

Ruby

Chapter 11 – Well out of a Boat

“The funny thing was that George wasn’t expecting a visit from the intelligence services, but he should have been.”

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The anti-tank gun turned the police launch into a burning hell, but it didn’t stop it hitting the front of the Go-fast boat. Like a living thing, burning fuel rushed over the front of the boat, setting light to everything it found. Carlos briefly saw the torso of the policeman who’d been behind the wheel of the launch. Only a burning torso, his legs and arms had gone and all that remained of his head was a lower jaw attached to his neck. Mercifully the flames quickly blocked his view and Carlos was left to decide whether to jump overboard or hope the fire didn’t reach the small cabin.

“Jump you fools, she’s breaking up !” Shouted Ivan.

Carlos climbed up onto the side of the cabin, feeling the heat from the approaching flames. The engines were still running, but they weren’t moving. He spun the light back to where he thought Ruby’s boat would be and lit up Spider, still aiming the machine gun in his direction. Carlos waved, hoping that the patrol boat wasn’t about to move away, leaving him to die in the cold waters of the Black Sea. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement and Carlos saw Rose, her legs on fire. She wasn’t screaming and for some reason that surprised him more than her being on fire. She dived over the side, hitting the flame covered water and disappearing under the surface.

“Come on sir, getting to the patrol boat is our only hope !”

Leo jumped, hitting the surface and disappearing into the dark water. Carlos spun the light, catching Ruby pointing in his direction and then he saw her wave. It was going to be alright, she saw him, they would wait and pick him up. Or at least he prayed they would. What was the survival time in the winter waters ? Five minutes, maybe ten ? Rose would have known, but she’d jumped over the side to get away from the flames. The engines died and the lamp, there was no more time to think about possibilities.

“Ruby ! I’m coming !” He shouted.

Perhaps she’d heard him, perhaps not. Carlos jumped, aiming for the patch of water with least flames. He hit the water feet first and there was no sensation of burning. There was a brief feeling of heat and then he was deep below the flames and looking up at the hull of the Go-fast boat. Carlos had once done a tough guy course, a ten day intensive course on how to survive just such a disaster. They had created a crashing helicopter scenario in a huge tank of water. Very realistic, the fuselage of the helicopter had even rolled over to disorient them. But it hadn’t; not really, everyone knew it was in a tank and that they were in little real peril. Now it was different, the ice cold water was the Black Sea and he was a long way from shore. Directions were difficult, though the flames above gave him a definite direction for where the surface was. The intense flames he knew where coming from the Turkish police launch and then there was the hull of the boat he’d just left. Yes, he knew which way to swim and he could see where the surface was free of burning diesel.

It was hard, his muscles were cold, they didn’t want any extreme exercise. Carlos forced himself to ignore the cold and the dark, he aimed for the where there were no flames and hoped Ruby and her patrol boat weren’t far away. Just as he was about to surface the blow hit him like being punched in the kidneys. Something had exploded, probably the fuel in the long range tank on Ivan’s Go-fast boat. Carlos tumbled, completely losing any idea of where was up and where was down. Some

instinct made him ignore the pain in his back and kick for the surface. The patrol boat was there, less than fifty feet from him and he could see Leo climbing up a scramble net. Good old Russian navy, they still had a scramble nets. A light found him in the water, though it blinded him and he wished they'd aim it somewhere else.

"Here, the net is at the back of the boat." He heard Ruby shout.

He knew where the net was, he'd seen Leo climb it. Carlos tried to swim hard for the net, but the cold was beginning to affect his muscles. Slowly, oh so slowly, he used a very weak breast stroke to edge towards the patrol boat. There was a splash in the water near him and Carlos realised he was close to passing out, maybe he had passed out for a second. An arm was round his shoulders and he was being pulled towards the Zhuk class patrol boat.

"Hang on, you'll soon be warm and drinking the muck that Sarah calls coffee."

It was Ivan one side of him and another man on the other. It wasn't Spider, but Carlos recognised the face. Serge, yes Serge, the DGSE agent. What the hell was he doing with Ruby? All the big money was on him being dead and lying in a ditch somewhere in Bulgaria.

