

Ruby V : Machu Picchu

Chapter 8 – Mara’s Family

“There was a dog barking somewhere, a really annoying yappy dog. The barks were constant and irritating, which was a good thing. People would be less inclined to open their windows and the sound might cover any strange noises they made.”

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They were on vacation, so Ruby hadn’t intended there to be an avoidance of phone calls. There was though, she found the call from Monique surprised her. Not just the content of the call, it was that it was a proper telephone call, using their own voices and not being that careful about what was said. On cell phones, which were encrypted and safe.....yada-yada. Ruby knew the official line and that it was total crap. They were using burner phones in Lima though and Monique had called her on a rarely used phone that spent most of its time in an office drawer. At the worst, an intelligence organisation would have her links to the Paris underworld confirmed. Not a huge issue, they’d probably known that for years. The incoming call from Monique at just before breakfast, had meant Ruby calling a number only known to a few of Gérard Villand’s best clients.....

“Mara, dreadful news, really terrible.....I feel I should be there with you.” Said Ruby.

“No, you’re busy...I know that. Things here will carry on much as they always did.” Said Mara. “He was a realist and knew the moment couldn’t be far away. Everything has been planned for.”

Gérard Villand dead, at a truly colossal age. His mind had remained sharp though, right into his nineties. Surprising really, considering his hedonistic lifestyle when he’d served in the French DGSE, the Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure.

“Monique mentioned natural causes.” Said Ruby. “What happened ?”

“He tended to shrug things off, the illnesses that would mean bedrest for a man half his age. Every morning he coughed and spluttered with what he called allergies, blamed on dust in the old buildings we used. One bad cough became an infection he didn’t shrug off. In the end, he was gone after just a few days of being really ill. Nothing sinister, just old age mixed with damp, mouldy offices.”

“So you’re taking over as head of the family.” Said Ruby.

“Oh, head of the family....I hadn’t thought of it like that.” Said Mara. “Yes, I suppose I am. I’m still getting used to him not being here. Villand always felt like.....He was always there.”

Her father, of course he’d felt like that to Mara. Ruby could hear Mara softly crying at the other end of the line.

“I will come to the funeral, let me know the date.” Said Ruby.

“That would be nice, but you’re the other side of the world.”

“George once flew to Hamilton in Bermuda for someone’s birthday party. I can spare a few days of being a tourist to attend the funeral of an old friend.” Said Ruby. “I’m sure Charlotte will be there too, and Malou of course.”

“It will be a circus, Ruby. Every police force in the country will have photographers in the bushes, you know they will.”

"Maybe, but I wouldn't mind betting a few government figures turn up." Said Ruby. "It's that long association with North Africa and what went on there. Villand was one of the last survivors.....People will remember him."

"I'm sure you're right."

"Let me know a date for the funeral." Said Ruby.

"I will."

Ruby had never exactly bonded with Villand, none of her wunderkinds had. He was one of nature's natural introverts, perfect material for the intelligence services. To Mara though, he had obviously been a father figure. After the call, Ruby thought about how to break the news over breakfast. To most of them Villand was just a useful contact for information. Sophie was likely to be upset though.

"Tough call?" Asked Todd.

"Yes, tougher than I thought.... I volunteered us to attend the funeral."

"No problem."

Todd hugged her and that reminded her that he'd given the task of spotting Serge, a hundred percent. Would she have done that if it had been his ex? She had to admit, probably not. She kissed him gently on the lips.

"So, what are you going to tell the others?" Asked Todd.

"That Villand has passed on and anyone who knew him, might want to attend the funeral in Paris. Sophie knew him, he was once quite rude to her.....But he was rude to everyone. I can see her wanting to go, but not the others."

"The King is dead....Long live Queen Mara." Said Todd.

"Yes, I think Villand's family is in safe hands."

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Some people were breakfasting in the hotel's dining room, some weren't. Sophie and Caleb had ordered croissants and coffee to be delivered to their room. It gave them a little longer to properly wake up and get dressed. As Ruby seemed to be constantly saying, they were on vacation. Lily had arrived at their room door, with news about Villand's death.

"Tell Ruby I will definitely go to Paris for the funeral." Sophie had said.

Sophie didn't yet feel comfortable to saying yes or no, on behalf of Caleb. She hoped he'd go, though he didn't really know anything about Villand and his family of lost teens and misfits. Caleb was no fool though and he had moved in some fairly strange circles.

