

Ruby 2

Chapter 10 – Age of the Train

“It was infuriating when Monique used words and phrases from a Middle Eastern language that he didn’t understand. That was all of them of course. Spider wasn’t a natural linguist like the kids, he often had trouble understanding people from Scotland.”

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The visas for China had actually been approved and they’d arrived on time. Serge had been planning a clandestine trip to Baishan, but he was helping Lisa to find her case on the baggage carousel. Changbaishan Airport would never get onto a top ten list of tourist’s favourite airports, but it was still far better than the alternatives Serge had been planning. A direct flight from Beijing would have been nice, but Ruby had insisted that they take a more circuitous route.

“Humour me Serge. Take a few days over the trip, change planes a few times.” She’d told him.

It did make them look more like tourists, though the journey had been tiring. Not for the kids of course, they relished every opportunity to see more of the world. The plane from Yantai had been a wreck; even the fabric on the seats was falling apart. The kids had loved that too and the four hour delay. Serge just wanted to get to the hotel and spend a day in the shower.

“I can’t see my bag.” Said Roger.

The thirteen were perfect at being tourists. There was no play acting, no pulling on a persona; they really were enjoying being tourists.

“I see yours.” Said Trudy.

Trudy was tall and black, obviously a rare combination in Baishan. She towered above most of the passengers on the plane, helping just about everyone to get their bags. It showed a good community spirit, but many people were taking pictures of her and that wasn’t good. They were supposed to be travelling quietly, keeping off the radar. Pictures on social media, of the nice tall black girl, definitely wouldn’t fall under the traveling quietly plan.

“Come on Trudy.” Said Serge. “We have all our bags now. Time we found our hotel.”

Trudy was a good linguist; she talked to everyone whose bag she’d dug out of the pile. That was also good, but it might also become a nightmare. An elderly Chinese lady was taking their picture, no doubt to put on her social media page. Serge couldn’t remember if they had Facebook in China, but they definitely had Twitter.

“She invited us for lunch on Sunday.” Said Trudy. “I have her phone number.”

Serge cringed ! They had squeaky clean passports and valid visas, so maybe, just maybe, they were doing the right thing. He remembered a DGSE instructor once telling him that he wasn’t very good at blending in with the surroundings. Most of the thirteen were naturals at it. Only Serge had travelled on a false passport, but that had been essential.

“Find us a taxi please Lisa.” He said.

There was a line of green and silver cars outside, all with taxi signs bolted to their roofs. Several looked a bit dented, but it seemed to be etiquette to use the first in the line. Theirs looked to be one of the most neglected, with several dents and a missing front hubcap.

“The Westin Hotel please.” Trudy told the driver, in perfect Mandarin.

Four of them and their bags was quite a load for the elderly taxi and they didn’t have to worry about their driver speeding. Ruby had booked The Westin, the only five star hotel in the city.

“You’ll be on a train for days Serge.” She’d told him. “Enjoy a bit of luxury while you can.”

The hotel was only fifteen kilometres from the airport and the roads were quiet. Their taxi driver said little, barely smiling as Serge paid him a decent tip. In fairness, he'd seen New York taxis that had been just as neglected, but the drivers were usually more talkative.

"Oh, it's beautiful." Said Lisa. "Do you think they have cable TV?"

"I'm sure they do." He replied.

He kept forgetting that they'd effectively spent centuries asleep. Their minds were still getting used to the sudden influx of information that was now available to them. Trudy hadn't slept for two days, after discovering the twenty four news channels on his cable service.

The Westin called itself The Westin Changbaishan Resort and he could see why. It was huge and covered several acres. Ruby had chosen well, there had to be every hotel service imaginable. They checked in and went to their rooms, the kids enthusiastic about the view from every window they passed. Serge just wanted to a long shower and a few hours sleep in a real bed, not another lumpy airline seat.

"Enjoy yourselves." He said. "I'm going to sleep for about twelve hours. Order anything you want and just charge it to your room number."

They hurtled off like three energiser bunnies and Serge doubted that he'd ever had that much energy. He ordered a light meal from room service and stepped into his first proper shower for three days.

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Imran and Isobel had watched the locksmith fit not just a new lock to Sarah's apartment, but a whole new front door. Gone were the two glass panels, the new door was solid hardwood, with two serious looking bolts on the inside. George had arranged it all, with a locksmith who'd worked for some of the top London embassies. The lock itself was expensive, incredibly expensive.

