

Ruby

Chapter 6 – Bandit Country

“The boot of the Merc would be a bit more of a problem, the RPG was hard to disguise, but no plan was ever perfect.”

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Ruby hadn't had a lot of sleep, but she still managed to rise at about 7am. She had no idea what time it was in London, but she knew local time was ahead of London. 4am, 5am ? She could only guess at what time the clock in her bedroom at home was showing, she just knew it felt far too early to be getting up. Olga had needed the usual process of denial, anger and acceptance, before she'd believe Ruby could read her mind. It was strange that after watching her unerringly find Sarah in a strange city, Olga still thought it must all be some kind of trick.

“No one can do that Ruby, it's impossible.”

“Why do you think Jurgis kept me around, just for decoration ?”

“Well I knew you two were..... sharing a bed, I just assumed...”

Ruby laughed, Jurgis had a certain soft spot for her, he'd even told her he loved her. But he'd never keep anyone in his circle who didn't pay their way.

“I know you resented me Olga. I remember you actually thinking about killing me on one occasion. The nasty little British brat who didn't know her place.”

Olga went very pale and simply stared at her.

“You couldn't know that, you're just guessing.”

“The thing is Olga that then, I just didn't care. You wanted to take me over the border into Croatia and leave me in a ditch and then claim that one of the local militias had killed me.”

“You knew and yet you still went with me !?”

“Why should I care ? I didn't fit in anywhere. I was too scared to go back home and sometimes I felt too scared to stay in Budapest. Dumping me in a ditch almost seemed like doing me a favour.”

Olga was crying and hugging her.

“I never, I wouldn't..... it was just anger.....”

Ruby held her and knew they'd both excised a demon that had needed removing from their relationship.

“I know Olga, you treated me like a sister once we got back from Zagreb.”

“Do you still feel that way about your life Ruby ?”

“Sometimes, but I have a life now and George accepts me for what I am.”

They'd hugged and exchanged stories until about 3am. It had been necessary, but emotionally draining. It turned out that neither of them knew where Jurgis had been born; his original nationality was a secret he'd taken to the grave.

“He mentioned a grandmother in Latvia once,” Olga had said, “but that might have been a lie.”

It was now 7am and Ruby looked out of her bedroom window and cringed as she saw the slight covering of snow on the grass in the garden. It was normal for winter in the east, but snow would just add another hazard to their journey. She showered and dressed and then went downstairs in search of something for breakfast. Spider was alone in the kitchen, frying a pan of bacon and eggs.

“I didn't think I'd see anyone else until after ten.” He said.

“That smells wonderful.”

Spider took another plate out of the cupboard and gave her half the contents of the pan.

"It would have been better with a few fried tomatoes, but there are none in the fridge." He said. While Ruby ate, he put more bread in the toaster and put buttered toast on a plate in front of her, together with a large mug of coffee.

"You have unseen talents Spider."

"The army taught me the importance of a good fry up for breakfast. It is just about the only meal I can cook."

Spider had turned on a radio near the cooker and it was quietly playing jazz music. They could easily have been enjoying breakfast in London, rather than halfway across the new extended Europe.

"I think you're right about nobody else getting up until after ten. I have something to pick up this morning, do you want to come with me?"

"It's what I'm here for, where are we going?"

"A shop, it's not far. We can get a taxi and be there and back before they get up. I'll leave them a note anyway."

"Will it be open?"

"Yes, Tobor always gets in well before eight."

While Spider stacked the dishes, she rang a local cab company and her Hungarian was good enough to obtain the promise of a cab at the door in fifteen minutes.

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"Your people in Paris seem in a bit of a flap. I was told to give you this."

Serge hated not being armed, but it was impossible to take a gun on any of the major airlines. The embassy van had been waiting for them, complete with weapons for him and Roland. Only on loan of course, they had to sign a form guaranteeing they'd be returned before they left Bulgaria. While Roland signed the various forms, he opened the sealed envelope the embassy official had just handed him. He knew it was from Collomb from the short clipped sentences. Coded in Paris and then decoded in Varna, the strangled pros still identified it as a letter from his boss, Gérard Collomb. "Files found hidden in attic. You may need extra team members. Detailed files on way in diplomatic bag. Don't leave Varna until you've read contents and we've talked."

