used both detectors and this room is clean." Said Roland.

"How much will you bet on that?"

Roland was giving him a huge grin, no doubt he believed his trainers when they said the new bug detector was infallible.

"I don't want to take your money." He said.

"I'm getting a feel for Henri Gervex," said Serge, "he will have something to record what goes on in here, but it'll be something old, something fairly passive. The bug detectors won't find it, but our ears just might."

Roland was looking at him as though he was crazy.

"Fifty Euros," said Serge, "unless you're scared I might win?"

"Make it a hundred if you like."

"You're on. There was once a bug planted in the British Embassy here in Paris. They ran everything over the room it was in, but they never found it. After five years a decorator noticed a crack in the plaster and they finally found the bug. The Russians got the blame, but that bug was one of ours."

"How do you know that?"

"How do you think I know. I planted it there. Now do you still want to bet a hundred?"

"Yes."

"Ok, but you need to sit down and keep quiet for a while."

Serge went to the door that led into the main hall and stood quietly for a good two minutes. He then clapped his hands twice and listened. Nothing.

"What are you doing?" Asked Roland.

"Quiet!"

Serge moved to the door that led into the kitchen and again stood quite still for about two minutes. He clapped his hands and listened. Nothing. This time Roland merely shrugged at him. Serge moved to near the coffee table where Henri had spoken to Ruby. He waited and clapped his hands and there was the faint sound of a small electric motor.

"I heard that." Said Roland.

"Shush I need to pin down its location."

There was a wood panelled wall quite near the coffee table, it seemed the perfect location. Serge put his ear to the panel and then clapped his hands.

"It's in here, get your tools."

Henri probably had a method of getting the panelling open without destroying it, but Serge used a claw hammer to pull away a section of panelling and behind it was an old reel to reel tape recorder.

"Voice activated," said Serge, "unless it's recording, there's nothing to detect."

The power cord went off into the dark inside the panels, but there was enough loose cable for the recorder to be pulled out and put on the carpet.

"Big reel, it might have every conversation in this room for months." Said Roland.

Roland disconnected the voice activation device and rewound the tape about half an inch on the reel. He pressed play and there was the sound of a girl talking to Henri.

"Take it back further." Said Serge.

After quite a bit of trial and error they found the spot of the tape where Ruby introduced herself and is invited into the lounge. The recorder had been set on the slowest recording speed to conserve tape. The recording wasn't the best quality, but it was clear and Serge listened to every word.

"I think he just attacked the girl." Said Roland.

It was all there on tape, the fight, the sound of the man with the girl hitting Henri. Then the front door is slammed and there is the sound of Henri getting up and walking into the kitchen. Roland stopped the tape.

"I knew this must be heavy when they called you in, but this is just crazy." He said.

"Play it through again."

Serge set his phone to record and recorded the whole conversation. It was against the rules, but they'd brought him in because he rarely followed rules. The tape gave him names, Ruby, George, Kurt and this strange group that Henri seemed obsessed with. The fact that Henri's daughter had died at the hands of her own sister ? As far as he knew, no one at the DGSE had been aware of that. Henri was unstable and he had a habit of bringing files home, the two together made him a security nightmare.

"I'm calling the boss," he said, "bag everything up and get it all in the car."

He left Roland to put the tapes and the old reel to reel machine into their car. He wanted a little privacy, so he went upstairs and into a small bedroom at the back of the house. The bedroom looked clean and there were still signs it had been occupied by a girl. One of his daughters ? Serge picked up a cheap metal bangle from the floor and picked up a hint of perfume. He was getting a real feel for Henri and his family. Serge found his boss on his phone contacts and waited for his call to be answered.

"Collomb."

That was the way he always answered, no first name, no rank, no enquiry. Gérard Collomb was one of the few senior people at the DGSE who actually knew what it was like to run a network in a hostile country.

"It's Serge. Things are bad here. He brought files home and he was unbalanced. It appears one of his daughters killed the other over a man. The most worrying thing is his belief in some kind of bogeymen called Das Geheimnis."

Serge listened while Collomb muttered and fumed about Henri and his Fox Mulder inclinations.

"Yes sir, we have tape recordings he made and we found a gun he must have bought from a street level supplier."

More muttering, but Collomb was actually asking for his advice.

