

Ruby 2

Chapter 12 - Marseille

“The car didn’t have a toilet or hot water. They’d all quickly decided that was a flaw in the design which BMW needed to address.”

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No one had visited them and only Isobel in London was bothering to call them with any news. Patrick and Delmar felt cut off from the world, stuck in Serge’s house, while everyone else was off having fun. It didn’t help that Ruby seemed to have taken mainly the girls with her to Russia. They were young, male and feeling unloved and neglected. A very dangerous combination of factors.

The boys hadn’t liked each other at first, but a shared misery had turned them into friends. It was Patrick’s night to monitor the various cameras and sensors that protected the house. At two twenty six am, a car drove over the traffic monitor at the entrance to their driveway. He didn’t wake Delmar, it might be an error or just someone using the driveway to reverse. The monitors were the usual tough piece of rubber tubing that crossed the road. They were everywhere, usually put in place by the local authorities to monitor traffic flow. So common that they’d become part of the environment and were ignored by everyone.

“Crap, they’re here again.” He muttered.

The ancient Combi van hit the second monitor at two thirty seven, they were heading for the house. A few seconds later and the famous VW front was on one of the TV screens above the desk. It was near complete darkness outside, but the image intensifier on the camera showed the camper van in perfect detail. Not who was in it though. Patrick went upstairs to wake Delmar, to find him up and reading.

“They’re here again.” Said Patrick. “Third time this week.”

“It’s a nice night, been hot and dry for a while now. They might be driving out here to have sex.”

“Maybe, but we’re a long way from anywhere.”

Delmar followed him as he went back to the security room and brought up a picture of the elderly camper van.

“Looks a bit crap for North Korean intelligence.” Said Delmar.

“Which could be why they chose it. No one will look twice at an old VW Combi.”

They both peered at the screen, trying to see who the dark smudge behind the wheel might be.

“Two smudges.” Said Delmar. “Might be more in the back. Did they reach camera two?”

“No. Like the last two times, they turned off the road after camera one. They’re out there, somewhere in about five acres of woodland.”

“I still think it’s a couple of locals screwing.” Said Delmar. “But I suppose it needs investigating.”

“Ruby wouldn’t like that.”

They grinned at each other.

“Ruby isn’t here !” Said Delmar. “You monitor the screens and I’ll go out and see what they’re up to.”

Patrick moved between Delmar and the door.

“Hey, who died and made you boss ? I’ll go and you can stay here.”

“Don’t be stupid Patrick ! You’re the geek and I’m the guy who gets things done. Everyone knows that. Let me get my coat.”

“Geek huh ? Fancy seeing how much of a geek I am ?”

They squared up to each other and for a second it was in the balance. It might have gone one way and they might have done serious damage to each other. Delmar was bigger and more muscular, but Serge had taught Patrick a lot of dirty fighting tricks.

“Crap ! I don’t want to fight you.” Said Delmar. “We’ll toss a coin for who goes.”

Delmar had a pile of small change on his bedside table. Patrick watched as he dug through the mixture of coins.

“Damn Euro currency.” Said Delmar. “Fat guy or weird pattern isn’t really heads or tails.”

He found a UK fifty pence piece and held it up in triumph.

“One toss and you can call.”

“Heads.” Said Patrick.

Delmar didn’t catch the coin, he flipped it high, so that it span and landed on his bed. They both looked at the coin, seeing Queen Elizabeth looking back at them.

“I won ! I never win at this !” Yelled Patrick.

“Just be careful. I’m not coming out there to rescue you. Just find them, see what they’re doing and come back.”

Patrick wanted to give another speech about Delmar not being his boss, but he’d won that argument already. No phone, cell phones didn’t work that well in that part of the world and their energy emissions could be detected. He picked up a fully loaded Glock 17 and put on a dark jacket. That was all the preparation and equipment he needed.

“Good luck.” Said Delmar, locking the back door behind him.

He had to assume that a full North Korean team was out there, the best they had. They’d be watching the front of the house of course. He crept into Serge’s overgrown garden and felt out the surrounding area. Charlotte had taught him how to focus and feel every living thing within miles. At first it was fun to spot wild creature, but he quickly filtered the input down to humans.