"Every lock has a completely unique set of keys." The locksmith had told them.

The work had taken all day and included the fitting of a lot of metal into the door frame. It looked solid and they both felt safe in the flat. Ruby had told them to go everywhere together, but they didn't go far anyway. Food they ordered online and didn't even let the delivery guy into the apartment. On the few occasions that either of them went out, one of them remained in the apartment and stayed awake.

Isobel had gone to sleep, when Imran heard someone fiddling with the outside door. He instantly woke Isobel, putting his finger to his lips, as she woke up.

"Someone is trying to get in." He said.

The phone had rung a few times that night, later than would generally be accepted as an appropriate time to call. They left the phone to the answering machine and monitored the calls. Sarah received about twenty calls a day, a few were from potential clients. There had been a man called Erdem, who'd sounded as though he'd once shared some intimacy with Sarah. The majority of the calls were from withheld numbers and left no message. Probably they were all just nuisance calls, asking about PPI insurance, or accident litigation. The late ones were worrying though, like someone checking to see if the apartment was occupied. They had their own phones, so they didn't use Sarah's for anything.

Isobel carefully crept right up to the door, waited there for a good minute and then came back to Imran.

"One man." She said. "Frustrated at the change of locks. He'd determined to get in!"

Imran felt scared and couldn't account for the feeling. On strength alone, he could easily break any intruder in two. Add on their various gifts and they had no reason to be anxious, yet he was. He held

Isobel's hand, feeling her heart racing. It was someone trying to get in that was so terrifying ! Even if he got past the locks, the bolts were made of a titanium alloy.

"If he opens the lock, I'm going out there to get him." Said Isobel.

"No !" He hissed. "Ruby said we're to stay inside."

"He isn't armed."

He held her and kissed her forehead. There was just the two of them, with all day to do exactly as they pleased. Of course they'd become sexual partners, just to ease the boredom more than out of any wish for a relationship. Nature will always win though, they'd well and truly bonded.

"Please Isobel." He said. "I don't want you to take any risks."

She smiled and nodded back at him and Imran felt a warm inner glow. The man at the door tried to enter for a further twenty minutes, before going away.

"He's determined." Said Isobel. "He'll keep coming back."

"I'll tell George."

Imran sent a text to a number George had given them, for reporting anything strange or sinister. The man fiddling with the door fell into both categories.

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Ruby had a few days to enjoy Vladivostok. The trouble that Serge was going to cause in China was part of a long term plan, but it would double as a diversion. If her destination was considered to be China, the North Korean's might relax a little. A trusted member of Olga's Russian network had collected their purchases from Ivan, so all they needed to do was enjoy themselves for a few days.

"It's home to the Russian Pacific Fleet." Said Sarah. "That must mean a lot of fit sailors are in town."

"That might be fun." Added Charlotte.

Even Eugenie had a twinkle in her eye. They were growing up and Ruby could see the attraction of a night spent with flirtatious Russian sailors. They were all in her room at the Hyundai Hotel and the room felt a little crowded.

"Be careful." Said Olga. "Modern man and sexual equality have yet to arrive this far east."

"We'll all go together." Said Ruby. "Do you know a decent bar Olga, or a club ?"

"If you want somewhere fun and reasonably safe." Said Olga. "There is the Cuckoo Club."

"One of the hotel staff mentioned that place." Added Murad. "The queue goes round the block.

We'll never get in !"

Ruby had to smile, he still hadn't recognised the recreational possibilities of their gifts.

"We never queue." She said . "Anywhere !"

"Will there be Russian sailors there ?" Asked Sophie.

Her too ! It was so out of character that Ruby had to chuckle. It seemed that all the girls wanted some male attention.

"It's a bit out of their pay scale." Said Olga. "I do know somewhere near the naval base. A bit rough, we'll need to stick together."

"I like the sound of the Cuckoo Club." Said Lau.

Sophie gave an audible sigh.

"You would !" She muttered.

"Ok, ok, keep it friendly." Said Ruby. "We'll vote on it. Who wants to go to the Cuckoo Club ?"

Lau was the only one with his hand up, so Ruby raised hers, just so he didn't feel too excluded.

"Looks like we're going to The Moonshine." Said Olga.

"Is there a dress code ?" Asked Eugenie.

"Being young and pretty will do." Answered Olga.

"I need to shower and change." Said Ruby. "Everyone out and we'll meet up in the lounge, in..... an hour and a half."