"You need to send a team in to take the house apart Sir, he may have files hidden elsewhere. As to the next move ? I think Roland and I need to follow Ruby and her friends east. We've no chance of catching up with her before she gets to Budapest, but we can wait for her to arrive in Varna."

Once the call was finished, Serge re-joined Roland and helped him carry their equipment out to the car.

"Well, what did the boss say ?"

"Can you speak any Bulgarian Roland ?"

"Enough to buy wine and pizza, why ?"

"Because we're flying out to Varna once we drop all this crap off at the office."

~ ~

Spider had done most of the driving, Ruby still ached and Sarah had a bit of a bad reputation when it came to cars. Sarah always considered herself to be a safe and careful driver, but four crashes in three years made others less confident of her abilities.

“Not far now.” Said Ruby.

They’d come in along the E71 road and Ruby was certain there were at least two vehicles following them. The dark Land Rover hadn’t been behind them as they stopped for lunch, but a tan coloured Mercedes had kept about two car lengths from them for about seventy five miles.

“You’re both going to say I’m crazy.....”

“You’re crazy !” Shouted Spider.

It was the usual banter and Ruby was just happy they weren’t bickering. Sarah crashed back into her seat and pointed out of the rear window.

“Very funny, but that helicopter has been buzzing about since we left the hotel.”

“It disappeared for a while,” said Ruby, “it must have needed to refuel. Yes I had noticed it and I’m glad we’re going to dump this car.”

The name District XI sounded strange and evocative, but Olga had told her it was just another district of Budapest.

“Don’t expect to see me,” Olga had told her, “turn left into the street, drive about fifty yards down the road and then abandon the car.”

“In the middle of the street ?”

“Yes my little gombóc, in the middle of the street.”

Dumpling was the pet name Jurgis gave her; it had reminded Ruby of the happy days she’d spent in Budapest.

“Give your phone to Sarah Spider, she can take the battery out of yours and her own.”

Ruby took the back off her own phone and dropped the battery and her phone into her shoulder bag.

“Spider’s is ok, but the battery doesn’t come out of mine.” Said Sarah.

“Show me.”

Ruby took the phone off her and threw it out of the car window and under the wheels of a truck going in the opposite direction.

“Sorry, I’ll buy you a new one when we get home.”

“But it had all my contacts !”

“They’re following us in a fucking helicopter Sarah,” said Spider, “these guys are serious. I’ll buy you another phone and help you type in your friends.”

“Here,” said Ruby, “turn left here, the street with the Commerzbank on the corner.”

Sarah seemed to forget the loss of her phone as they turned and Ruby looked at the street in front of them. Fifty yards would require guesswork and Ruby had never been much good at judging distances.

“Here, stop the car.” She said.

“Do you want me to park the car.”

“No. We get out here.”

Ruby looked straight at Sarah.

“No drama, just help Spider get our things out of the back.

“Ok.”

By the time they'd got out of the car there were already several drivers leaning on their car horns. The street was busy and there was too much oncoming traffic for anyone to get past the large Volvo estate.

"Ignore them, get our things." Said Ruby.

Spider was obviously enjoying himself and grinning, but Sarah was jumping at every horn that showed the annoyance of those behind them. A driver shouted an insult in Hungarian and Sarah actually blushed.

"Is someone coming for us?" Asked Sarah.

"Yes."

Ruby hoped they were, but she thought Sarah might actually run away if she thought there was the slightest chance that no one was meeting them. They were on the pavement in the middle of all their possessions, with a growing number of angry drivers shouting at them.

"Ruby! Stop pissing about and pick up your things."

Olga, blonde and crazy Olga! She stood a good six foot one tall and that was in flat shoes. Like most of the people Ruby had known in the East, Olga spoke perfect English, Russian and about five other languages. She helped Spider by picking up the heaviest bag and then she was leading them into a side street.

"My car is down here. The little traffic jam you created should slow down anyone following you."

"They have a helicopter now." Said Sarah.

Olga looked suitably impressed. Ruby had almost expected Olga to be driving a Humvee, but she opened the boot of an elderly dark blue BMW.

"Everyone drives these," she said, "even a helicopter won't be able to tell where we are."

They put their things into the boot and then climbed into the car. Spider and Sarah claimed the back seat and Ruby sat in the front with Olga. The BMW move off into the traffic and Olga drove towards the south of the city.