"Villand....Everyone thought he'd live forever." Said Caleb. "I didn't know you knew him that well.....Certainly not well enough to attend the funeral."

"He was a dinosaur.....He once had me locked in the back of a van to travel across Paris. Blindfolded and wrists tied, the bastard. Villand was a character though, one of the last of the genuine old school."

Sophie grinned at Caleb and he grinned back.

"Ahh, a crazy old eccentric who once tied you up.....Of course we have to go to the funeral." Said Caleb.

"I knew you'd understand.....Now, we need to get dressed. Ruby wants to examine the objects she found in the toilet cistern."

"But of course.....We're on vacation." Muttered Caleb.

"Just a few weeks and we'll be in the Nazca desert, just the two of us." Said Sophie.

They dressed like typical tourists, all bright colours and flip-flop sandals. Ruby was waiting for them, with even more news that had arrived via Monique in London. Not as dramatic as Villand dying, but

it was curious and needed looking into. First came more coffee though and the offer of yet another continental style breakfast. Sophie thought her caffeine level had to be approaching the level where she started to get a bit twitchy.

"I wanted to check before saying anything." Said Ruby. "It's confirmed with the DINI people. The house where we found all the CIA documents, has been torched. The authorities are talking about it being reduced to a hole in the ground."

"An ash filled hole in the ground." Added Todd. "Someone used accelerants, which means it was torched by a pro."

Sophie liked the view from Ruby's room; she took her coffee out onto the balcony.

"Why did Monique end up knowing about this?" Asked Caleb. "Who told her?"

"Only a best guess..... Probably the CIA." Said Ruby. "The local London office, which Chris Smith, our newly acquired asset, thinks is important."

"Local offices tend to do their own thing." Added Todd.

"Crap, this is getting complicated." Said Sophie. "Why would the CIA send us useful updates? Aren't we sort of.....Investigating them?"

"Truthfully.....I have no idea what game the CIA are playing." Said Ruby. "It seems that our fairly gentle prodding, has produced results. So we're going to prod a little harder."

"A news article about Operation Forty Love." Said Todd. "Leaked to a journalist who's known to Lily. Then a few paid for trolls to give the story a boost on social media."

"Wow, you mean a news piece released in Lima?" Asked Caleb.

"No, in London.....Lily knows someone at one of the major dailies." Said Ruby. "It'll be fun to see how huge the response might be."

Caleb gave Sophie an appealing look, as if they'd ended up in the top security ward at a psychiatric facility.

"You're both.....Quite mad." Said Caleb. "The CIA doesn't mess about."

"Leave Ruby and Todd alone, it's like having our own pet tornadoes." Said Sophie.

For a fraction of a second, Sophie saw a little look on Ruby's face, perhaps a tiny amount of self-doubt. It didn't last for long.

"Anyway.....Let's examine the finds from Pseudo-Serge's house." Said Ruby. "The gun may have to go to DINI, if it seems to have been fired recently."

"How can you tell?" Asked Caleb.

"We'll know." Said Sophie.

Hotel cleaners were always an issue, even for Ruby with her gifts. Hit one cleaner with the whammy and they'd be just one of several working shift patterns. Hiding things worked reasonably well, with a few mental tricks added to the hiding place. Todd retrieved a small travel case from the back of the wardrobe and Sophie felt the 'don't fiddle with this' placed on the case. A cleaner would avoid it and if they didn't, nausea would follow, with vomiting as a final consequence. It took a really dedicated busy body to get past that....Sophie had never met a hotel cleaner who was anywhere near that nosey, or dedicated to their job....

"Ahhh.....I sense an anti-nosey overlay." Said Sophie.

"Mainly to protect the cleaners.....There is a loaded gun in the case." Said Todd.

The plastic wrappings had been sliced open the night before. They all knew the contents of the six packages, though the notebook had been given to Lily. It was hand written in what was probably a very simple cipher. Lily still had access to the computers in Vauxhall, which would hopefully crack

the code. Of the five remaining parcels, one was a loaded nine millimetre automatic. Ruby picked up the gun and moved close to her.

“Alright, Sophie.....We both hold it and.....Feel whatever there is to feel.” Said Ruby.

“Oh, you guys.” Said Todd.