"Help him, he'll never climb the net." Said Ruby.

More people in the water, pushing and arms from above pulling. Olga was smiling at him, she looked far more attractive than her pictures in the files.

"You took your time getting here." Said Ivan.

They had him on the rear deck, Olga was tutting at his ripped clothes and scorched arms. Carlos ignored various protests and got up onto his hands and knees. He was just in time to see the Go-fast boat break apart and sink beneath the waves.

"Is Rose here?" He asked.

"No, I don't think she made it." Said Ivan.

"We must search for her."

Sarah brought him a blanket and a steaming hot mug of coffee. As his senses returned, he realised the patrol boat was circling, someone using two bright search lights to examine the surface of the sea. Carlos allowed himself to be taken into the cabin and sat on a chair next to the navigation system.

"We'll do what we can," said Serge, "but we can't stay here too long, the police patrol boats will have given our location to their base. Leo has already started a search pattern."

Leo, of course he'd know how to carry out a man overboard search. Carlos felt proud that it was one of his own people who was using the lamps to scan the waters for Rose. He must have fallen asleep, because he was woken by the sound of shouting out on deck. As he stood up the cabin seemed to spin in front of him and it was Ruby who grabbed hold of him.

"Sit down, they'll get her body out of the water."

"Body?"

He knew from her expression that Rose was dead and it wasn't unexpected, she'd been in flames when she'd jumped into the sea. Poor Rose, he was going to miss her.

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"I'll get you some milk, but you need to try and sleep."

Kallina often found herself talking to her cat as though it was a child. Constanze, named after Mozart's wife in a drunken fit of pure whimsy. Her grey cat had been her only company for quite some time. There had been the old woman who had owned the house, but she'd died of old age three winters before, or maybe it was four. Kallina concentrated and realised the old woman had died three decades before..... she had been on her own for a long time.

“There, once you’ve drunk that, you are to stop bothering me.”

Her cat gave a few deep purrs and began to slowly sip the milk, with the grace that only a cat can give to such mundane tasks. Kallina looked out of the window and could just see the river bank, the one where Ruby would have them beach the patrol boat against the muddy shore. In her mind she saw Ruby, or more felt her, or sensed her. Kallina knew there had been an attack at sea, that many had died. Detail was often stubbornly absent from her sight, but she knew that Ruby was safe and on her way.

“You will see her Constanze, the one Kurt thinks so highly of.”

The grey cat arched her back as Kallina stroked her and then went back to lapping the milk. Kallina had found it easy to get the old woman to accept her as a long lost relative, a child of a cousin in Tbilisi. A large city is Tbilisi, very hard to verify a name or a person, not that any had tried to trace her, as far as she knew. The old lady had introduced her to the local shops and her friends and in a few years Kallina had become an accepted member of the community. Not appearing to age might have been a problem, she still looked like a young woman in her mid-twenties. But making everyone accept that as normal was easy. It was the way her gift was slanted, she’d never met anyone who she couldn’t convince that Wednesday was really Friday. Kallina had been born in the year seventeen hundred and two, in the summer to be precise, or as precise as records then were about such things. She’d been born into a semi-nomadic tribe on the Russian steppe, in an area now part of the Ukraine. Her memory was still very clear on her early life, it was remembering to feed the cat twice a day that was a problem.

“There are days when I feel so ancient Constanze.”

Kallina was tempted to go with Ruby and her friends, to take her to where the children waited. But no, Kurt had told her to remain in the house.

“Ruby is the strongest, the best Kallina.” He had told her.

Once she had been his lover, she had been the best. Constanze rubbed her nose over her arm and Kallina wondered if it was time to feed the creature again. No, she remembered feeding her cat only two hours before. Birds died on her, starved in cages because she thought a week was only a day. Cats were far better, they came and found you when they were hungry, bit your ankles and pestered relentlessly. There was no finding a starved cat in a cage, yes cats were good, cats were far better. Kallina went upstairs and opened her drawer of memories, the drawer with the pictures in. On top was a picture of about twenty children, taken on a sunny day. There were only thirteen of them alive now, Kurt had made an error. The children looked as though they’d been deliberately chosen to represent every race on the planet, but that had been pure chance. Young Sophie from Moscow, born in eighteen eighty seven. Then there was Lau from the area now known as Korea, when was he born ?