She had to almost shove Sarah out, her friend was so excited at the prospect of a night on the town.

Olga remained, sat on her bed until the others had gone off to put on their evening out clothes.

"The Moonshine isn't that bad." Said Olga. "They'll have fun, but it's really a tourist place. I know you wouldn't want them to go anywhere dangerous. I know a few bars near the naval base and they're all strip joints and full of trouble."

"I can imagine ! Thank you Olga."

"I remember Sarah in Budapest. That one is crazy !"

"I know. I'll keep an eye on her."

Olga left and Ruby undressed and turned on the shower. The excitement of the others was infectious, she was really looking forward to a night out in Vladivostok.

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The Moonshine wasn't that far from the main railway station and in a safe area of the City. To the thirteen it was a night out in an exotic foreign town and they all looked happy, even Lau. Sarah seemed to know she'd been hoodwinked into a better part of town than the naval base, but she didn't seem worried. There were a lot of good looking Russian guys and Sarah was in her element. The kids would have a few hours fun and then a taxi ride back to the hotel. Not that Ruby would fully relax, until they were all safely in bed.

"Relax Ruby." Said Olga. "You are taking them into one of the most dangerous countries on the planet. I think they'll survive a bit too much to drink and a grope with a decent looking Russian."

She was right of course, she was fussing about like a mother hen, over kids who could handle themselves far better than fully human kids.

"What are you drinking ?" Olga asked.

"I suppose in here, it's all vodka and yet more vodka ?"

"Actually they're famous for their cocktails."

"Then I'll have a Long Island Iced Tea please."

Murad had already found a girl to dance with, she had just about the longest legs that Ruby had ever seen. If Murad could pull, she was certain she could. Ruby eyed the crowd and her gaze settled on her usual type. He was tall, dark and looked a little lost. Olga had obviously seen where she was looking.

"Your tastes in men are such a cliché Miss Mason."

"Ok Olga, you choose for me. Who will it be ?"

Olga looked straight over Ruby's left shoulder.

"Her, she's been looking at you since we came in."

The girl was about her own age and colouring. Likes did attract more than opposites, Ruby understood that. There was no need for any special gifts to translate the looks the pretty brunette was giving her.

"I know you used to like girls too." Added Olga.

She had and it had been a long time since she'd enjoyed the company of another woman, in that way. Men were her real thing, but women had that wonderfully soft skin and there was none of that performance neurosis with another woman. Not that anything was going to happen that night, but she did have a few days to keep herself amused in Vladivostok.

"Good idea Olga. See you later."

Ruby went over and introduced herself to Jenny, who was actually from Oregon in America and touring Russia with some friends.

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Max had received his updated instructions from George, given to him by a courier arriving at the W1 flat with two envelopes. It was an odd way to be given highly confidential orders, but probably as secure as any other methods. One envelope contained fifty thousand pounds, the top end of any offer to be made to the ex-cop and now PI, Raymond Phelps.

“Get him to accept less and the balance is yours.” It said in a note with the cash.

The second envelope contained a printed account of the attempt to get into Sarah’s flat in North London. The obsessively persistent character of Phelps had been noted several times. The last line gave him permission to deal with the matter and keep the full fifty thousand.

“If his persistence isn’t diminished by money, dispose of Phelps.”

There it was in black and white on 80 gsm Copy Paper ! An instruction to kill the PI and dispose of his body.

Sadie was due to arrive the next day, so Max was alone as he stood outside the house in Chingford. A modest two up and two down, probably worth six hundred thousand in the crazy London property market. Easily affordable a decade or two before, even on a cop’s salary. Max rang the doorbell, which made an irritating buzzer sound. He had a new walking stick now, something really solid and expensive that he’d bought from a mobility shop in Wigmore Street. Just having the stick to lean on, had dramatically improved his general mood.

“Yes, can I help you ?”

Raymond Phelps looked more like an ex-cop in person than he did in his pictures. There was just something about the way he carried himself. Not like the sort of cop who’s on the frontline of law enforcement. Raymond looked like a back room bureaucrat. Just the sort to become obsessive about Sarah and the kids.

“This is a bit awkward.” Said Max. “My name is Max Krause and we’re in the same game. Could I have a private word with you ?”

Raymond remained in the middle of his doorway and showed no inclination to invite Max inside.

“What about ?”