"You've moved then since I was here last?" Asked Ruby.

"Yes, I have a nicer place in District XIX now, the neighbours are less.... inquisitive."

They'd barely gone a mile before a grubby van pulled in behind them, Olga waving at the driver.

"A friend. He'll block anyone he thinks is following us. I take it you all took the batteries out of your phones."

"Yes." Said Ruby.

"Mine went under a tanker." Moaned Sarah.

Olga gave Sarah a long hard look in the rear view mirror.

"She's ok," said Ruby, "her battery wouldn't come out, so...."

Ruby recognised the area as Wekerle, one of the best residential areas of Budapest. Business must be good if Olga had managed to move to a house in Wekerle. Olga slowed down and parked by the side of the road. She produced a small detector from the BMW's glove compartment.

"If they got a tracker on your car, they might have one on you or your things." Said Olga.

"We bought everything new in Paris." Said Spider.

"I'm not taking chances. People with helicopters are likely to have friends with guns."

Olga ran the detector over them and then over all their things in the boot, even opening the bags and pushing the detector inside.

"Alright, you seem clean. Now we need to move everything to the van."

Ruby should have expected it, the transfer, the street blocks, it was all pure Jurgis.

The grubby van had pulled up behind them and they swapped vehicles. The friend of Olga's got into the dark blue BMW and they all climbed into the back of the van with their gear.

"Sorry," said Olga, "but the discomfort won't be for long, I live about half a mile from here."

There were no windows, so they could only hear the normal sounds of a busy road and then the van was stopping. There was the sound of a gate being opened and then other mechanical sounds. The van moved forward again and then the unmistakable sound of a hand brake being applied.

"We're here. I have a meal ready, though it is only cold food."

They were in a well-lit and clean garage, the outside doors had been closed. Olga was picking up some of their things and walking towards a door that led to the interior of the house. A very expensive looking Lamborghini was parked next to the van.

"You seem to be doing well." Said Ruby.

Olga gave the warm laugh Ruby remembered so well.

"The car was acquired for a buyer in China and the house belongs to an aunt who's been in hospital for a while. I'm just house sitting."

The house was amazing, it seemed to go on forever. Olga took them to a kitchen at the back of the house, but not before showing them the view of the gardens.

"There are about five or six bedrooms for each of you, choose the one you like best. Not mine of course...."

The meal came straight out of the fridge and consisted of a makeshift chicken salad and it was excellent. By the time they'd had their second glass of chilled chardonnay, they were all relaxed and Sarah was even telling Olga about her fights with the people at the job centre. Olga looked confused by it all, but she managed to nod and offer sympathy in the right places.

"I mentioned I like dogs and this silly woman asked if I'd considered starting a dog walking business. I mean, I like sex, but no one has ever suggested I open a bordello."

Ruby had heard it all before, but Sarah's long running battle with the job centre always made her chuckle.

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Max was in a hotel in London when the text came in. Not a seedy hotel, but a full five star hotel with a decent restaurant and large comfortable suites. He cursed his stiff leg and the size of the room, as he limped to the table he'd left his phone on.

'Package lost Finding it may be difficult'

He had six of them in Hungary, six of the best he'd managed to head hunt from the most highly trained security forces in the world. Sometimes Max wondered how certain agencies of the west functioned, he'd poached so many of their best people. He typed in a quick reply text.

'I will be arriving tomorrow to help with search'

That would stir them up a bit. Six of them and they couldn't even keep track of one PA and her two lowlife friends. Was he going to tell George that Ruby had vanished into the long grass in Budapest? Max decided not to pass on that piece of information until he'd talked to his team on the ground.

After all he did have his reputation to consider. Officially Max ran a risk management company.

There were parts of the world where no businessman would go without protection and Max provided that protection. The other work, the clandestine work, paid better, but it could put his bread and butter business under threat. No one wanted to hire a company that couldn't keep one twenty two year old girl safe. He slammed his phone onto the table, cracking the front glass.

"Fucking idiots." He muttered.

Cynthia was fine, he knew he could trust her to lead the team. Yes she had a few skeletons in her past, but so did most people in her line of work. It was Raúl, of that he was certain. He'd taken a chance on Raúl after Carlos had gone to work for George. Now he'd fire him as soon as he arrived and take charge of the team himself. He dialed his office on the hotel phone, knowing someone was on the duty desk twenty four seven.