Collomb agitated, that was a first. Serge noticed the message had been rush coded to make sure it was in the van meeting them. They'd obviously found something fairly dramatic in Henri's attic.

"Anything else I can do for you?"

"No. I think arriving at the hotel in an embassy van might give the game away."

Serge picked up his bag and Roland followed him as he climbed out of the van and headed for the line of taxis.

"What did the note say?" Asked Roland.

Serge was getting to like Roland, so he simply gave him the envelope and waited while he'd read it.

"More people on our team, that sounds ominous."

"Maybe Henri really did find some aliens?"

They both chuckled and waited for the taxi driver to put their bags in the back of the cab. Serge would never have claimed to sound like a native, but his Bulgarian was good enough to get by. Besides, most Bulgarians spoke fluent Russian and that he could speak like a Muscovite.

"Where are we going?" Asked the taxi driver.

"Can you recommend a decent hotel?" Asked Serge. "Somewhere with a sea view?"

It appeared he knew someone who ran the best hotel in Varna and it was cheap. Serge nodded at him and leant back in his seat and closed his eyes. It looked like being a very long day.

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The sign above the shop said Kornél Toys and the window was full of children's toys. Not just the usual high tech toys, but old fashioned traditional toys made of wood. Ruby had no idea who Kornél had been, she'd only ever known Tobor, who'd inherited the shop years before.

"You'll like Tobor, everyone does." She said.

"What does he do, besides selling toys?" Asked Spider.

"Papers, he's the best forger in Hungary. But I'm not here for that, he has something of mine."

They entered the shop and two young members of staff were dusting and moving various displays around.

"We're not really open for another hour." One said.

"I'm here to see Tobor, we're old friends."

"Do you know the way?"

"Yes."

Ruby went through a door into the store room, Spider following close behind her. Boxes of all shapes and sizes filled most of the room and the odd broken toy. She dodged through the aisles of boxes and stepped over the broken dolls. Eventually they came to a set of stairs leading upwards.

"I love this place," she said, "I used to come here for Espresso and biscuits when Jurgis was driving me crazy."

They'd gone up a few stairs when Spider asked;

"Did you love Jurgis?"

"Sometimes. He was so flawed that it was almost impossible not to love him."

There was a narrow hallway at the top of the stairs with several doors. All of them had staff only signs on them. Ruby ignored the sign and opened the door at the end of the hall. The room beyond was a nightmare of clutter. Several filing cabinets filled one wall and all of them had drawers open to reveal vast amounts of yellowing paper. The floor was carpeted, but the ancient carpet was now a uniform buff colour. Not that much of it could be seen through the piles of paper and toy samples that had been left by generations of sales reps.

"Ruby! So nice to see you again. I'll buzz down for coffee."

The man behind the desk looked quite old, but in contrast to the room, his suit looked freshly pressed and expensive. There was an old sofa near the desk, but it had two broken dinosaur toys on it. Ruby pushed them both onto the floor so that she and spider could sit down. First though she went round the old mahogany desk and hugged Tobor.

"I've missed you and your coffee."

Ruby kissed him on his cheek, which made the elderly shop owner blush.

"The box you sent arrived and it doesn't appear to have been opened. I'll get the lad to bring it up with the coffee."

Ruby perched herself on the edge of the desk, while Tobor pressed a number and had a brief conversation with one of his staff.

"Are you in Budapest long?" Asked Tobor.

"No, we're heading further east today. Across Romania and then on to the black sea coast."

Tobor pursed his lips.

"Bandit country Ruby, I hope you're going with friends."

"This is Spider, he's going with me and Olga."

"Olga! Now I know you'll be safe. Even the Hajduk are scared of Olga."

They both laughed, but Spider had no idea what they were talking about.

"The who?" He asked.