Trudy could pick up memory traces too and tell you who had been where and when. Patrick just picked up hot spots and there was one at the side of the house. He also picked up six men, three quite close to the house and three further off, probably monitoring events from the camper van. The realisation that he really was up against a full team from the State Security Department of North Korea, came as quite a shock. He really had hoped it was a few local kids screwing in the woods. Patrick drew the Glock and crept towards the memory hot spot.

“Christ ! A camera.” He quietly muttered.

The memory traces were fading, they’d probably installed it the first time they’d been there. On a tripod and hooked up to a heavy battery box, it was as good as their own night vision cameras. They’d have seen every delivery of food, every visit by the postman and every time they been out for walks. It was bad, they must be pretty certain there was only two of them in the house. Keeping out of the camera’s field of view, Patrick crept to the next hot spot and found another tripod, another camera. This time aimed at the garage doors. He didn’t need to visit the third hotspot, it was going to be a camera aimed at the other side of the house. They’d ignored previous visits by the old VW Combi and been punished for it. He was tempted to disable the cameras.

“Then they’ll know they’ve been rumbled !”

Patrick thought about what Serge would have done if he’d been there. Firstly he’d have never ignored the camper van, but that horse had well and truly bolted. Next would be to see what the North Koreans were up to, which still seemed sensible. He crept silently towards the three enemies who were closest to him and found them aiming infra-red imaging equipment at the house. The building was old, but made of solid local stone. He doubted if their devices were going to tell them

much. Their supervisors seemed a better bet to discover what they were planning, the guys in the VW van. Patrick concentrated on every footstep, taking nearly half an hour to come up on the van from the rear. No sign of any cameras or listening devices on or near the Combi van, which was a mistake.

“Over confidence will get you every time.” He muttered.

They had curtains inside the van, red and white striped ones that allowed enough light to escape, for him to see his way by. Patrick stopped, right up against the grubby metal body of the van. He could stand quite still for hours if need be, his mind searching for anything and everything that might be useful. He found two minds thinking in Korean, but then he heard their words and the replies of another, thinking in English. The English thinking one was the local man in London, who’d spent years at the Ealing embassy. Someone had accused him of being a little too cosy in London, so someone new would be arriving to take control of operations, there and in Marseille. Two of them merely muttered at him, while he gave full flow to his list of real and imagined grievances. He spoke in a strange mishmash of Korean and English, but Patrick understood him. Mainly he hated being uprooted to spend hours in a smelly camper van in France.

Delmar had said he wouldn’t come to his rescue, but Patrick eventually felt that he ought to return to the house. He’d heard enough anyway, enough to make some kind of action essential. The last thing he needed was Delmar storming out of the house, guns blazing. Patrick took a long and wide route back, managing to fall over twice in the dark. He arrived at the back door, muddy, tired and sore. They had no real telepathic link, but Delmar knew he was there and opened the door for him.

“Wow buddy, you look like shit !”

“There’s a small stream to the east of the house.” Said Patrick. “I discovered it in the dark.”

Once in their kitchen he could see the full state of his clothing. Mud up to his knees, leaves plastered over his jacket and few nasty looking thorns still stuck in the back of his left hand.

“You need to get that hand cleaned and a plaster on it.” Said Delmar. “What happened ?”

“Just me finding everything to collide with in the dark. Do they have poison ivy in France ?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“Good ! Or I’d have found some to fall into.”

Patrick took his jacket off and pulled out the thorns under a running tap, rubbing the wounds hard to make them bleed. By the time he’d dried himself, Delmar had the first aid kit open, handing him a large plaster.

“They have cameras out there.” Said Patrick. “Good ones and infra-red monitors.”

“Crap ! We need to smash all those in the morning.”

“No, no, you haven’t heard the best bit. They’re sending two people from North Korea, to run things here and in London.”

It was a warm night, he’d have gladly taken off his muddy trainers and jeans, but Delmar would tease him for being a geek again. Patrick went to the fridge and found a bottle of Beck’s, he needed it.

“So ? Why do we care about them getting a new boss ?” Asked Delmar.