"It's Max. Get me on the earliest flight out to Budapest in the morning."

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"You'll be fine. There are two borders to cross between here and Varna, but they're both soft borders."

Ruby looked at the small arsenal in the basement and wished she wasn't considering taking some of it to Varna. Spider was smitten with Olga, they could all see that and Olga was saying they needed serious firepower if they were going after Kurt.

"I don't want a gun. Can't you just find Spider a gun like his Browning?" Ruby Asked.

"No one asked me," said Sarah, "I want a gun."

Olga and her friend were both looking at them as though they were crazy. No one had been introduced to her friend, but he seemed to be going with them.

"He can show you the quiet roads in and out of Romania." Olga had said.

It also seemed that her nameless friend could block and disrupt any pursuit that might be attempted. Ruby just looked at the four or five grenade launchers in front of her and thought that things were quickly getting out of control.

"Trust me Ruby, this is my trade," said Olga, "you need a gun each, something that can be concealed and something heavier in case you're ambushed."

"Have you got an AK47?" Asked Spider.

Olga just grinned at him and kicked the top off a wooden box.

"I have a dozen. Not new, but all refurbished and in A1 condition."

That was another Jurgis saying. Everything he sold was in A1 condition. Ruby had assumed he'd seen it on a TV advert and thought it sounded good.

"Have you got a vehicle we can put all these weapons in?" Asked Ruby.

Olga seemed annoyed at being taken away from talking about her beloved weapons, but she pointed at her friend.

"Anything too military looking and the Romanians will think you're the police. That could be very bad. Andrei has a large old beige Mercedes. It has a good engine and it used to be owned by a gun smuggler, so it has some armour plate in the doors."

So they now knew a name for her friend who seemed to be useful and had a car they could buy.

Ruby was wondering how much all this was going to cost her.

"Anything else Olga? Perhaps a trailer and three jet skis for when we get to Black Sea?" She asked.

Sarcasm just didn't work on Olga. Come to think of it, Ruby didn't know anyone from east of the Rhine that it did work on.

"Knives!" Shouted Olga with enthusiasm.

She opened a drawer and brought out several long and serious looking daggers.

"You need one each, especially Ruby and Sarah. Men get close to pretty girls and when they're close....."

Olga made a motion with a dagger as though she was ramming it into someone's guts. Ruby reluctantly accepted a nasty looking knife in a leather scabbard. Sarah selected her own dagger and

then Spider helped Olga pack the rest away. It was obvious to everyone that Spider was becoming increasingly attached to the tall blonde.

"Coffee and then I'll show you the route to Varna on the maps." Said Olga.

A girl Ruby hadn't seen before came into the basement with several jugs of coffee and then she went back for a tray of cups. The girl was from Varna and her thoughts were about the town as she put the coffee cups down.

"I'm tired," said Sarah, "I think I'll get an early night."

"Good idea it's been a long day."

Ruby was pulling views of Varna from the girl's head and didn't take much notice of Sarah telling Spider she was going to bed. Of course she was hoping that Spider would join her, but Spider just smiled at her and went back to talking to Olga. Later Ruby realised that if she'd just looked into Sarah's mind just a little, so much trouble could have been saved and two lives. But Ruby wanted the information on Varna and the dark haired girl's head was full of it. Sarah left the room and Olga brought several old cloth maps out of a drawer.

"They're old but accurate," said Olga, "the newer maps leave off the old trails and places you'll be going."

Ruby noticed one had Esso on the top and must have come from the west in the days when Romania and Bulgaria were part of the Soviet Union. The map from Budapest to the Romanian border was along clearly marked roads, but once over the border the route seemed to avoid anything other than old trails and backroads. Spider ran his finger over some of the map and noticed the gradient arrows in some places.

"There are some steep climbs," he said, "can the old Mercedes cope with that?" He asked.

"Better than many modern four by fours. I promise you Spider, the car won't be a problem." Replied Olga.

Ruby listened as Spider and Olga went over the route. Olga even gave him the name and address of her connection on the Black Sea coast, just in case they needed a safe place.

"We trade weapons, but we rarely use them," said Olga, "my network will help where they can, but if you turn up with a dozen armed thugs on your tail, they might not even open the door to you."