“Please forgive our nonsense Spider,” said Tobor, “every country has someone like your Robin Hood and his merry men. People who legend says took from the rich and gave to the poor. In this part of the world we call them the Hajduk. Though these days the bandits tend to cut your throat and keep the money.”

“How bad is the region we’re going through ?” Asked Spider.

“I’ve known worse, but I’m glad to hear Olga is going with you.”

The lad who brought up the coffee and biscuits looked to be at least forty, as did the other who carried in a box with courier stickers on it. Ruby picked up the box and examined the duct tape around every edge.

“Thank you Tobor. Carrying it through immigration could have been awkward, but no one looks at a parcel sent to a toy shop.”

She used a paper knife from the desk to open the box and removed a broken doll wrapped in bubble wrap. Under the doll was another box, which she put on the sofa next to spider. The lads had now gone, so Ruby simply put the broken doll on the floor and enjoyed her coffee.

“Do you need anything else Ruby ? Passport, driving licence perhaps ?”

“No, but thank you, we brought papers with us.”

Tobor moved from behind his desk, revealing that he was quite short and stout. He rummaged in a metal box and brought out an object wrapped in what looked like a towel. He handed the object to Spider.

“These are quite difficult to obtain in Budapest, but you might need it for your trip.”

Spider unwrapped the object inside the towel and found a Browning 9mm that looked to be in perfect condition. He pulled out the magazine and it was fully loaded. After a day when everything had been going wrong, it was what Spider needed.

“Thank you Tobor, I’m sure this will come in useful.”

“When Ruby called, she mentioned it might be appreciated.”

After several cups of coffee they left, Spider carrying the rather heavy cardboard box. As they reached the shop door he had to ask;

“Yes I’m being nosey, but what am I carrying.”

“The rest of Ingrid Pearce’s money. We’ll probably need it.”

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Max successfully negotiated his way through baggage collection and immigration at Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport and noticed Cynthia had come to meet him. She was alone; she obviously wanted some private time with him. Probably she wanted an opportunity to blame Raúl for losing Ruby.

“Can I take your bag ?”

“Thank you, my knee doesn’t do well on cold damp mornings.”

“There was a light dusting of snow last night.”

The small talk that was so much a part of any meeting, the chance to put someone at their ease, or stir them up.

“Is your hotel far ?” He asked

“No, we’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“Good, we have a lot to discuss.”

Max limped out of the terminal doors and followed her to where she’d parked the Land Rover. Max cultivated a legend that his leg had been destroyed by an enemy bullet, but in reality he’d smashed his knee diving out of a mess hall window for a bet. He’d won the bet and preserved the honour of

his unit, but his knee injury had eventually led to early retirement. Cynthia pressed the fob on her keys to unlock the doors and put his bag on the rear seat. Once they were in the vehicle and on the move she wasted no time in getting to the point;

“I’m sorry Max. If we’d been allowed to stay closer to her, but she obviously had help in Budapest. Then there was the ludicrous tracker that Raúl insisted on using.....”

He put his hand on her arm for a second.

“Raúl will be on the next plane back to London, I’m sacking him.”

“He’s out in the other vehicle at the moment.”

She’d obviously sent him on an errand to keep him busy, Max smiled and knew he’d chosen the right person to keep.

“Then call him, tell him to meet us at your hotel.”

While she made the call he concentrated. Cynthia was watching him, not enough to make her driving reckless, but she was watching him. She finished the call and drove slightly quicker.

“Don’t worry Cynthia this isn’t a purge. No one else is going home.”

She was still watching him, a nervous tick had started at the edge of her left eye.

“I will lead the team for a while, but it will be yours again once we find Ruby and her friends. We’ll get rid of the helicopter and concentrate on reacquiring the target.”

The traffic was dense and her prediction of twenty minutes to the hotel looked like turning into closer to forty.

“Can we keep closer when we find her ?” Asked Cynthia.

“Yes. Obviously we have to listen to the client, but we do have to get the job done. Once we find her, we keep at least two people on her until she’s back in London.”

“Do we know where she’s heading ?”