“When was Lau born Constanze ?”

She looked and realised her grey cat was downstairs. Just as well, the creature seemed to have no grasp of dates. Twelve ninety seven, that was it. Troubled times then, no wonder the boy had been so wild and difficult to discipline. There were several old pictures of some of those born after the invention of the camera. There was even a Daguerreotype of young Eugenie, taken in Paris in eighteen forty one. All the children, the precious children, there could be no more errors.

“Ruby will look after them Constanze.”

The cat had come upstairs and purred at the sound of her name. Cats are clever creatures and Kallina had noticed how hers was getting quite chubby. It seemed Constanze had learned how to get three or more meals a day. Kallina chuckled and picked up her cat, cuddling her.

“Better fat than starved in a cage eh ?”

Yes, soon Ruby would be in the house by the river in Batumi and they could discuss the children. Ruby would know what to do, Ruby was the best, Kurt had said so.

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Ruby could feel the atmosphere change now that the balance of the sexes had become more masculine. Leo was very good at the routine needed to keep the boat on course and away from shipping lanes. Of course Spider resented that and he didn't like the way Ivan looked at Sarah. Serge seemed to have a surge of testosterone and became incredibly competitive about everything. It was almost a relief when Ivan said he wasn't going to be with them for more than a day or so.

“You'll need to refuel tomorrow,” he said, “I know people in Gülburnu who will fill your tanks, for a price.”

“I thought we had enough to get to Batumi.” Said Spider.

As usual, Leo was watching the horizon and being taciturn, but he did confirm that it would be a good idea to get more fuel.

“Dangerous waters around Batumi,” he said, “lots of large ships. You don't want to be left drifting in the shipping lanes. Very bad.”

Ruby had no idea how Leo knew about the eastern end of the Black Sea, but she trusted him. After all, he had arrived with Carlos.

“It would be good to have plenty in the tanks Ruby, just in case we need to run away from trouble when we get to Batumi.” Said Olga.

Everyone was looking at her for a decision, even the new arrivals. Ruby had never considered herself to be a leader, but she was getting better at it.

“Ok, we'll refuel at Gülburnu. Can you contact your people there with our radio equipment ?”

“Of course, I'll let them know a rough time for our arrival,” said Ivan, “they'll even arrange for Rose to be left somewhere the authorities will find her. For a price of course.”

“Everything has a price.” Muttered Sarah.

They still numbered less than the eleven the boat was designed to hold, yet Ruby felt the cabin was becoming claustrophobic. Perhaps it was the arrival of strangers into their group ? She'd already delved into their minds and found nothing threatening.

“Who are these people we're paying for fuel ?” Asked Spider.

“No names, you just buy the fuel and go. I may as well stay with them for a while and work my way slowly home through Turkey.”

Olga gave Spider a look and Ruby noticed he was handling a gun under his jacket.

“He should stay with us until Batumi Ruby,” said Olga, “he knows our names and where we're going. There are probably quite a few people who'd pay him well for that information.”

“There are,” said Ivan, “probably more people than you realise.”

Spider now had his Browning aimed straight at Ivan and for a second or two Ruby weighed up her options. Killing Ivan might be for the best, he was someone who thought all knowledge was a sellable commodity. She delved deep into his mind and came to a decision.

“Leave him alone Spider, put the gun away.” She said.

He put the gun back under his jacket, but he still didn't take his eyes off Ivan. The boat caught a wave wrong and shuddered, it seemed to suit the occasion.

“I'd better check the engines.” Said Leo.

He left the cabin, which seemed to give Ruby a bit more air to breathe.

“He'll sell us out the instant we leave Gülburnu.” Said Olga.

“No he won’t.” Said Ruby.

Serge had been watching Ivan, he too seemed to be fiddling with something under his jacket, probably the small automatic he’d picked up in Varna.

“How can you be so sure ?” He asked.