Ruby didn't know Andrei and she was picking up general indifference from his mind.

"We need you to go with us Olga. You know the people and the route." She said.

"I am needed in Budapest and Andrei knows Bulgaria like the back of his hand."

"He may, but I know you and I respect your expertise at what you do. I will gladly pay enough to compensate you for any sales you might lose by coming with us."

Ruby looked deep into Olga's mind and found something she should have expected, but it still shocked her. It just remained to be seen if Olga would tell her about selling arms to Kurt of her own accord.

"There is a conflict of interest." Said Andrei.

Jurgis had known the full extent of Ruby's gift, but he'd never told the rest of what he called the Budapest family. Olga may have guessed that Ruby was more than just a good listener, but neither she nor Andrei realised how open their minds were to her.

"Are you selling his group weapons?" She asked.

Olga went to a battered old green filing cabinet and opened the second drawer down. After rummaging for a while in a few files she took out a picture and handed it to Ruby.

"Is this your Kurt?"

It was a clear colour photograph and it was Kurt Trifonov. There was a lot of writing in a language she didn't understand, it looked like the picture had been part of a file held by the Riga police in Latvia.

"It is, but I thought he was Bulgarian?"

"He is, but he's been of interest to quite a number of police forces. The police in Riga came to the conclusion that he was basically harmless and closed the file."

"What do you sell him?"

Andrei was shaking his head at Olga, but she ignored him.

"Nothing for a while, but he had the usual small arms from us. Not huge amounts, but enough to equip a group of six or seven. You understand my problem Ruby? I can't turn on a client, there are ethics, even in my trade."

"None of our other customers would trust us." Added Andrei.

Ruby felt something tugging at her consciousness, but she couldn't quite make it out. It spoiled her concentration and didn't help her mood.

"They're just customers Olga!" She shouted. "You always said I was family."

"I can lend you two good people, but I can't simply....."

Olga got no further because Ruby was screaming and holding her ears. Sarah was in trouble and she was screaming. It felt like she was screaming inside Ruby's head. It was so loud it was hurting and it took Ruby several minutes to get her own feelings under control.

"It's Sarah," she said, "they're going to kill her!"

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Sarah wasn't surprised that Spider was smitten by Olga. Tall, blonde and an expert with weapons, they were an obvious couple. She opened an outside window at the back of the house and wedged it slightly open. Not that she intended to climb out of the window; it was a way back into the house if anyone locked the door.

"He can screw who he likes." She muttered.

The side door had three bolts and a chain, but she managed to open the door without causing a noise. Sarah walked round to the front of the house and opened the gates and walked onto the street. No one had yet given them replacement phones, so she looked at the house name and number and wrote them down on a piece of paper. The nearest street corner was quite close and there she found a street sign that gave the street name and district. Sarah knew she now had enough information to get home, even if it did mean being very nice to a guy in a bar.

"Lights girl, lights mean things happening, lights mean fun."

To her right there just seemed to be more long and boring residential streets, but to her left there were a few shop signs in the distance. Sarah had a few thousand Euros and she could speak Hungarian like a native. Actually better, natives of any country rarely speak their own language as well as foreigners do. Even if the lights were only fast food joints and bars, Sarah knew she'd find someone selling something a bit stronger in just a few minutes. It was cold, she knew it might get down to minus ten, but she'd bought a heavy coat in Paris. It had a fur collar which she pulled up to cover her neck.

"Faux fur of course, we never sell real fur." The shop assistant had told her.

After the first thirty yards she almost turned back, the street looked cold and deserted. Obviously the local knew better than to go out on windy nights with a minus ten forecast. Then she reached the lights and it looked like any row of shops back home. There was a fast food joint selling chicken and a late night store with a fruit and veg section that went out onto the street. Sarah was good at

spotting dealers, she'd known quite a few in London. There was a guy running a cell phone accessories counter in the store, they seemed to exist everywhere. This one had a sign promising to unlock any make of phone. Many of the signs were repeated in Turkish, so she took a chance and talked to him in Turkish. She did what most people do to start a conversation, she moaned about the cold weather.

"If we're lucky tomorrow it might get just above freezing." He replied.