“They’re scared of him being hurt, they’ll be in real trouble if he is. Their new boss is coming from the village near Rakwon. He’s one like us !”

“That deserves to be celebrated. Pass me a beer.”

To hell with it ! Patrick took off his muddy clothing and sat at the kitchen table, dressed in just his boxer shorts and a T shirt.

“He arrives in three days.” He said. “Something worth being a little patient for.”

“Too true, too true. I’ve been hoping we’d get to meet one of them.”

“Our chance to find out how good they really are.”

Delmar was grinning at him and nodding furiously.

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While matters were becoming serious in China, Ruby simply checked out of The Hyundai Hotel in Vladivostok. There wasn’t even any attempted subterfuge, by checking out a few at a time. Ruby took all eight of her party down to the front desk at nine am and settled the bill. The Russian security services would know where she was and her likely destination. There was no point in hiding.

“Please stay with us next time you’re in Vladivostok.”

The woman on the desk was a typical blonde Russian, with long legs and a catwalk figure. At one time hotels managed to hire such women for silly wages, but things were changing in Russia.

“Can I book you transport to the airport ?”

“No, thank you. We’re being picked up.”

Ruby led her team out, through the front door, to stand beside the hotel’s driveway. She’d learned a lot from Serge, but still always thought about what Jurgis would do in any given situation. He’d been part theatrical magician and part P. T. Barnum. Jurgis could sell someone a broken down wreck of a car and make them believe it was a classic. He could lead the opposition in one direction, only to vanish the opposite way. She often thought that he might have been a brutal bastard, but he was a huge loss to the world of crooks, gangsters and con-men. She was about to make the Russians look one way, while performing a vanishing act, hopefully.

“I see the truck.” Said Eugenie.

They knew the plan, get in the back of the truck as quickly as possible. The weekend bags had been added to, other bags to carry the extra clothes bought in Russia and all those must have souvenirs. The truck and driver had been hired from Ivan, for a price of course. Anyone watching her leave the hotel, would know who the truck belonged to. Olga was smiling as the truck pulled up.

“I know this one.” She said. “The driver will do anything for money.”

Olga joined the driver in his cab, while Ruby clambered into the back with everyone else. Climbing into a truck is an acquired art and there were quite a few curses and minor abrasions. The hotel employed two staff to load and unload guests from taxis. They looked on, bemused by seeing the crazy English lady and her friends, climbing into a dirty truck.

“Settle down.” Said Ruby. “We won’t be in here long.”

The route she’d agreed in advance with Ivan, the one he was certain to have given to the authorities, was to take them out past Gornoye and drop them close to the Chinese border. It matched all the gossip that Ruby had been seeding everywhere. Even the gorgeous Jenny had been fed the story, as Russian security were certain to question her. All of the thirteen could sense any undue interest in Ruby and her group. Charlotte and Eugenie were the best though, concentrating and not speaking until they were certain.

“Two cars behind us and another keeping about fifty yards in front.” Said Charlotte.

The car in front was a nuisance but not unexpected. It would need to be dealt with at the right moment. The truck was old and looked like army surplus. The sides were wooden, with a green canvas cover at the rear. Luckily it was a warm morning, the journey would have been unpleasant during the winter. There was no contact with the cab, not even a window for the driver to look through. Ruby’s phone showed a text message that Olga was enjoying the view. Good, that meant the driver had been paid enough to deviate from the agreed route.

"You all know the plan." Said Ruby. "No playing helpless tourist this time. Out the instant the truck stops and out quickly !"

"I'll deal with the car in front." Said Lau.

"Remember !" Said Ruby. "We hurt no one. We've no grievance with the people of Russia. Understood ?"

Lau nodded at her, but she could feel his frustration. He was desperate for some action and was likely to get plenty of it once they reached the facility in North Korea. Maybe before then, if things didn't go according to plan. The truck lurched to one side and hit something. Someone was shouting and then Olga was pulling up the canvas cover at the rear of the truck.

"All change for Tumangang and all points south !" She yelled.

She had to shout, at least a dozen car horns were being pressed simultaneously. The kids were quicker this time, even helping Murad to clamber out of the old truck. The plan was for the truck to simply stop and block the road. It was an old and well proven plan that had worked for Ruby in Budapest. The driver had used his initiative and driven across both lanes, colliding with a parked car. The car looked a right off, but the truck didn't even look dented.