Max moved a little closer and lowered his voice so that it was only just above a whisper.

“I’ve been hired to investigate a Sarah Simmons and I’ve a team watching her flat in Enfield Town.”

There was a momentary look of surprise on Raymond’s face, but he was still stood squarely in the doorway.

“Last night they saw and filmed someone trying to break into her flat.” Continued Max. “Can we now have a quiet word about who they filmed ?”

“Yes, yes, come in. I knew there was more to Sarah Simmons than just fiddling her benefits.”

Phelps closed his door and Max was inside. They were alone, he knew that the ex-cop was a bit of loner. The PI was quite animated, now that he thought of Max as a fellow investigator.

“Who gave you my name ?”

“Oh, the usual industry contacts.” Lied Max.

“You mean a police contact identified me. No bloody honour in the force anymore.”

He led Max into a kitchen that showed the usual neglect of a man living on his own. Surface cleaning, but grubby corners and stains in the sink. Max knew the signs, his apartments usually looked much the same.

“Sit down.” Said Raymond. “So, who does Sarah owe money to ? I’m assuming it’s a debt you’re investigating ?”

Max sat without touching anything. He had no idea how the meeting was going to end, so he’d make sure his hands touched nothing at all. He had his cover story rehearsed and ready.

“Yes, she owes about fifty thousand, split between two major credit card companies.”

“I knew it ! No one gets her kind of money from nowhere.” Said Raymond. “Signs on for years and then she’s the owner of several successful companies. Bullshit ! I knew she was up to something.”

Max had heard enough, the excessively nosey and astute investigator, had to go. Max just had to weigh up the options and wait for an opportunity to appear.

“You were really investigating her that thoroughly for the benefits people ?” He asked.

“Oh yes, you’d be surprised at how many people I look into for the DWP. And local councils too. I get a steady stream of work, making sure people really live near to the school they applied to, for their kids to attend. Public sector work doesn’t pay that well, but it’s regular.”

“I was worried about a conflict of interest with my enquiry.” Said Max. “But as there doesn’t seem to be one, I’ll go. Can I use your bathroom before I leave ? It’s a long drive back to town.”

Phelps was actually grinning at him now, they were fellow private investigators.

“Chingford is a long way from anywhere.” He joked. “Yes of course, the loo is upstairs and right in front of you.”

Max made a point of leaning heavily on his stick, as he stood up and walked into the hallway. He’d have to touch a few things now and he needed to remember where to wipe clean.

“I assume you will be destroying the pictures of me at Sarah Simmons’ place.” Raymond called out.

“Yes, no problem. They’ll all be deleted.”

He clumped up the stairs and into the bathroom. Max really did need to use the facilities, so he took his time and washed his hands afterwards. More deliberate clumping about, to re-inforce his persona as a clumsy old guy with a busted leg. He flushed the toilet and kept on pumping the handle. Max opened the bathroom door and shouted to Raymond.

“Sorry, I appear to have broken something.” He yelled. “The water won’t stop, it’s going all over the floor.”

“Crap ! What did you do ?”

Phelps was in the hallway, looking up at him. Max tried to look helpless and slightly stupid. The trick was not to overdo it, Phelps was no fool. Max kept his foot in the bathroom door, staring into the room.

“My cane got caught up in..... Christ ! You must let me pay for the damage.”

“What the fuck !?”

Raymond was fit for his age, fitter than he looked. The PI took the stairs two at a time, until he was almost at the top. Max used his stick as a weapon, jabbing it into Phelps’ chest and pushing him over.

“Sorry, nothing personal. You’re just too damn persistent.”

Raymond instinctively grabbed the cane, using it to pull himself upright. Max simply let go of his stick and Phelps went over backwards, breaking his neck as he fell. The PI lay at the foot of the stairs, his head at an impossible angle, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. Max was thorough, he checked for a pulse, even though Raymond was obviously dead.

Max used toilet tissue to wipe everywhere he’d touched and then screwed it up into a ball and took it with him. No searching for information on Sarah, that would ruin the accidental death scenario.

Poor Raymond had run upstairs too fast and taken a tumble. He was a loner, it might be months until someone discovered his body.

“More than a thousand people a year, die from falling down stairs.” He mumbled.

George would have contacts who could look into Sarah’s problems with benefits, contacts who could make the problem go away. The problem had been knowing who wanted her investigated and now they knew. Max was happy, he had an extra fifty thousand pounds to spend.