“Shush, Todd.” Said Sophie. “You’ll spoil the fluence, as Spider calls it.”

It did feel a little strange, to be stood there holding a gun with Ruby. There was something about it though, a whole pile of left over human emotions. Even if a gun is fired and misses, it can retain a lot of fear, excitement, regret.....And of course, disappointment. So much fear was still there, linked to the weapon they were holding.

“It’s been used to kill.....More than once.” Said Sophie. “Multiple shooters have used it, including a teenage girl.”

“A gang weapon, bought cheaply and used by many.” Said Ruby. “There’s no alternative.....I’ll hand it over to one of the DINI agents in the hotel.”

If anyone thought that was a bad idea, no one said it. All three of them were nodding at Ruby. Of the remaining four plastic wrapped bags, three contained cash. About half was in high value American dollar notes, with the other half in Euros. A lot of cash, folded and wrapped up really tight.

“I’m guessing at there being about the equivalent of two hundred thousand pounds.” Said Ruby.

“Personally.....I vote for it going into our Christmas party fund.” Said Sophie. “Don’t give me that look Todd, it’s hardly taking it from the needy.”

“I know I don’t get a vote.” Said Caleb. “I agree with Sophie.....It belonged to a sleaze ball.....Keep the money. Give it to a cat’s home if that makes you feel better about it.”

Ruby looked at the ceiling for a few seconds, one of the ways Kallina had used to concentrate on a decision.

“We will keep it.” Said Ruby. “If Thio ends up staying in Peru, it’ll give him a decent start.....Now, the final mystery package.”

They were keeping the plastic wrapping, just in case there might be forensic evidence in it somewhere. Ruby cleared the table of everything apart from their coffee cups, before placing the keys in front of them.

“Not hotel keys, they look like the keys to a flat somewhere, maybe another house for our fake Serge.” Said Todd.

Sophie prodded the keys, separating them out a little. Five keys in total, though two of them were quite small.

“These.....Look like keys to a briefcase, or something similar.” Said Sophie. “The large brass coloured key is similar to my house key.....But the smaller one reminds me of an outside door key, for a block of flats. My guess is.....Our fake Serge has a flat somewhere. How to tell where though.....”

“Can’t you feel its history ?” Asked Caleb.

Luckily Ruby laughed, so Sophie didn’t have to make a joke at her boyfriend’s expense. It was a common question from non-wunderkinds. Even George had been through what they called the Swiss Army knife phase, where he’d expected them to be capable of doing anything and everything.

“Guns tend to induce trauma in the mind of those using them.” Said Ruby. “Keys are just.....Keys. There will be no emotional explosions lodged in them.....They’re just.....Keys.”

“Hopefully.....The notebook might hold clues to where the flat is.” Said Sophie.

“If we’re really lucky our Pseudo-Serge might consider the property still safe enough to use.” Added Todd.

“I do hope so.....I’ve a score to settle with him.” Said Ruby.

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Sarah knew she was going to blame it on Spider, if Ruby moaned at her. She wasn't really religious, but at least three leaflets in the hotel had pictures and articles on the cathedral. It was just a question of having a destination to aim at. Almost anywhere would have done.

"I just don't want a day going through Operation Forty Love with Ruby and Sophie." She'd said to Spider.

"Once we're out for the day, we're gone." Spider had said.

Just about walkable and Todd had made sure everyone had one of the free tourist maps of Huancayo. Spider said he preferred to get there by taxi and slowly wander back to the hotel. Sarah felt guilty, but it all gave her more ammunition to blame Spider, when Ruby asked about it. It was all his idea, she'd been helpless....No chance of refusing. Yeah right, as if Ruby would fall for that, though it was worth a try. The taxi dropped them off on the east side of Constitution Square and the view of Huancayo Cathedral was just about perfect. Lots of sunshine, but not too hot. She was glad she'd remembered to bring her camera.

"I love the mixture of domes and towers." Said Sarah. "It's so....."

"Foreign." Said Spider.

"Yes.....Is it wrong to say that ?"

"No....Part of the fun of foreign places, is foreign buildings.....And the food of course." Said Spider.

"Vive la difference, as some clever guy once said."

Sarah had begun to realise she was falling down on the job, as the official journal keeper and photographer of the trip. She took about fifty pictures of the outside of the cathedral, before going inside.