“The way I know his name isn’t really Ivan. The way I know all the names of the people he knows in Gülburnu. I know about his mistress in Odessa and the wife he hates but will never leave. Leaving her would mean losing his beloved daughter Marta.”

Ivan and Carlos were looking at her in amazement, but the others were now used to her gift.

“What is his real name ?” Asked Sarah.

For the first time Ivan looked horrified.

“I won’t tell. Let’s just say that Spider got off lightly with Rupert.”

“Hey !” Said Spider.

“Oh come on, we all know your real name Spider.” Said Sarah.

Serge once again looked fed up with their banter.

“Ok, ok, you know his life inside out Ruby, but how can you be certain that he won’t pick up the phone and sell our destination to the highest bidder ?” He asked.

“Ivan may be a lot of things, but he’s never betrayed anyone. He has a code of behaviour, of sorts and he believes loyalty is important. Besides, if he tries to betray us, he’ll be dead in a matter of minutes.”

Ivan’s look of amazement had turned to curiosity and then concern.

“I’ve put a trigger in his mind,” she continued, “if he tries to say anything about us, his eyes will start to bleed. That will be visible, but his internal organs will also begin bleeding. Very quickly he’ll be too weak to stand and he’ll collapse onto the ground. In less than two minutes he’ll be dead and his death will be painful.”

No one doubted her, no one asked if she could really do it. Not even Ivan asked if she was serious.

“Who made you ?” He asked. “Russians, the American ? I know even the Chinese are playing about with brain augmentation.”

She gave him pain. Not agonising or for long, just enough to make a point. Ivan gasped and held his stomach, wincing at the sudden pain.

“Shut up. Call your people in Gülburnu and arrange for our fuel.” Said Ruby.

“I still think we should all know his real name.” Said Sarah.

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Max decided he needed a last night in a decent hotel, so he directed Marco towards Akhaltsikhe in Georgia.

“I thought you’d stay away from Cities.” Said Marco.

“It is only a small city and we can catch up on the news.”

The hotel was a good one, at least four stars, though Max didn’t see any claims to a star rating on their front doors. The girl behind the counter was efficient without being intrusive and the Otto Leitner credit card, paid for a suite with two decent bedrooms.

“Thank you Mr Leitner, have a pleasant stay, room service is available twenty four hours a day.”

She actually gave him a state of the art electronic key, Georgia had come a long way since his last visit. Marco smiled at the girl and enquired about local beauty spots and historic buildings. It was a nice touch and added a little authenticity to their story about being tourists. There was an offer to have their cases sent up to their room, but they declined the offer and found the lift. The lift was

modern too and had the bad habit of telling everyone what it intended to do and what it had just done.

“Doors closing, first floor, doors opening.”

Max thought most people spoke far too much drivel and it worried him that many devices seemed to be acquiring the habit. Their suite was large and comfortable, but Marco wanted food.

“I’m starving,” he said, “let’s eat and talk about plans in Khulo over a decent meal.”

The restaurant was mostly empty, just a few businessmen enjoying a mid-afternoon meal. It seemed they were too late for lunch and too early for dinner. The hotel was now operating the all-day menu, which didn’t sound encouraging.

“I’ll have a burger, well done, with fries and a side salad.” Said Max.

“Me too and bring us two bottles of Beck’s Bier.” Added Marco.

The burgers were actually good and they were on their second bottle of Beck’s by the time talk turned towards ambushing Ruby at Khulo.

“I don’t suppose the Leitner identity could hire a house ?” Asked Marco.

“Not in the timescale. It’s a use once or twice and then discard, identity.”

Max knew what Marco was about to suggest and it didn’t just cross the line as to what was acceptable, it leapt over it by a mile.

“We can’t camp out on the road with a dozen heavily armed men.” Said Marco.

“First we’ll look for an empty house that’s close to the road.”

“There are always elderly living alone Max.”

Yes there were, he knew that. The world was aging and just about every street had ‘that’ house in it. The house with all the obvious signs that no one had visited in months. If the house was only needed for an hour or so, it was fine to leave a confused occupant to talk to the police. But they needed a base for a lot longer than an hour or so.

“You know what I’m asking you Max. You know what we’ll need to do.”