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There was a park just over the road from Moonshine, one that didn’t have fences or get locked up at night. Ruby didn’t know why she’d ended up there with Jenny, it had seemed a good idea at the time. The park had a play area for children and several benches hidden among the trees. Too much intimacy was awkward in the bar, but Jenny had Ruby flat on the bench, her legs right up against her chest. Ruby was too drunk to worry about being seen and having too much fun.

“You taste like..... apples.” Said Jenny.

It was the free shower gel at the hotel, but Ruby didn’t want to spoil the moment by mentioning it. Girls were always so much better at giving oral sex than men. Part of it was patience, but most of it was down to knowing the places where they enjoyed being licked and nuzzled. Jenny was good at it, very good at it.

“Don’t stop.”

“I can hear someone calling your name.”

Ruby sat up and pulled her knickers straight. She could now hear Eugenie, calling her from near the entrance to the park. Oh, the fun of being a mother to thirteen kids ! Her skirt was crumpled and her top had picked up a few grass strains from somewhere, but she’d have to do.

“Sorry, I’d better see what they want.” She said.

“Probably for the best, the cops here take a dim view of sex in public places.”

Ruby stood up and almost fell against Jenny. They’d both had quite a bit to drink and good sex always left her feeling a bit lightheaded.

“Ok Eugenie !” She yelled. “Don’t wake the whole city.”

Eugenie ran up and was in a real state of panic. Her emotions were actually hurting Ruby, like music played far too loud.

“I can’t find Charlotte ! And then I couldn’t find you !”

Ruby hugged her and smiled at Jenny over her shoulder.

“Ok, we’ll go and find Charlotte, just give me a minute.” Said Ruby.

She liked Jenny, enough to want to repeat the sex, but in a proper hotel room, with both of them naked and reasonably sober. Ruby rarely used what Spider referred to as ‘the fluence,’ on her dates. She liked her partners to be willing and keen, all on their own. Plans had been made with Jenny, but they had both been quite drunk. She kissed Jenny, hard and on the lips, using her tongue.

“What is my name ?”

“You’re Ruby Mason.”

“Where am I staying ?”

“The Hyundai.”

Ruby kissed her again, hoping that it wasn’t for the last time. It wasn’t love ! If she loved anyone, it was Serge. She just wanted to spend some time with Jenny.

“Where are you going to be tomorrow night at eight ?”

“In your hotel room.”

“Good, now I have to go and find Charlotte.”

She held Eugenie’s hand, wondering why she was in such an emotional state.

“Where did you last see her ?”

“When she went after the men.”

“What men ?”

It was all becoming far more sinister than a friend simply wandering off. Sophie was stood in the street near the park, waves of extreme emotion cascading off her.

“I told her to let them have the bag.” Said Sophie. “It was just full of my junk.”

Ruby stopped moving away from the bar and moved them just inside the door to Moonshine. They could hear the dance music, but still talk without shouting.

“Right you two. I want all the details about Charlotte, this bag and the men. Everything ?”

“They were young.” Said Eugenie.

“Three of them and they grabbed my shoulder bag and ran off with it.” Added Sophie.

“We both told Charlotte to let them have it.” Said Eugenie.

“So what did Charlotte do ?”

They were looking at each other, like children about to share a really deep secret.

“I shouted at her not to.” Said Sophie. “I told her my bag had nothing in it worth stealing.”

Apart from the bag, which was Gucci and had cost a small fortune. Russian street robbers weren’t silly, the bag alone was worth stealing. Ruby found herself becoming angry at their prevarication.

“So, where is Charlotte !?” She shouted.

“She ran after the men.” Said Eugenie.

“To get my bag back.”

Ruby was still under the influence of four or five Long Island Iced Teas. She had no other plan than simply finding Charlotte and making sure she was safe and hadn’t killed half the street criminals in Vladivostok. First she hugged Sophie.

“Tell everyone to stay in Moonshine until we get back.” She said. “Tell them how angry I’ll be at anyone who leaves the bar.”

“I will.”

She held Eugenie’s hand and took her back to the park, sitting them both cross legged on the bare concrete of the play area. Ruby had found Sarah in Budapest, before her gifts were anywhere near as powerful.

“Help me Eugenie, use your gifts.”

Ruby felt Charlotte, barely a mile away and still angry. Charlotte being angry was a worry, she was capable of bringing down her thunder on the entire city. Ruby pointed in the general direction of Vladivostok railway station. Everything seemed to be railway connected lately. As Spider had pointed out;

“It is the age of the train.”