“East it appears. George Polandrous spoke to the woman who owns the hotel they stayed at in Paris. Quite a nice lady who seemed worried about Ruby. They’re heading for the Black Sea coast and it would seem she’s teamed up with some old friends from her time in Budapest.”

“Are these old friends a threat ?”

“Not to her, but you might need to keep your head down.”

Cynthia received a call to say Raúl was waiting at the hotel. They drove on in silence until they pulled into the car park of the hotel. It was one of a chain, the sort of hotel used by business reps and conferences.

“You’ll need new vehicles.” Said Max as he got out of the car.

“I’ll hire them today. I’ll do it myself once Raúl is on his way home, the cars we have can stay in the hotel car park.” Replied Cynthia.

They were across the reception lounge and at the lifts when Max decided to see how well Cynthia might follow orders in extreme circumstances.

“There may come a point when our client wants Ruby dealt with. Could you do that ?”

Max knew the skeletons all his employees had in their past and he knew Cynthia’s was the death of an entire family in Fallujah. An internal inquiry had fully exonerated her, but rumours persisted. He saw her face twitch for a fraction of a second and she waited until they were alone in the lift before answering.

“Are you asking if I’d obey an order to kill her ?”

“Yes.”

“No problem, I did far worse for the agency.”

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The Lamborghini had gone from the garage, Ruby assumed it had been sent off to whoever had ordered it from Olga and her group. Now a large and very battered Beige Mercedes stood next to the van they'd been brought it.

"It certainly looks the sort of car Romanian gangsters would drive." Said Spider.

"Poverty stricken gangsters !" Added Sarah.

Sarah had been throwing up all morning, there had even been blood in some of it. Or so she told them, no one had actually seen her throw up. Olga had told Ruby that Sarah had eaten three rounds of toast once she finally got up at about ten thirty.

"I trust Olga when it comes to cars," said Ruby, "if she thinks the Merc will get us there, it'll get us there."

"So there's no chance of getting a plane to Varna ?"

They both ignored Sarah. Ruby went to see if Olga needed a hand loading up the van and Spider went to see if there was anything in the kitchen to snack on. Olga had told her they needed to take a second vehicle;

"We need a backup that everyone can fit into and all our gear." Olga had told her.

It appeared the fairly old and battered van had twice gone right through Romania and into the Ukraine, though Olga was a bit vague about what the cargo had been.

"We make money out of conflict, we can't be picky !" Olga had shouted at her.

Andrei was going with them, they were going to be a party of five. Who was going in which vehicle had yet to be finalised, but Olga had already allocated a seat for Ruby in the back of the Merc. Ruby examined where she'd be sitting, just as Andrei was putting a weapon into the boot.

"We're really taking rocket launchers ?" Asked Ruby.

"It's a Russian made RPG," said Andrei, "one in the Merc and one in the van."

"Do we really need them ?"

"You'd be surprised at what bandits in the mountains are armed with. Think of taking them as taking a condom in your purse to a party."

They both laughed.

"I know Andrei. Better to take it and not need it than end up blown to bits because we didn't have one."

"Something like that."

Despite his friendliness, she still only picked up indifference from him. Andrei was going with them because Olga was paying him extra. It was a pity, he was good looking, but Ruby needed a certain fire in her lovers and Andrei had none at all.

"Strap them up nice and tight. Nothing must shift about on rough ground."

Olga was talking to the dark haired girl from Varna, as she strapped several jerry cans of petrol to the walls of the van. The girl wasn't going; she was handling business while Olga was away.

"When will we be ready to leave ?" Ruby asked Olga.

Olga had a list. Not an electronic list, but a paper list on a clipboard. She looked it down and looked in the back of the van.

"I've one delivery still to come, but it'll be here soon. We can have a late lunch and leave in the mid afternoon. That way we'll miss the early evening traffic."

Olga walked over to her and spoke quietly.

"I've paid out quite a bit Ruby and Andrei would like some of his money before we leave. I hate to ask, but I need at least half the money for this trip before we leave."

"Yes of course."

Spider had simply put the box in a thick bin bag and placed it into the boot of the car. Ruby shifted a few items about and lifted the box out of the boot.

“Where do you want to do this ?”