“Yes, but first we look for an empty house. If we don’t find one, then and only then will we take over someone’s home.”

Marco was drinking straight from the bottle, looking into his eyes, demanding a direct confirmation of what a home invasion implied.

“They can’t be left alive Max. You know that.”

“Yes I know.”

They had a slice of cheesecake each for dessert and then coffee.

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“I’m sure the Turkish coast is beautiful,” said Ruby, “one day I’ll come back and see it in the daylight.”

Ivan had given them the location and the navigation system on the patrol boat had unerringly brought them there. They were north of Gülburnu, quite a bit north and Gülburnu wasn’t exactly boom town. Everywhere around Amasra had been a mass of lights, but in front of them was darkness. Not complete darkness though; a single light was right where they were heading.

“Don’t expect them to be talkative.” Said Ivan.

The jetty was poorly lit and Serge hit the bumpers hard, bouncing them away and having to come in again to tie up. Sarah was quickly over the side, leaping onto the jetty, stretching and then helping Olga to tie their vessel securely to the jetty.

“Where are they ?” Asked Ruby.

“They’ll be here,” said Ivan, “they’re watching, making sure we’re alone.”

"I don't see pumps," said Spider, "looks like hours of lugging fuel drums about."

Ivan just smiled at him. A young girl approached, she couldn't have been more than eighteen. She nodded at Ivan and then gave everyone a long look, before approaching Ruby.

"We've got as much fuel as you want, but it'll cost you three times the pump price."

"That's fine." Replied Ruby.

Again the girl looked at Ivan, this time obviously waiting for him to say something.

"Don't insult my friends, they've got the money." He said.

The girl waved at someone they couldn't see and a team of about six teenagers ran out to their boat, dragging a long flexible pipe behind them.

"Are they all kids?" Asked Serge.

"Kids who've seen more action than most soldiers twice their age." Replied Ivan.

The pipe had the wrong connector for their boat, which didn't worry the team at all. In complete silence one of them went into the darkness at the end of the jetty and returned with the correct pipe connector. The pipe was fixed in place and then there was another wave to someone in the dark.

"I'm guessing they do this a lot." Said Ruby.

They heard a pump start up and then there was the sound of fuel running into their diesel tanks.

"Fastest fill up on the Black Sea. You'll be on your way in no time." Said Ivan.

Ruby guessed the team at the jetty usually refuelled smugglers, for whom time was important.

Smuggling what and where? Ruby decided that everyone was allowed their secrets and anyway, she probably wouldn't really like to know what they smuggled. The girl was back, this time standing under the jetty lights. Ruby could see she was wearing almost the same jeans and top that she had in her own wardrobe in Hackney.

"I heard you have a body to dispose of?"

Leo reacted, the first time Ruby had seen him react to anything.

"Not disposed of like garbage!" He shouted.

"We want her left where the authorities will find her." Said Ruby.

The girl looked thoughtful for a moment.

"There is no hospital, but we can leave her on the steps of the police station."

It sounded far from ideal, but it was better than whatever the girl had meant by disposed of.

"That will have to do." Said Ruby.

"There is some risk, we'll need an extra thousand dollars."

Ruby was beginning to wonder who she meant by we. All they'd seen so far was about seven or eight kids who all seemed under twenty.

"That's fine," said Ruby, "just promise me you won't just dump her body."

"She's a good kid," said Ivan, "if she says they'll take her to the police, they will."

"You have my word." Said the girl.

Ruby could have used pain on the girl, shown her what could happen because of broken promises. But Rose hadn't been one of them and the girl might talk, tell her family about the brunette who inflicted pain without touching. Five teenagers came for Rose, three of them girls. They gently carried the shroud wrapped body away, one of the girls actually crying. It comforted Ruby, people tended not to dump a body they'd cried about at the local dump.

Sarah made coffee, while Spider kept close to the forward machine gun, just in case. Quite quickly the fuel tanks were full and Ruby was handing over more bundles of dollar bills.

"Thank you." Was all the girl said, before walking into the dark.

Ivan hugged Ruby, somehow she knew he would. He was handing her a piece of paper with an address in Odessa on it.