He then explained that you had to be at least his age to get the joke.

“That way !” Said Ruby. “We need to run to catch her.”

~ ~

The man from Special Branch had taken quite a shine to the bird, the one Monique was calling Crow.

“It is legal I hope ?” He’d asked. “There are all sorts of rules about potential health problems and CITES rules for endangered species.”

All Spider knew was that Kallina had bought it from a trader in India, not far from Calcutta. There was no paperwork and as far as he knew, the bird was probably caught illegally.

“An old friend gave him to me.” He replied. “He’d had it for years.”

The bird didn't like their guest, it was making a low booming sound that seemed to indicate that it was unhappy. It seemed quite happy being looked after by Monique and had stopped trying to stab her with its beak.

"What is it anyway?"

No sodding idea was the true answer. He'd looked up the name on the sheets of paper Kallina had left and it wasn't even on Google.

"It's a Weaver Bird of some kind." He lied.

The police officer just shrugged and lost interest in the bird. The man had come with instruction to call George to verify his credentials.

"Tell him everything Spider. I promise you there'll be no comebacks, he represents the interested parties in Natalie's death, the clients."

The man's warrant card had said Iain Peck, Special Branch, but Spider thought he was more likely to be from MI6, or another of the more clandestine agencies of national security. He'd seen a lot of MI6 when he'd been in Afghanistan and he'd never liked any of them. There had been no question of their visitor taking anything away, he just read reports, listened to recordings and took lots of notes. He'd also drunk about a dozen cups of coffee and all their chocolate biscuits. Spider told him everything apart from where Aunty Silvia had gone to ground, he owed her that.

"Can you read him?" Spider asked.

They were alone in the hallway, as Monique prepared to go out for more biscuits and a few nibbles.

"Don't worry Spider, he's on our side. I wouldn't like to be Rob Newsmith."

"Why do you say that?"

"My people would have called him a $\mu\alpha\rho\eta\omega\sigma\sigma\upsilon\lambda\alpha\varsigma$."

It was infuriating when Monique used words and phrases from a Middle Eastern language that he didn't understand. That was all of them of course. Spider wasn't a natural linguist like the kids, he often had trouble understanding people from Scotland. Monique was half out of the front door, by the time she ran her finger over her throat.

"Assassin." She hissed at him.

She returned with various bags of junk food and a huge bag of Hula Hoops, which Iain Peck seemed to love. He then went through the notes and recording that Spider had taken of Ivy Norris.

"Was she aware that you were recording her?" Asked Iain.

"No, she would have clammed up." Replied Spider.

Peck sighed and listened to the tape again, before holding up his coffee cup.

"Do you have anything stronger?" He asked.

"Yes, we have everything stronger." Said Monique, reeling off a list of every bottle of liquor in the house.

Their guest settled for a tumbler of Jack Daniels with no ice. He then listened to the tape of Mary Dwyer and her memories of Rob Newsmith and his friends.

"Well, it would never get a court conviction." Said Peck. "But then again, this matter will never be going to court."

Monique was looking at him with her best inscrutable smile. Spider could almost hear her hissing the word assassin at him. Peck was looking at them all, including Fabio, who'd so far avoided talking to their guest.

"Do you think Ivy Norris was telling the truth?" Asked Peck.

"Definitely." Answered Fabio.

"All of it is true." Added Monique.

Spider just nodded and filled his glass and Iain's. The kids knew far more about people being truthful than he did. They were walking lie detectors, with a hundred percent accuracy.

"She's quite old." Said Peck. "And it was all a long time ago."

"She was telling it straight." Said Spider. "You can hear it in her voice. She was having trouble with her husband and didn't want it spread across the tabloids."

"So she kept quiet." Added Monique.

He took more notes, the Special Branch man who wasn't really what he claimed to be. He was some sort of official and George had vouched for him though and that meant Spider trusted him. Besides, Monique said he was on their side and Monique was never wrong about such things.

"You've done a superb job on a cold case." Said Peck.

He waved his arm about, indicating the numerous file, pictures and details on their white board.

"No one else seemed to give a crap about her." Said Spider.

"People care now Mr Bailey, people care now." Said Iain. "What is the next step in your investigation?"

"I spoke to a couple of women on the phone, escorts who knew the infamous trio. They both live in the north of England now and we were going to travel north to see them."