"Did the driver agree to everything ?" Asked Ruby.

"Yes, he'll carry on to the Chinese border, once we've gone. I just hope his little improvisation doesn't get him arrested."

"Come on everyone !" Shouted Ruby. "Follow Olga."

Not quite everyone, Lau was running toward the other car, about fifty yards further up the road. No one was worried about them, all the anger and shouting was aimed at their driver. He ignored it all, locked in his cab.

"I paid him a bit extra." Said Olga. "In case someone starts shooting at him."

It was a full replay of her arrival in Budapest though probably with far more noise and anger. Sarah panicking had been the biggest worry in Budapest, but she was now a different person. She picked up her overnight bag and actually grinned at Ruby.

"Just like old times !" She said.

They ran up the street and turned left, carrying all their belongings. There was a large delivery van parked outside a fairly anonymous looking office block. The driver had the rear doors open, consulting a list on a clipboard. Just one of a thousand other normal deliveries being made in Vladivostok that morning. Olga dumped her things in the back and joined the driver, pretending to look at his list. All the others ran into the back of the van, as though it was the most normal thing in the world. Ruby looked back, watching smoke rise into the sky, thick black smoke. Lau was carrying out the most dangerous part of the plan.

"Keep alert Charlotte." Said Ruby. "I need to know if he's being followed."

It seemed to take an age before they saw Lau, running up the street towards them, though it was probably only a minute or two. He looked happy, grinning at them as he leapt into the van.

"It worked !" He said. "They won't be following anyone else today."

Olga helped the driver close the rear doors, before sitting with him in the front. Ruby banged twice on the metal wall behind the driver and the van moved away. It was quite dark in the van, just a single low wattage bulb illuminated the interior.

"Give me details Lau ?" Asked Ruby. "Did it go as planned ?"

"Yes, I was just one of the crowd to them. I rolled the smoke bomb under their car and after it went off, they got out and ran. You should have seen them go ! The crowd ran too, so I kept among them."

“Good, great job.”

“Superb !” Added Murad.

Ruby needed to know if Lau had been followed. Sophie had joined the others, even Lau himself had been roped into scanning thoughts and moods in the vicinity.

“Anyone on our tail ?” Asked Ruby.

They muttered at each other in the clipped way that most kids talked to each other. Their chatter was almost a personal code though, spoken in a good two dozen different languages. Several of those languages were no longer used and at least two weren't of human origin.

“Difficult.” Said Charlotte. “The driver just drove away in the truck, as planned. That caused a lot of anger and that sort of jams our senses.”

“People are thinking about us.” Added Eugenie. “ But probably just out of anger..... It's difficult.”

“We don't think anyone is following.” Said Sophie.

Clever of them to get Sophie to speak last, it was hard for anyone to become angry at Sophie. Think wouldn't do though. Think might mean that instead of quietly leaving Russia, they might have a fight with the Russian security services. It could happen at their next vehicle change, or when they collected the weapons supplied by Ivan. Think wouldn't do !

“You know I don't like the word think.” Said Ruby. “Think can get someone killed. You need to look again and be certain.”

Ruby leant against the van wall and closed her eyes, taking a few moments to calm herself. Sophie was pulling at her jacket.

“There is definitely no one following us.”

“We are sure.” Added Charlotte.

“Certain !” Said Eugenie.

“Thank you.” Said Ruby. “Fifteen minutes and we change vehicles again. You'll all really like the next one.”

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They'd spent quite a while with Jasmine, now known by her married name of Beverley Jones. Not that she was still married. Beverley turned out to be an Afro-Caribbean divorcee with two children, a boy and a girl.

“My son took up one of these new apprenticeships, lives in Runcorn now. My daughter is in London, working for a large firm of accountants and studying to get her ACCA qualification.” She'd told them. Beverley was now a little plump, but still had a twinkle in her eye when she talked about her days as an escort for Aunty Silvia.

“Silvia was like a second mother to all of us.”