“The kitchen will do.” Replied Olga.

Spider was at the kitchen table and enjoying a meal of cold meat and pickles. He was eating quite a bit and Ruby suspected that a fridge with fresh food in it was something of a novelty to him. She lifted the heavy box onto the table.

“Do I get family rates ?”

Money had been talked about at various stages, but the trouble with Sarah had taken up a lot of their time. Ruby had a figure in her head, but nothing had actually been agreed. Jurgis had always charged more to help out friends.

“You take risks for friends Ruby, friends can be very bad for our health.” He’d once said.

Olga was consulting her list and Ruby picked up a number from her mind. It was a huge sum, but not an obscenely large one, considering the circumstances.

“I have to assume all the vehicles and equipment won’t be coming back.”

Olga looked at her list again. It was a ritual she needed to go through, so Ruby just nodded and waited.

“Andre has a sister he looks after and there is the loss of business while I’m away.”

Spider opened the jar of pickles and put a few more on his plate.

“And of course we could be gone for months.”

“Hopefully it won’t take that long.”

“But it might. I’m sorry, but even at family rates I’m going to need two hundred thousand and I’ll need a hundred thousand before we leave.”

Spider stopped chewing and sat watching them. Ruby opened the box and looked at the three separated heaps of high denomination notes it contained.

“That’s fine. Do you want that in Dollars, Euros or Pounds sterling ?”

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Olga put Spider in the van with Sarah, it seemed the easiest way to avoid Sarah having another meltdown. Ruby had the entire back seat of the old Merc to herself and Olga and Andrei were in the front.

“They’ll fight if you leave them alone.” Ruby had said.

“I’ll go in the van with her tomorrow.” Answered Olga.

Ruby wasn’t sure if that would solve the problem or make it worse, so she kept quiet and watched the streets of Budapest go by. They didn’t look like a heavily armed group of course, they’d all put on plain comfortable clothing and trainers. Olga had added the internationally recognised symbol of harmless nerdy students. She’d provided them all with brightly coloured anoraks. Anyone looking inside the van would just see several tarpaulins covering a few boxes. The boot of the Merc would be a bit more of a problem, the RPG was hard to disguise, but no plan was ever perfect. Their phones had arrived just before they left, Kestrel smartphones with just about everything turned off apart from text messages and voice calls.

“I put everyone’s numbers in the contacts list.” Andrei had told them.

Of course Sarah had phoned them all to make sure the phones worked and it had taken severe warnings from Olga to stop her calling Theo in London.

“Give away our position and you’ll be very sorry !” Olga had hissed at her.

Now they were heading South East along the M5 and should be at the Romanian border in about two hours. Ruby noticed Andrei was using maps to plan the route and not a single electronic device. "How far is it to Varna ?" Ruby asked.

"As the crow flies it's about twelve hundred kilometres." Answered Andrei.

"Only we're not crows," added Olga, "we will keep to the back roads. Less traffic cameras and far less attention at the borders."

"So how long will it take us ?"

Andrei looked at the map and muttered to Olga. She took the map from him and looked at his scribbles along the edges.

"Allowing for a bit of snow in the mountains, we should get to Varna in three days. Maybe four." Said Olga.

Four days ! Ruby had seen the bed rolls in the van and assumed they were for just one night. It had been a long time since she'd gone a day without at least having two showers. And then there was going to be Sarah's reaction.

"Are there any places we could stay," she asked, "Inns, motels, that sort of thing ?"

Olga and Andrei just exchanged a look and started laughing.

"We keep to ourselves Ruby," said Olga, "we'll need to buy fuel for the vehicles, but there will be no hotels until we get to Varna."

Ruby sent a text to Spider telling him the news and asking him to tell Sarah. Then she sent another text.

'Break it to her gently.'

~ ~

As Ruby looked out of the car window she barely noticed the van at the road works. Just another white van surrounded by cones. There wasn't even any human mind to get her attention, the cameras were completely automated. There were several vans on different roads leading south out of Budapest. The automated cameras looked at every face in every car, they could even see through tinted windows. The software was the problem, it took over an hour to sift through faces on its files, run the results through its heuristics programme and decide the face had a ninety four percent probability of being Ruby Anne Mason. It was more certain of Spider in the van and gave a ninety six percent verdict on him being a known felon, one Rupert Bailey, drug dealer and ex British soldier.