"If you get up that way and need a guide."

"I will Ivan and don't worry. I will never tell anyone your real name."

Sarah untied the boat, she was becoming very efficient at it. As the engines started and Ruby stepped aboard, Ivan called out to her.

"This thing you did to my head, how long will it last?"

"I don't know, a long time, maybe forever."

"But supposing I just mention you to someone, years from now?"

"I'd advise you not to."

He was still calling out and looking unhappy as their Zhuk class patrol boat headed away from the jetty and towards Batumi. Ruby knew the trigger in his head was only good for a few days, but she wasn't about to tell him that.

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The funny thing was that George wasn't expecting a visit from the intelligence services, but he should have been. Normally he employed people like Max and Carlos to arrange operations in foreign parts, but now he was having to do that himself. Max used third parties, rarely used phones and knew the right people to see and the right people to avoid. The amount of money required shocked him too; he could now see why wars were so expensive. He just wanted to get about fifty men to an isolated part of the globe, carry out a rescue mission and then bring everyone safely home. George Polandrous looked at the feasibility study his finance team had put together and realised that he couldn't afford to mount such an expedition. He spilled his coffee, which he never did and Penny rushed over with a box of tissues.

"Bad news?" She asked.

She was mopping up coffee, making sure she got the little bits that were clinging to his computer keyboard.

"A billion, actually one point two billion." He said.

As he said it the numbers sounded crazy, but he had the full breakdown on an excel spreadsheet. He knew from previous arguments with his finance team, that once it was on a spreadsheet, there was no doubting the numbers.

"That much?"

"It's the timescale, they need to be in Turkmenistan in two days. There's buying transport aircraft, all the equipment, helicopters. Plus the men who could do this kind of mission don't come cheap. It all comes to over a billion. Christ, no wonder Iraq bankrupt the nation!"

Penny had finished drying his desk and brought him a fresh cup of coffee and a couple of his much love garibaldi's.

"So it's just too expensive?" She asked.

"I could get the money together, but it would mean the end of the foundation, the end of my life's work."

Penny was looking at him, obviously waiting for him to continue, but George wasn't sure what he was going to do. He'd called in so many favours, managed to get people to agree to sell him some very advanced equipment. Rescuing Ruby had always been about saving the Polandrous Foundation, but if he had to rip the foundation apart to save her?! It all needed a lot of thought, it needed time, which he didn't have.

"I need a walk to clear my head, I'll be back in an hour or so."

Penny briefly put her hand on his and then she was gone, calling out as she sat at her own desk.

“Don’t forget to take your phone.”

George put his phone in his pocket and used the lift to get to reception. He’d been using the stairs lately in an attempt to get a bit fitter, but now he just wanted to get out of the building. Under The Bridge, the small seedy café was where he’d go. The atmosphere there had helped him sort out a lot of problems. There was no pressure there, just a few people enjoying a coffee and the odd cheese roll.

“Would you like an umbrella ? They’re forecasting rain.”

“No, I won’t be out for long.”

He didn’t even know the name of the security guy who ran the front desk. At one time he knew everyone, now the foundation was multinational and people just became faces. George crossed the road and didn’t notice the middle aged man until he spoke to him.

“George, so nice to see you again.”

Something about the man looked vaguely military, though George couldn’t think why when he thought about it later. Smart suit, sensible enough to be carrying an umbrella. The man smiling at him obviously knew him, but George couldn’t place the face.

“I’m sorry. I know I should know you, but.....”

George suddenly realised how thin the veneer of safety can be, even in a big city like London. Less than ten yards away the office people were crossing at the lights, off to the ATM, or meeting someone for lunch. He was under a railway bridge, pushed up against the wall, a hand at his throat.

“Don’t struggle, I’m just here to give you a message.”

George tried to move, but his assailant was obviously experienced in such things and held him firmly against the dusty wall. No one noticed, or if they did they ignored the two middle aged men.

“You’ve been asking about things best left undisturbed George.”

The man leant in very close, whispering the words in an almost soothing tone.