That wasn't the story he'd heard from Mary or the other women they'd seen. Most saw Aunty Silvia as someone who exploited them and encouraged them to remember that;

“The client is always right ! No matter what he asks you to do.”

In her own way, Silvia was no different to many people who ran small, labour intensive businesses. But then again, who ever really likes their boss ? Spider was worried she might be telling him what he wanted to hear, rather than the truth.

“..... but you were pressured to perform acts you felt uncomfortable about ?” He'd asked.

Beverley had smiled at him and actually patted his knee.

“Boys will be boys Spider.”

She'd been talkative to the point of being garrulous and that too wasn't like the others they'd seen. Most had been escorts for the money and got out of the game as quickly as possible. It wasn't

something they wanted to be reminded of and getting information out of them, had been like pulling teeth. Beverley made it sound like some sort of date night with a variety of boyfriends. They'd left and driven the expensive BMW to a quiet spot out of town. Monique was still driving them everywhere, despite having no driving licence.

"If we get pulled over by the police, I can deal with it." She'd told him.

He believed her, she'd probably persuade the cops to escort them across town, blue lights, sirens and all. They'd been spending a lot of time in the car, it was a million times more comfortable than The Carousel Bed & Breakfast.

"You two were quiet back there." He said.

"Difficult to get a word in." Answered Monique.

"A very complex woman." Added Fabio.

"Right out with it, tell me what you picked up from her?" He asked.

Complete silence, his mentees seemed upset with their mentor again.

"I'd think better over a coffee and something to eat." Said Monique. "And I need to pee."

The car didn't have a toilet or hot water. They'd all quickly decided that was a flaw in the design which BMW needed to address. Breakfast had been fairly inedible and Spider's leather belt had moved onto the next hole when he'd dressed that morning.

"I think we all need a decent meal." Said Spider. "Your choice Monique, find us somewhere to have an early lunch."

They were happy again, it took very little to swing their mood from stormy to sunshine. Was that normal? He'd never had kids, so he had no idea. Monique found a decent café on the A56, just north of Prestwich. They chose a quiet table by the window and Spider let them eat, before coming back to Beverley and her rather cheery attitude to life on the game.

"Did you see all the religious symbols on her walls?" Aske Monique.

"And in her china cabinet." Added Fabio.

He liked their double act. Fabio came up with the bullet points and Monique filled in the details. Spider knew his role was simply to ask the right questions and look suitably impressed by their replies.

"A lot of people are religious." He said. "There's no harm in that."

"She came to religion late." Said Fabio.

"Long after she stopped being Jasmine." Said Monique. "She used it to bring her kids up well and give her life meaning, but it doesn't fit well with her days as an escort."

"So she chooses to see that time through rose tinted glasses." Added Fabio.

It made sense, but they were left with a recording of her memories that portrayed Rob Newsmith as laddish and naughty, rather than a killer.

"She did say they'd tied her up." Said Monique. "Or..... we could ignore her testimony?"

It was tempting, but Spider knew what he had to do.

"No, write it up as it is, warts and all." He said. "But I won't send anything to George, until after we've seen Christine tomorrow."

The food had been good and the coffee. Spider asked the waitress what they had for dessert, which pleased the kids. Three portions of rhubarb crumble arrived, before he put another of his manilla files on the table. They all knew every detail in the file, but refreshing the memory was always a good idea.

"Samantha, real name Christine McNeil, only agreed to see us for a fee of five hundred pounds."

Said Spider. "I think we can assume that she won't be anywhere near as cheery as Beverley Jones."

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Terry had done his homework; he knew the times for the freight trains heading south. There was only one line south and one line north. Freight trains had to regularly move onto sidings, until the passenger train had passed. One such passing place was near the Daoqing Post Office, to the west of town. They'd taken a risk and borrowed the schools mini-bus, abandoning it in a supermarket car park. Serge felt exposed, as he observed the halt where trains picked up and dropped off passengers.

"A few local commuters get off here, but most trains go straight through." Said Terry.

"I'd expected somewhere in the woods." Said Serge. "This is a bit open."

"You should have talked to Rosy for longer. This is China, a people taught to question nothing for the last sixty seven years. As long as Trudy keeps her face hidden we'll be fine."