Within ten minutes she knew the town in Turkey where his parents still lived and after twenty minutes she had a name and description of someone who could supply what she needed. He'd even written his name and number down for her, in case she needed someone to show her the Budapest night life.

"He's in the Blue Diamond. It's on the other side of the street, you can't miss it."

She thanked him and went in search of his friend Salih, who he'd described to her in great detail. Sarah crossed the street and walked up the next junction and the Blue Diamond bar was right in front of her. A huge neon sign of a kitten inside a brandy glass left no doubt as to the fact that it was a place to have a good time. She walked through the door and the heat hit her, she undid her coat and tried not to look like a tourist. To hell with finding Salih the hard way, she decided to ask the guy behind the bar.

"What does a nice girl like you want with Salih?"

"I have something for him."

He leant closer to her.

"I know someone better. I have a friend, not too far away."

She'd had similar conversations in London, drugs these days were a cut throat business. She shook her head but smiled at him.

"Can you point out Salih please?"

"Downstairs bar, he's with the girl in the blue top."

She bought a lot of vodka with a tiny amount of tonic water and carried her drink down the stairs and into another part of the bar. The lights were lower and most of the tables seemed to be taken by couples. Many of the men looked middle aged but the girls didn't. Sarah began to understand what went on in the Blue Diamond. Salih was there and the girl with him was wearing a top that was almost day glow blue. Sarah sat at his table without being invited, she just wanted to get his attention, buy the stuff and leave.

"You must be Salih. The guy at the store over the road said you might have something I need."

He looked Turkish, but the girl had a slight look of South East Asia about her. Sarah noticed her legs that were barely covered by a tiny skirt, were just about perfect. He must have seen something in her that showed she was a regular user, he must have seen so many.

"What do you want?" He asked.

"What do you have?"

He ran through a list of local names, some meant something to her, some didn't. He mentioned a powerful amphetamine Sarah had used once, so she bought a handful of white pills from him for a surprisingly low price. Obviously it wasn't just booze that was cheaper on the mainland. Sarah pulled a pile of Euros out of her pocket and saw Salih jump, he put his hand on her arm.

"It doesn't pay to let people here see you have a lot of cash." He said.

No one seemed to be taking any interest in their transaction, but he was right of course. She paid him and put the pills in her pocket. The girl with the perfect legs was smiling at her, but it was obvious that they wanted her to leave.

“Thank you.”

Sarah had intended to go straight back to the house, but she was feeling the start of a stress headache and she had the cure in her pocket. The ladies toilets were immaculate and they were empty. Sarah put two of the pills in her mouth and washed them down with her vodka and tonic. By the time she reached the street the headache had gone away, she just needed to get home before the high made her reckless.

“Did you find Salih ?”

It was the guy from the store, she couldn't even remember his name without looking at the piece of paper that was in her pocket.

“Yes, he had just what I needed.”

“If you're hungry, I know a place nearby. My uncle owns it and the food is good.”

He'd obviously followed her, but he looked about her age and he wasn't bad looking. If Spider didn't want her company, it was obvious that this guy did. She should have said no, or at least got him to walk her part of the way home.

“That sounds great, is it far ?”

“No, there's a quick way I know.”

She followed him across the street and through several small lanes and in ten minutes she was completely lost. It was getting icy and she was beginning to slide about.

“There it is. You'll love it, the food is the best in Budapest.”

She looked where he was pointing and she could just see a sign on a building in the next street. It was in a back street and owned by his family, so Sarah wasn't relying on it really being the best food in town. But it would be warm and hopefully it would be friendly. The pills were really beginning to kick in and Sarah felt a need to be among friends.

“Where are you going with him ?”

The two men in front of them were dressed in heavy coats and their hoods were up. Sarah couldn't see their faces, but anyone could have heard the hate in their voices. They weren't after her money, they were just looking for someone to beat up. A white pasty faced girl with a dark skinned Turkish guy, the thugs must have thought it was Christmas. Sarah instinctively backed up and looked behind her. There were two more of them coming up the street from that direction, all hooded and all far larger than her or her companion.

“Do you want money ? I'll give you money ?” She said.

“We want him and you need teaching not to mix with his kind.”

He didn't look any different to the other three, but it was obvious that he was the leader. He stepped towards her and Sarah amazed herself as she stepped towards him.

“You can't have him !” She shouted.