"People are more honest when you talk face to face." Added Fabio.

"That sounds a good plan." Said Peck. "Keep George informed and he'll pass the information along to me. You might see me again, but I doubt it."

He removed a thick envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket and put it on the coffee table.

"Towards the expenses and as a sign of appreciation for what you've done. You can also tell Aunt Sylvia that it's safe for her to return home."

Their guest seemed none the worse for wear from his two large glasses of Jack Daniels. He collected his things together and began to leave.

"You will reach a point where you're just going through the motions." He said. "When there is no new evidence to gather or people to interview. Just let George know when you get to that point."

Monique opened the door for him and he was gone, walking off in the direction of Ealing Central tube station.

"That was all very weird." Said Fabio.

Spider's first thought was to open the envelope, it was rather thick. Of course it might be full of five pound notes and then it wasn't being that generous. He picked up the plain brown envelope and sat in his favourite chair. It was fifty pound notes, those lovely pinkish coloured notes. Hard to spend in some shops, but Spider wasn't about to complain. He ripped off the remains of the envelope and rippled the banknotes.

"About three grand. We're eating out tonight my friends. Where shall we go?"

"A posh pizza place." Said Monique.

"Indian food." Said Fabio.

Left to themselves a fight would ensue, there might even be hair pulling and biting. Spider decided to intervene with something they all liked.

"Looks like a night for a Thai place." He said.

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Ruby ran, with Eugenie following her, waves of guilt and anxiety flowing off her. It reminded Ruby of Budapest and Baku, but this time it wasn't Sarah she was chasing. It took fifteen minutes to reach the train station and even then it wasn't clear where Charlotte had gone to. There were so many side alleys, loading bays and parking lots full of waste bins. A road ran parallel to the train tracks and

next to it was a covered row of parking spaces. Poor lighting, no sign of cameras, the sort of place to be avoided like the plague. Charlotte was there though, Ruby could still feel her anger and it had turned to rage.

“Charlotte !!” Yelled Eugenie.

One small exit sign lit the scene and that was only giving off a meagre glow of yellow light. Charlotte was there and she had Sophie’s Gucci bag in her hand. Charlotte had chased the three thieves across a foreign town and recovered what had been stolen. It had been a stupid thing to do, yet Ruby couldn’t help feeling proud of her. They were all looking at Eugenie now, looking towards the girl shouting Charlotte’s name in an English accent. One of the men was on the ground, but still moving about. His two friends were backing away from Charlotte, obviously scared of the crazy girl and wanting to get away.

“You’ve got the bag, leave them alone now !” Shouted Ruby.

The two street thieves viewed Ruby’s arrival as reinforcements for their tormentor. One brought a gun out of his pocket and aimed it at Charlotte. Ruby stopped running and held onto Eugenie, stopping her from advancing on the two men.

“Go !” Shouted Ruby. “This is over, go home. Take your injured friend.”

“NO !” Shouted Charlotte.

She was advancing on them, her fists up like a boxer. Serge had trained Charlotte to fight and she was easily a match for the street thugs. The one in front of her raised his gun and Ruby recognised the model. Jurgis had sold them and they were cheap, nasty and generally useless. Made out of plastic for the long disbanded Czech security services, the guns were almost entirely made of plastic. Hard plastic, tough as steel even the bullets were plastic on a plastic strip. Usually six, though sometimes eight, all the bullets could be fired in less than a second. There was a fifty-fifty chance that the weapon would jam, but if it fired, they usually inflicted fatal damage.

“Charlotte !” Yelled Ruby. “For fuck sake let them go !”

It was no use, Charlotte wasn’t going to be happy until she’d beaten both of the men to a pulp, Ruby had once felt a similar rage herself. Charlotte advanced and the thug fired his gun, all eight hard and weighted plastic bullets. Ruby saw Charlotte hit by them all, as his fire raked across her chest.

“Bastard !” Shouted Eugenie.

Eugenie reacted instinctively and the man with the gun went up like a roman candle. The flames were so intense that his friend on the ground was burned too, his clothes catching light and then his hair. It was horrific and someone in the station must have seen the flames, even if they hadn’t heard the gunfire. Just a fence and four railway tracks separated them from the main line station. Even at that late hour, someone would be there and they were certain to have called the authorities.

“Do you see the last one of them ?” Asked Ruby.

“There !”