“Buying weapons, pricing up helicopters. You’re becoming a bit of a joke George. To be honest Her Majesty’s Government has always had a soft spot for the Polandrous Foundation, but now you’re becoming a fucking nuisance.”

The hand moved from his throat and he was punched in the stomach. Just once, one expertly aimed blow that left him gasping for breath.

“It stops George ! Go back to your hedge funds and offshore companies. There will be no further warnings, next time it’ll be a mugging that went wrong. You’ll get a two paragraph obituary in The Times and you’ll no longer be an embarrassment to the government.”

He drew his arm back and George flinched, expecting another blow.

“Not this time George, just make sure I don’t need to come back.”

The man simply walked away, no hurry, no sign he’d just threatened to kill someone. George took a few deep breaths and waited for his heart to slow down. He knew the department the man was likely to have come from, he was likely to have been to social events with the man’s boss. George’s natural reaction was to call Penny and tell her about the threat. Not now though, now he was going to be more like Max, no more phone calls about sensitive matters.

George decided to carry on with his trip to the café. He also decided that Ruby wasn’t just an employee of the foundation, she was family. He wasn’t going to throw money at the problem, he’d probably be dead in twenty four hours if he did. He had good people and he already had a small store of modern weapons. He went to his usual table in the café and as usual the girl with the tattoo smiled at him.

“The usual ?”

“Yes please.”

George made up his mind before the coffee arrived. On the surface everything would be as usual. There was no need to spend a billion, though it might need few hundred thousand from the emergency fund. George was going to the Caspian Sea himself ! He'd take just two of his best people and he'd call in a few favours to get there. Ruby was family and her family would come and save her. Besides, he could hardly turn up in the woods with his wrists slashed and a stomach full of opiates, if he was out of the country.

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Their boat always felt fast over the water, but it now felt agonisingly slow. The coastline went past and the river estuary seemed to get no closer. Ruby had wanted Serge at the controls and she'd demanded to go ashore during the day. It wasn't just that she had a feeling time was running out, she needed light to find the house.

“Leo is actually better at this than I am.” Said Serge.

He was fighting the current and watching a large container vessel that was about to cross their path.

“I know,” she said, “but he always considers my orders and only carries them out if he agrees with them. You just do as I ask.”

Serge grinned at her as their boat bounced around on the estuary currents.

“That might not always be a good thing Ruby.”

“It is to me.”

Another huge ship was leaving Batumi and was sure to see them, it was about the fifth that must have seen their patrol boat. Someone must have called it in, there had to be a few curious official somewhere, wondering about investigating them. Ruby consoled herself with knowing that they'd soon be leaving the boat for good.

“Keep hard over to the right of the estuary.” She said.

“There are a lot of mud banks Ruby.”

“Just do your best.”

Spider had stopped sulking about Sarah and the guard in Amasra and now he was sulking about her obvious infatuation with Leo. Some things never changed, though Ruby thought Spider must have realised Sarah was rather fickle by now. Carlos was her problem. He'd quickly realised that she and Serge were more than just friends and he'd become very silent and distant. He'd taken to joining Spider, leaning against the forward machine gun and looking miserable. Seven there were of them now, a lucky number if you believed in such things. Olga entered the cabin, sweating profusely and covered in dust.

“The charges are in place, she'll sink in seconds when they go off.”

“Good, is everyone packed and ready to go ?”

“What we can carry. Sadly we'll have to leave a few things it would have been nice to take.”

Even at top speed their Zhuk class patrol boat could only manage about thirty miles an hour and Serge was keeping their speed down. They were still moving fast for a boat, but the reed beds on either side crawled by.

“Is that the island ?” Asked Serge.

“No, we want one further up river. Keep to the right Serge.”

He glared at her, but he obeyed and brought them perilously close to a mud bank. Ruby could see the island now and she brought up the memory Kurt had put in her mind. They would get muddy, perhaps very muddy, but the house wasn't that far from the river. The road crossed the river but it

didn't impede their progress. Once under the road bridge, Serge saw the island and began to head towards it.

"We need to be between the right hand bank and the island." Said Ruby.

"It looks shallow Ruby, we'll run aground."

"I know."