"They're on their way." Said Serge.

He didn't get the information for two hours, but the time didn't matter. He now had the registration numbers for both vehicles and soon he'd have pictures of those travelling with them. Now it was just a case of waiting until they came to him.

Serge didn't know that Max had a reliable informant inside the DGSE, but it wouldn't have surprised him. Most intelligence organisations leaked like sieves. Someone needed money for things like medical expenses, or even something as mundane as a daughter's wedding. Once they'd been paid for information once it became a habit. The slightly balding data co-ordinator knew Max was looking for a beautiful brunette travelling with a small group. Ruby's face leapt off the screen at him and Max actually received the information before it reached Serge.

Now everyone following her knew about her companions, their vehicles and they knew the direction she was headed. The only good thing was that none of them actually intended her any harm, or at least not yet they didn't.

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The Romanian border came and went without notice, only Olga's map told them they were now in a different country. Andrei knew a spot where he'd spent the night on another trip through the area. Andrei was always unclear about what he'd been transporting through Romania, but Ruby suspected he side lined as a people trafficker when not in the gun running trade.

"There's an old logging camp, it even has a cabin we can use." He'd said.

The trail off the main road seemed to go on for miles, but they eventually came to a deserted logging camp.

"They'll start up again in the spring, but no one comes here in the winter."

The air smelt of pine cones as Ruby got out of the car and had a good stretch. Once they'd turned off the vehicle lights the darkness was complete, just a few stars glittered in the sky above. Olga opened the back of the van and took a large flashlight off its charging socket.

"Be careful as you open the door, I haven't been here in a couple of months." Said Andrei.

Nothing waited for them in the cabin apart from dirt and grime. Andrei had used the wood burning stove on previous visits, so it was easy to get going, the rest of the cabin showed signs of being deserted. Four bed frames had been turned over and stacked in a corner, empty food boxes had been pushed into a bin bag and left by the door. There was no lighting, but Olga found two oil lamps among the gear in the van and hung them from hooks in the ceiling.

"Not exactly a home from home," she said, "but it'll be a warm place to eat and spend the night."

"Are there any toilets?" Asked Sarah.

"I saw what looked like a toilet hut as we drove in." Said Spider.

"No, don't go near that," said Andrei, "go into the woods, but go in pairs."

Everyone turned to look at Andrei.

"Bears," he added, "and wolves. They're harmless, but go in pairs and be careful."

Ruby was digesting the information about the local wildlife, when Olga came in carrying a large camping stove. Pans and plates seemed to appear from nowhere and soon they were all eating a fairly good beef stroganoff with rice. Everything was from packets and tins, but by the time the coffee arrived, Ruby decided that four days on the road might not be so bad after all.

"Someone will need to double up." Said Olga.

She was turning the bed frames the right way up, while Andrei brought the bed rolls from the van. Spider looked at Sarah, who blushed but nodded at him.

"We'll use the same bed." Said Spider.

Olga produced a radio and they listened to a station broadcasting pop music until it was time to sleep. Sarah was looking uncomfortable. Spider had offered to take her out to pee, but Ruby knew that no woman wants to squat in the bushes in front of her lover.

"Come on, we can guard each other." She said.

A loo roll and torch had been left near the door and a loaded shotgun. As the cabin door closed behind them they were in complete darkness, until Ruby turned on the torch. They avoided the direction where the chemical toilet of ill repute stood and headed the other way. As they neared the closest group of bushes, something large scurried off into the trees. Ruby lifted the shotgun.

"I might not hit it, but I remember hearing that the noise is enough to scare off a bear."

Sarah was now in amongst the bushes, her panties around her knees. Ruby could see her eyes staring around in the torch light as she peed.

"Don't you rely on that Ruby. If anything tries to eat me, you fucking shoot it!"

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