Trudy was keeping covered up, she was well aware that many of the locals had never seen anyone who wasn't white. Roger and Lisa were doing their best to be inconspicuous too, but it all seemed like breaking into a train, in the middle of town.

"I've only seen two people." Said Lisa. "And they kept their heads down and ignored us."

"They will ignore us." Said Terry. "They'd consider it impolite to talk to us, much less ask us about our business here. They have no culture of low level criminality like vandalism and criminal damage. No one had ever hopped a freight train in modern China. To them, the whole notion of breaking into a train and travelling on it without permission, is..... unthinkable."

"They'd survive for about an hour in Marseille." Said Serge.

Terry led them through the gate at the halt, across the track and through a gate on the other side. The siding where the freight train would wait, wasn't even fenced off.

"It won't be long now." Said Terry. "We can wait over here."

A wood would have been nice, or just a few trees. Instead there was the low growth of shrubs and weeds that claim any neglected piece of ground. They sat down behind a thick growth of bushes and waited for the freight train to arrive.

"It will stop many times on the way south." Said Terry. "It may even go into factory sidings and stay there. If that happens we'll need to find another train. Some overnight stops will be useful, as we don't have enough supplies for the journey."

"No proper toilet stops ladies." Said one of his men

Lisa fixed him with an icy stare.

"If I need a toilet, I'll find a quiet corner of the freight car and start one !" She said.

The train arrived, a heavy diesel locomotive, pulling a long line of freight cars. They waited until it had come to a complete halt.

"I've never seen the driver or engineer leave the locomotive." Said Terry. "Come on, we might only have five minutes."

No containers, just dozens of freight cars with sliding doors. Terry ignored the ones with metal seals over the handles and the empty ones.

"Ten to one there's a cargo waiting for these, somewhere en-route."

Eventually they clambered into one that was half full of boxes.

"We'll move them about later, to make somewhere to hide."

It had been a surreal day, Serge had expected another night at the superb Westin Hotel. Instead he found himself sitting on a bare wooden floor, listening to Terry giving orders to his men. The kids never seemed phased by anything, Trudy was pestering Terry for a decent assault rifle. Serge settled

back and readied himself for days of being grubby, malnourished and bored. Hell, if the kids could cope with it, he could.

~ ~

Max had bought a Wi-Fi dongle for their laptop, but it didn't perform as well as he'd hoped. Free connections seemed better, so he'd been sitting in the various hotels, bars and cafes that offered a reliable internet connection. And bus stops, quite a few were close to sources of free Wi-Fi.

"Damn these seats are uncomfortable." He said. "No wonder British old ladies are always miserable. They have to sit on bus stop seats for hours."

Sadie smiled at him, her hips still worked properly and she could perch on the hard plastic seat, without making grunting noises.

"I'm starving." She said. "I'm going to get a sandwich from the service station. Do you want anything?"

"Orange juice and a sandwich, nothing with egg in it..... thanks."

Most of the time she was keeping away from him anyway, trying to avoid them being associated with each other. Sitting in a car with a laptop open, brought more attention than sitting in a variety of places for half an hour at a time. Plus the human brain tended to shut down when it was bored. Max had once helped the CIA with a sensitive surveillance mission in Mexico. He'd returned to their van one night to find, what he thought, were four dead men. It turned out that all of them had fallen asleep. It wasn't that rare an occurrence. Keep moving and the mind has new things to occupy it and stays alert. The advanced piece of software would scan the images coming from the North Korean embassy, but they had to be close enough to follow anyone it flagged as interesting. The AI seemed to be working, ignoring the few members of staff who had entered the building.

"Just so long as it recognises bad guys." He muttered.

Max knew how the software worked. It looked for anything outside the bell curve. Anyone looking tougher and fitter than your average office worker. It also looked at their walk, people who stalk others for a living walk in a different way to the rest of the world. Facial expressions of course and many other tell-tale signs. Similar software was used at airports, with quite a high degree of success. Not that the public were told too much about it, for obvious reasons. No one wanted the next guy carrying a bomb, to be schooled in how to avoid looking like a terrorist. The laptop beeped at him. Max pressed the hotkey on his phone to call Sadie.