"Wow, this is beautiful." Said Sarah. "It's like nothing in London.....It's so...."

"Foreign." Said Spider.

Sarah thumped him on the arm. No photography allowed inside, which she always treated as a personal challenge. She turned off the flash and spun the camera around, while clicking the button. The results might not be brilliant, but she could edit the pictures later. As they came out, she noticed Spider was looking at an eatery called Café Colonial.

"No, we're both gaining weight." She said. "No more café crawls, we're still digesting breakfast."

"Just a coffee."

"We always say that...Then it'll be just a slice of pie to go with it....Get out the tourist map." Said Sarah.

The problem with free maps were all the adverts for places to eat, most with full colour pictures. It was all so tempting.....

"Parque de la Identidad Huanca." Said Spider. "Really popular according to the blurb. Lots of walks and quirky sculptures. Not that far away and close to places where we can get lunch."

It still felt like a café crawl, but at least there were those quirky sculptures.

"Sounds great, let's grab a taxi." Said Sarah.

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Sarah would have handled it all better, Lily realised that. Then again, Sarah had known Ruby for a very long time, from way back when they'd both been on vocational courses at a North London college. Sarah accepted that the woman they were all following around Peru, had quite a few flaws. Once it was obvious Lily was a second choice for Spider, it was far too late to say no. It had all begun when the computer in London had decoded an important part of the notebook. The one that had been wrapped in plastic, before being submerged in the water of a toilet cistern.....

“Ruby.”

Lily had called out, while knocking on the hotel room door. Ruby had been.....What Spider called a tad strange, since finding out Serge wasn't really still alive. Hardly surprising, but it meant she might be just ignoring her knocking, rather than not being in.

“Ruby.....It's important. The notebook has an address. It's not that far away.”

No need to be an empath as the door opened, or have wunderkind gifts. Lily could tell that Ruby was upset and had probably been brooding on Serge for a while. More than likely on her own, Todd wasn't likely to have left her to look quite so dejected.

“Sorry Ruby, we don't need to talk about this now.” Lily had said. “We could go for a walk though, or sit in the hotel's garden.”

“Come in Lily.....You mentioned an address ?”

“Yes, in an apartment complex in the Hualhuas district of Huancayo. Almost just around the corner.”

“Have you seen Spider since breakfast ?” Ruby had asked.

“I believe he and Sarah left the hotel for a day doing touristy things.”

“Well.....You've done all the courses. I'm sure you'll do.” Ruby had said.

And that was the moment, when it really hurt. Despite all her training and the number of times she'd fought beside the wunderkinds. Ruby still thought of her as a second choice after Spider. Not that Spider wasn't a great guy, but he hadn't been through any of the MI6 tough guy courses. She had and she'd been favourably mentioned by several of the instructors. Lily sat in the small room, while Ruby fiddled with something at the bottom of a wardrobe. She returned with a gun in one hand and a set of keys in the other.

“I know I'm a hypocrite.” Said Ruby. “I have my own methods of defending myself. I'd be much happier though, if you had this gun in your bag.”

A plain vanilla nine millimetre automatic, probably made somewhere in Asia. Lily liked to know any weapons her life might depend on. She removed the clip and looked at the bullets it held.

“Just what it contains, no spares.” Said Ruby. “Spider once said that if you can't get it done with one clip, you should have brought an Uzi to the fight.”

She was still feeling hurt and the temptation to correct Spider was irresistible.

“I believe the original quote was from an American general. It was about the clip size on a sniper rifle.” Said Lily. “The basic idea is the same.....I take it you mean to go after the fake Serge.....And kill him ?”

Lily's bag was small, but she wasn't someone who carried heaps of makeup everywhere she went. The gun fitted and she could easily get it out the bag, if she needed to. Ruby took a while to answer the question.

“Using Serge like that has made it personal.” Said Ruby. “I know that.....It will always feel raw and very personal. So yes, I do intend to kill the fake Serge. If an accomplice is in the apartment, I intend to kill them too.....After they've talked. I'm hoping you'll come with me ?”

It sounded like inflicting pain to get answers, followed by murder. None of it was by the book, or even slightly like the MI6 training courses. On the other hand, Lily could understand how Ruby was feeling. Lily had read the files on Ruby and her people. Spider had killed for her, often in situations where the morality was decidedly grey. Lily took the apartment keys from Ruby.