Slowly the island approached and the channel between it and the bank looked just wide enough. Leo appeared, itching to be allowed at the controls, but Ruby had suffered two of her orders being ignored and she needed someone who acted on faith, faith that she knew best.

"Don't slow down !" She shouted.

She saw the place where the river bank jutted out, it was the place from the memory. There and only there, the river bank was firmer; they'd be able to carry their equipment to the road.

"There, a little to the right." She said.

Leo had kept correcting her, saying right was starboard, but Serge just followed her eye line and headed for the right place.

"Time for the klaxon Olga."

Olga pressed the button and the noise was deafening. It was their pre-arranged signal to hold on tight. As the klaxon stopped the front of their boat hit the bulge in the bank and went through it and into the mud beyond. They were still travelling at speed when the boat hit the firmer ground and grinded to a halt, leaning slightly towards the bank. Ruby came out of her chair and bounced off the navigation desk, badly bruising her arm. Olga fared the worst of all of them, losing a tooth after hitting the door frame with her face. Serge had hung on tight and was still at the controls. He turned off the engines and shut everything down.

"Will all passengers for the mud bank, please leave the vessel." He said.

"Fuck it," said Olga, "I knew it was coming and I still lost a tooth."

No one escaped completely bruise free apart from Serge and they all began comparing injuries and rubbing parts that ached. The sound of a distant helicopter roused Ruby.

"It may not be looking for us, but we need to leave."

Their bags and cases had been put out on deck and now they were piled up against the starboard guard rail. Leo was first to go over the side, quickly going up to his knees in the mud.

"What do they use this place for ?" He shouted up.

"I think it's a bird sanctuary." Said Olga.

Olga went down into the engine room, so it was Serge who was next to experience the fun of sinking into the mud. Ruby clambered over the side and joined them, losing her right shoe after just two paces.

"Good spot to come ashore." Said Leo.

Two large bags were being passed down by Carlos, Ruby took them both and began walking inland, towards where she knew there was a road. Her other shoe vanished into the mud, so she carried on walking in bare feet. It was hard going, but she put one bag over each shoulder and kept moving forward. The sound of laughter made her turn and Sarah was pelting Spider with handfuls of mud.

"There isn't long on the charges !" Ruby yelled.

That concentrated their minds and soon they were all moaning about lost shoes and following her through the mud. They seemed to have so much to carry, even Sarah had two large cases to struggle with. Ten minutes later they weren't yet at the road and the charges exploded.

"You know your trade Olga." Said Carlos.

Their Zhuk class patrol boat was burning from end to end and sinking fast. It had been their home for a while and Ruby felt sad to see it destroyed. The helicopter hadn't headed their way, but the explosion and fire was sure to bring someone to investigate. There was another explosion as the diesel tanks blew up and then the sound of the machine gun bullets exploding as the flames reached them. Ruby watched as the boat refused to sink completely and merely settled into the mud, bits of the cabin still sticking above the water.

"I feel quite sad to see it go." Said Sarah.

"So do I." Replied Ruby.

The sound of exploding ordnance carried on as they trudged towards the road. The road was another oddity, there was nothing on it. No houses, no pavement, not even a line down the middle. It was like a road built for houses to be erected along its length, but the houses had never arrived.

"At least it's dry and firm." Said Spider.

All those not wearing boots were now bare footed and all of them were wet and muddy right up their thighs. In the middle of the road was a very pretty woman, a blonde who Ruby recognised.

"Hello Ruby, Kurt said you'd come. I wasn't expecting the fireworks."

"Hello Kallina, it's been a long time. It's good to be here."

Kallina looked at her rather oddly and then took the bags from her, carrying them as though they weighed nothing.

"Has it been a long time ? I thought we met last summer, in London."

"That was four years ago."

Sarah was looking at Kallina and rolling her eyes as she jabbed Spider in the ribs.

"Four years, yes of course it must be. The house isn't far and you and your friends can clean yourselves up. Constanze won't like the mud but just ignore her."

Ruby didn't know what to make of Kallina and she could see the others exchanging looks. The helicopter sound was getting nearer again though and they picked up their pace and followed Kallina.

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