He’d moved away, trying to hide behind an old van. He had to be dealt with, there could be no telling all his friends about girls with super strength, who could immolate their enemies. Ruby raised her hand, but someone had him by the throat. Charlotte had him by the throat !

“It can’t be !” Said Eugenie.

But it was her, making short work of snapping the man’s neck and then turning him into another ball of red hot flames.

“I saw you shot.” Said Ruby. “All eight bullets.”

There was no sign of a wound on Charlotte, even her jacket was undamaged. It was insane, Ruby had seen the blood burst out her ruined chest.

"I thought I'd been shot too." Said Charlotte. "But I'm fine, not a scratch, he must have missed."

"No he didn't !"

Eugenie was pointing at a body on the ground where Charlotte had been standing. Their view was dazzled by the flames of their burning enemies, they might never have seen the body holding the Gucci bag. It was Charlotte, a complete and accurate copy, right down to Sophie's bag. Charlotte knelt next to her own body, looking at the blood, the chest almost cut in two.

"How Ruby ? How ?! Am I real ? What happened ?"

Ruby had a pretty good idea what had happened, it had happened to her in Romania. No one had noticed her body then though and it been brought home to Britain to be buried. That was before she'd even met the thirteen.

"It happened to me once." She said. "We need to go, before the police and just about everyone else arrives."

"We can't just leave her." Said Eugenie.

"It isn't her ! That body is dead and Charlotte is alive. We need to go."

Ruby had to pull Charlotte to her feet, already there were sounds of sirens in the distance.

Vladivostok was a relatively small city, the police would soon be there. Still Charlotte resisted being taken away from her dead double.

"But, we can't leave without..... it." She said.

"No we can't."

Someone would do a DNA test on the body; maybe put a picture on the local TV news. It was a potential disaster, a problem with only one obvious solution. Even so, Ruby felt awful as she aimed her index finger at the dead version of Charlotte and turned it into a ball of flame.

"No !" Shouted Charlotte.

"Yes ! Help me, it has to be completely incinerated."

No DNA from bone marrow or tooth pulp, it all had to go. Eugenie helped and eventually Charlotte, using their gifts to aim fire and intense heat at the body. Ruby only stopped when the concrete roof of the car bay began to crack.

"Come on, we need to get back to Moonshine. Run !!"

They'd barely gone fifty yards, when the old van exploded, bring down that section of the carpark. No one was going to find anything of Charlotte's dead body or the three men. At best they'd find a few bones and they would all have belonged to the street thugs. Ruby took them along every dark street she could find, only stopping when they were just a street away from Moonshine.

"I need to get my breath back." She said. "The others will all have lots of questions."

"I have questions Ruby." Said Charlotte. "What happened back there ?"

"It happened to me and I'm still not sure of an answer to that."

"Can't we ask Kurt ?"

Kurt again, always Kurt. Ruby felt bitter that the thirteen saw Kurt as a font of all knowledge. She also felt bitter because he wasn't ! She too had hoped for a few definitive answers after her trip across the Caspian Sea and all she'd found was yet more questions. And thirteen kids to look after of course.

"Kurt doesn't know, or Kallina." She said. "There are some things that we have to work out for ourselves. Even then a lot of it will be guesswork."

"I don't mind a guess." Said Charlotte.

"I think we have something in our unconscious minds." Said Ruby. "Something automatic that kicks in when we need it. Sometimes rage, or an extra boost to a gift. Tonight I think your unconscious

mind rejected death. It created a replica, exact down to Sophie's Gucci bag. All your memories, feelings, everything replicated."

Eugenie was grinning and playfully punching Charlotte on the arm.

"Hey, you're a replicant Charlie, a Nexus 6." She said. "That's so cool."

They recovered from things so quickly. Violence and dangers that would have most people needing months of therapy, they coped with remarkably well. Charlotte was already trading mock insults with Eugenie.

"Am I alive though Ruby ? Am I still me ?"

Ruby hugged her.

"Of course you are ! You're as real as I am. Don't push your luck though. You might have nine lives or that might be your one off chance to cheat death."

Ruby wanted to mention proportional response, there had been no need for the three street robbers to die. They certainly hadn't deserved to die like that. A second's hesitation in Korea might mean death though, maybe the permanent kind. Lectures on proportional action could wait until they were all back home.

"We'll talk about it a lot more tomorrow." Said Ruby. "Now we need to get the others and go back to the hotel."

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