"I got you a ploughman's. Looks sort of fresh."

"Great, hurry back, we just got a ping."

The face was being shown to him by the AI, while it went through the various reasons it considered the man to be a positive hit. Max didn't need a piece of AI with an ego to tell him the man was an agent of North Korean State Security. People who lived in the shadows recognised something in each other. Max knew that the young Korean man in the expensive suit, was a trained agent. Sadie sat down next to him, not even out of breath after hurrying back.

"Do we have time to eat?" She asked.

"Probably, the AI spotted him on the way in."

Max munched at his sandwich, while Sadie looked at the picture of their target. The ploughman's tasted fine, even if the edges of the bread were curling a little. He'd eaten worse and quite recently.

"I could plant a tracker on him?"

Sadie had bought a plastic container of salad, brave when buying from a service station. She was eating it furiously, obviously determined to finish it.

"A pretty girl bumps into him, by accident of course." Said Max. "That would work in many countries and on a lot of men who should know better."

He looked at the man in the picture, the look of steel in his eyes.

"I can't see it working on him though and we can't have him knowing we're following him. I think that North Korea have sent their best people this time."

The man came out an hour later, carrying a cricket bag that he hadn't gone in with. It was heavy, probably full of old but useable weapons, all untraceable. There was no temptation to call the authorities, they needed to find the rest of his team.

"I'll follow him, while you fetch the car." He said. "We can't lose him!"

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The delivery van drove out through the suburbs of Vladivostok, heading inland and towards the maze of housing projects from the soviet era. Ruby knew where they were going, but couldn't see their surroundings, until they stopped and Olga opened the doors.

"A bit grim." Said Olga, "But the police rarely come here and there's definitely no CCTV."

Some of the blocks of housing looked reasonably tidy, but some reminded her of pictures of Chernobyl, thirty years after the accident. No sink estate in the UK came close to the level of decay and deprivation. Their driver wasn't keen to stay too long, hurrying them out of the van and driving away at some speed. They were alone, in what resembled one of the upper regions of Dante's hell.

"We'll be fine." Said Olga. "I know the people here."

Only there were no people, apart from a few children playing near the entrance to one of the more dilapidated blocks. A window opened somewhere and a few words of abuse followed. Olga shouted a suitably obscene reply and the window slammed shut.

"I am never coming here for a holiday." Said Sophie.

"The veneer of wealth in Putin's Russia is very thin." Said Olga. "Over twenty million people live like this, or worse. It still feels like home though, where I belong."

"Home always does." Said Ruby.

The contrast between conspicuous wealth and their surroundings, was thrown into sharp relief by the arrival of the stretch limousine. Ruby knew it was coming to pick them up, but she'd deliberately kept it as a surprise for everyone else.

"It was a mobile casino." Said Olga. "Then Putin legalised it all and made Vladivostok his Vegas of the east. Now it's just used to pick up businessmen from the airport."

"Wow! Tinted windows." Said Charlotte.

"A legal way to drive into the city, but be seen by no one." Said Olga. "We're meeting my people at the main train station, the last place the authorities will expect."

"So we're officially on the run now?" Asked Lau.

"It's safest to assume that." Answered Ruby.

The limo could have taken twenty at a push, they had plenty of room for them and their bags.

"Keep your things close to you." Said Ruby. "In case we have to move in a hurry."

Olga sat with the driver, the other side of a glass partition. She gave him the sort of hug reserved for family or old lovers. Ruby didn't recognise him, which probably meant he was one of Olga's extended family.

"There's even a DVD player." Said Eugenie.

"Enjoy yourselves." Said Ruby. "We'll be driving around for about an hour, waiting for the right moment to board our train."

Someone threw a can at them, as the driver pulled away. It missed them though, bouncing off the pot holed road behind them. They were quickly on the main road and heading back into the city.

“No sign of extra police at the junctions.” Said Murad. “That’s a good sign.”

“With luck, the authorities will be searching for us along the border.” Said Ruby.