“Fine....Let's go to Hualhuas district and deal with Pseudo-Serge.” Said Lily.

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Spider had sent a few texts to Seb, the DINI agent he'd had a fight with. Often such things can have a bonding effect with men who'd been in the military. It sounded weird to him, but Spider knew there

was a slight bond there, a definite connection. Give someone a black eye and become brothers in arms. The text messages had been followed up by a phone call and two emails. The last email had confirmed that there was a permit to dig an archaeology site in the district Sarah had deduced from the trashy magazine. The last line had hinted at a GPS location, which would be perfect.....

"Yes, the Inkawara Restaurant was great, the food wonderful." Said Sarah. "But it's our third meal of the day and we're already talking about dinner. We'll be huge by the time we get back to London."

"Yes, but we're on holiday." Said Spider. "We'll soon burn it off when we begin hiking every day."

"If you knew my family history, you'd know why I worry." Said Sarah. "My mum.....To her it was just a bit of comfort eating. It got so bad, her GP wanted to book her in for a gastric band."

Spider knew addictive personalities ran in Sarah's family. Actually, not so much ran as galloped like a herd of rabid stallions. He also knew Sarah well enough to know she was unlikely to ever look like her mum. He might not be able to convince her, but he needed to tell her. Spider grabbed Sarah's hand and pulled her into a shop doorway. He kissed her, a long and passionate kiss. When they parted to talk, his heart was still beating fast.

"You're not like your mum; you're addicted to different things." He said. "Like languages and guys you used to meet down the Indian takeaway."

"Oi." Said Sarah.

"You know I'm telling you the truth. I've never seen an ounce of fat on you....Ever."

They kissed again and Spider wondered if there were rules in Peru, about public displays of affection. In his teens he'd been thrown out of the Kings Head in Old Bexley, for snogging. Emily Clarke had never talked to him again; she'd been chucked out too.

"It was only two guys from the Bengal Palace." Said Sarah.

"Ruby said six."

"Bitch !" Yelled Sarah.

More laughter and by the time they came out of the doorway, their clothing needed straightening. Spider knew it was a cop approaching them, even though he was wearing plain clothes. There was something about the attitude of cops; they always stood out like a sore thumb. The country and language didn't seem to matter....A cop was always a cop. Spider was expecting a telling off, maybe a fixed penalty fine for inappropriate public behaviour. The man smiled and handed him a sealed brown envelope. Nothing was said, the plain clothes cop, kept walking.

"That was weird." Said Sarah. "Even for us.....That was weird."

Spider had an idea as he ripped open the envelope. Seb wasn't likely to invite him into the local police station. Lily had also mentioned that confidentiality had become such an issue, that Foxy had taken to having personal letters delivered to their intelligence assets. Spider read the handwritten note and it was good news, far better than he'd expected.

"Ruby can go to the dig site as soon as she wants to." Said Spider. "Seb has come up with a GPS location. He's also given us a name and phone number for the professor running the dig."

"Who is he ?" Asked Sarah.

"A she.....Professor Ellie Nicholas." Said Spider.

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Ideally they'd have used a stolen car. Spider would have found the ideal vehicle to use for the night, but Lily hadn't been keen. There was no lecture about casual criminality of anything like that. In many key ways, Lily's training was far better suited to the situation than Spider's. Ruby had listened to the head of her security, Lily. No point in hiring good people, if you constantly overruled them.

“We can take a taxi to a bar or restaurant in the Hualhuas district.” Lily had said. “One a sensible walk from the apartment complex. As for coming back.....As long as we’re not being pursued, we can pick up a cab.”

“And if someone is chasing us ?” Ruby had asked.

“Then I’ll reassess the situation.”

It was a good answer and Ruby realised she should have listened to Lily more in the past. Situations did change and there was no value to trying to carve a plan in stone. Only to have it pulled apart by bad luck, or a particularly clever adversary. There was the famous quote about no plan of battle, surviving first contact with the enemy. There was a restaurant less than a kilometre away from the apartment, which the fake Serge might be calling home. Easy to find a cab in the street near their hotel, they were out of the cab and on foot, in just under thirty minutes.

“Is it wrong, that I’m really enjoying this ?” Asked Lily.