It was the pills, she'd taken enough to make some part of her mind think she was a tiger. She actually put up her fists and moved towards him, causing his friends to chuckle.

“Watch out János, she might scratch you.” One shouted.

Inside her unconscious mind something remembered she wasn't a tiger, but normally someone who was scared of spiders in the bath and taking library books back late. The part of her that was terrified wanted to scream and Sarah found she was screaming. Screams should bring people running, it should make thugs run away. It didn't work though. As Sarah carried on screaming János took a few steps forward and knocked her companion to the ground.

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Ruby was trying to run in a straight line, but the layout of the streets wouldn't let her. Olga had made her put on a military style jacket, but it wasn't done up correctly and kept flapping about as she ran. She skidded to a halt on the icy pavement and looked straight at the houses in front of her. "I need to be on the other side of those houses and about fifty yards further on."

Olga looked at her oddly, but so far she hadn't queried the rather odd requests for directions. Spider was with them, but she knew he wasn't armed. Perhaps Olga carried a gun ? It mattered because Ruby kept seeing images of four very large men and they were kicking someone who was on the ground.

"I know a way, we can cut through the park."

"Do you have a gun ?" Ruby asked.

"No, why ?"

"It might be needed, there are four of them."

Olga took them through the park and past the Turkish restaurant that Sarah was being taken to. A bit further and they found Sarah and her companion and the four thugs. One of them had Sarah up against a wall, his left hand cruelly crushing her throat as she tried to hit him. He was actually laughing as his three friends kicked the young man on the ground.

"You bastards !" Shouted Olga.

Spider didn't make a sound, he grabbed the man holding Sarah and spun him around. He expertly turned the man's arm at just the right angle, a twist and there was a loud crack as his elbow broke apart. Spider wasn't finished though, he turned the man again and rammed his face into the wall. The now unconscious thug fell into a heap on the floor. Spider looked at Sarah, pleased that she appeared to be uninjured.

"You silly bitch." He said as he hugged her.

Olga and Ruby now faced the three remaining thugs and they showed no inclination to run away. Olga undid her jacket and brought out a knife with a serrated edge that was a good twelve inches long. It was enough for two of the men, they turned and ran off into the night. One though pulled a knife of his own out of his jacket and faced Olga. It was a bad idea, she was well trained and he was just a street thug. Olga avoided his clumsy lunge and buried her blade in his throat. His throat bubbled blood as he collapsed onto the ground and died. Through all of this, Ruby had merely stood and stared, unable to keep the feelings of pain out of her mind. As the thug drowned in his own blood she shook herself and checked on the young Turkish guy. She merely had to touch him to know that he was dead, there was nothing in his mind.

"How is he ?" Asked Sarah.

"He's dead." Replied Ruby.

Sarah burst into tears and Spider hugged her. Ruby remained knelt on the ground and it took Olga to get them moving.

"We need to go, the police will be here soon. Did they take any of your things Sarah ?"

"I'm sorry, what ?"

Everyone could see Sarah was high, but Olga needed to know.

"Did they take anything from you ? Anything that might identify you ?"

"No, they didn't even take my money."

"Good, then we can go. Follow me and keep up."

"I can't even remember his name," Said Sarah looking at the body on the ground.

Olga moved fast and Ruby kept up with her. Behind them Spider was almost carrying Sarah and managing to keep up the pace. The ice on the ground was quite thick, the night did look like being a

minus twelve night. Everyone skidded about, but no one fell over and quite quickly they were back in the pleasant residential area where Olga lived.

“I will go with you Ruby,” said Olga, “you need my help, I can see that.”

“Thank you. I insist on paying you for your time.”

Olga merely nodded at her and said no more until they were back at the door to her house. Spider was now having to hold Sarah up and they were only just entering the front gates.

“Spider is good,” said Olga, “but you should send Sarah home, that one will get you killed.”

“She’s a good friend Olga, almost family. We’ll all have to watch her, but Sarah will be worth having with us.”

Olga opened the door and held it open as Spider carried Sarah through and into the lounge. As Ruby went to follow him, Olga blocked her way.

“You need to tell me everything Ruby. How you knew where Sarah was and how you knew there were four thugs. I’m coming with you, so I need to know it all.”

“Once we get Sarah settled I’ll tell you it all. I’ll even tell you why Jurgis had half his face shot off.”

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