Authorities, what a strange word, usually with negative undertones. Every language had a word to cover the forces who protected the state and cleared up after disasters. Les autorités in France, Regierung in Germany and власти in Russia. Of course people needed the authorities in the form of the fire brigade and the ambulance service, but there was always a feeling that such services weren’t completely..... On your side. Ruby remembered the famous Ronald Reagan quote;

‘The most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m from the government and I’m here to help.’

Most governments thought of their particular police and security services in a positive way. They were there protect the people after all. The strange thing was, or scary thing, was that most of the world’s population would agree with Ronald Reagan.

“Oh Wow !” Shouted Sophie. “There’s a fully stocked mini-bar.”

Ruby realised she’d been daydreaming. She’d normally have told them to leave the drinks alone, but this might be their last chance for a little mild hedonism. The train into North Korea would definitely be a journey with no frills or luxuries.

“Ok, fine.” She said. “Just don’t get too squiffy..... and someone get me a large tequila, no ice.”

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There were two gates to get into the rear of Vladivostok station and they’d been waved through both. No one had even spoken to their driver. In the old Russia, a Zil Limousine had meant political power, now their Mercedes meant new money. Different reasons, same result, they were safely inside the freight yards. Their driver stopped quite near to where Ruby had rescued Charlotte, but on the other side of the perimeter fencing. She could see the broken and fire blackened concrete, now fenced off from the road.

“We’re here. Everyone out.” Said Olga.

Another man who Olga didn’t introduce them too and another long hug. He waited for them to get their bags out of the limo and follow him along the tracks. He showed no signs of being worried about them being seen.

“We’ve spent your money well Ruby.” Said the man. “The employees of Российские железные дороги, Russian Railways, are paid very little. It was easy to bribe them to look the other way. Besides, they seem to think we’re gangsters.”

He grinned at her and Ruby instantly liked him. She suspected that he might really be a local gangster. They followed him up a small ramp and along the side of a train, stopping at two large open doors. They’d reached a baggage car, or one of them, there seemed to be about three of them.

“Sadly items being stolen isn’t unusual.” He said. “It’s also not unusual for people to travel, sat with their goods. I’d recommend you have someone watching your bags, all the time.”

They were in a walled off section of the baggage car, there was another of Olga’s friend watching over a large pile of assorted bags. Some new and leather, other worn and made of canvas.

“We did our best, but we had two bags sewn together and reinforced, for that.”

“That’ll be mine.” Said Sophie.

It was obviously her Russian Bazooka, bagged up by Olga’s people. He didn’t comment on Sophie’s statement, just stared at her for a few seconds.

“She’s stronger than she looks.” Said Murad.

“We might as well add our bags to the pile.” Said Ruby.

Ruby was far stronger than most twenty two year old women, but she was still glad to put her bags down. The world felt instantly better, for not having two large bags to lug around.

“I have contacts in the police.” He said. “There are no alerts out for you in the city. One of the train staff will alert you about any unscheduled stops..... But I think you’ll get to Tumangang without incident.”

Something had obviously occurred to Sophie.

“So we get proper seats and meals ?”

“Yes you do.” Said Ruby. “At least for a while. Ok, I need a volunteer for first bag watcher.”

“I’ll do it.” Said Murad. “I’ve been feeling a bit like a fifth wheel for days. Just don’t forget to bring me a drink and something to eat.”

They discovered that a bag of ammunition was as comfortable as a bean bag, if shoved into just the right angle. Murad was settling in, as Ruby thanked Olga’s people for their help.

“You might have fun swapping trains in Tumangang.” He said.

“We have something planned. Thank you again.”

Ruby led her remaining team, through the baggage car and through a connecting door to the main part of the train. It was quite full, though most of the passengers would disembark long before the North Korean border. They had reserved seats, all together in one of the partitioned off areas of the carriage.

“I think it’s worked.” Said Olga.

Ruby rested back in the large seat, next to a picture window. It beat travelling in a freight car, hell it beat travelling by airlines. The train wasn’t exactly a high speed bullet train, but it would get them there in comfort.

“It has.” She replied. “I did think the plan was a touch over engineered, but we’re here.”

Her little magic trick had worked. They were travelling out of Russia in style, while the Russian police and security services were searching for them on the Chinese border. Jurgis would have been proud of her.

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