“No.....We’re taking back control from Pseudo-Serge. It should give us a buzz.....I can feel it.” Said Ruby.

As long as he was there of course. Ruby had no worries about dealing with him and his accomplices, if he was there. If he wasn’t.....It was going to be a huge anti-climax. There might be information in the apartment though, more bread crumbs to follow.

“If he’s not there, we’ll take the place apart.” Said Ruby.

Her breathing was a little too fast as they arrived at the apartments, as was her heartbeat. Nothing to do with the walk, Ruby was actually excited about the likelihood of action. There was a decent looking road in front of them, giving access to several new looking apartment blocks. Not the best street lighting in the world, though that was probably a good thing. It was all going to be so easy, they even had a set of keys.....

“Shit.....There’s a camera above the outside door.” Said Lily.

That was unexpected and bad news. A large chunky CCTV camera, with its own light. The fake Serge might well have the camera feed on his TV and be monitoring what it saw. If Ruby was him, she’d have been watching who came through the front door.

“I can zap it, but that’s like telling him we’re on the way in.” Said Ruby.

“We could use the keys and rush him.” Said Lily. “If there are a few of them though, all well-armed. That could be suicide.”

“There are ways I can get in there, unseen and unheard.” Said Ruby. “The problem really is getting you inside the building.”

Ruby sat down next to a garden wall, still some way from the problematic front door. Lily sat near her, on the dry dusty soil.

“Sometimes it’s best to go away and come back mob handed.” Said Lily. “Bring everyone in the bus.....Tomorrow night.”

It was tempting, but Ruby had never run away from anything. She wasn’t going to be beaten by a fake Serge and a CCTV camera that looked like something designed in the nineties.

“No, we’re here and we’re going in there. We can do it Lily, we really can.”

“So, what’s the plan ?” Asked Lily.

“We go around the back of the building. There must be a door or window that can be opened from the inside. Then I do my thing to get in there.”

There was a dog barking somewhere, a really annoying yappy dog. The barks were constant and irritating, which was a good thing. People would be less inclined to open their windows and the sound might cover any strange noises they made. Ruby took the lead, looking into every window and

glass door on the ground floor. The window with the unlocked handle, was a window into what looked to be a communal laundry room. Ruby pointed at it.

“Not pushed home, it’ll still be unlocked.” She whispered.

“Are you going to use the shadow skill ?”

“No, something simpler.....I’ll walk through the wall.”

Becoming the shadow was great; there were so many options about what it enabled her to do. Complicated though and for a while, her body was helpless and unprotected. Walking through walls was far from easy, but it didn’t mean leaving her body behind. Ruby had used the skill quite a few times in Africa, often enough to feel totally confident about using it.

“Been a while.....But like riding a bike.” She whispered.

Ruby chose a brick wall close to the window. Her hand and elbows went against the wall, followed by her knees. She leant forward, putting all her weight on the parts of her resting on the wall. It was the best way, after a lot of experiments. When she turned the fabric of the wall to a semi-porous substance, she’d fall straight through it.

“That bloody dog.” Whispered Lily.

“Now you know why I prefer cats.” Muttered Ruby.

Ruby concentrated on her fingers, using them to distribute an energy she still didn’t understand. Not that she needed to know how her gifts worked, as long as they worked well. How many people understood the internal combustion engine ? That didn’t stop them using one in their car and even their lawn mower. As Ruby felt the wall vibrate, she moved the energy to her knees. She imagined the wall as being a sand covered dune during an earthquake. The wall was just particles that could be aligned so that she could pass right through. She concentrated on making the particles vibrate faster and faster, until.....

“That.....Was fun.” She muttered.

Ruby had fallen through the wall, to end up on her knees on a cold concrete floor. The room was full of washers, spinners and driers. She looked behind her and the wall looked solid once again. Her knees ached a bit, though that was her own fault. A little more focus and falling through the wall wouldn’t have caught her off guard. Next the window....She opened it quite wide.

“Quick.....Get inside.”

“Wow, Ruby.....Can you teach me how to do that ?” Asked Lily.

“No, sadly you have to be born with the gift.”

Once Lily was in the laundry room, Ruby put the window’s handle back to the exact position it had been in. The only light in the room was coming from a light outside, but it was enough to stop them bumping into anything. Time for rubber gloves to go on, just in case the building became a crime scene. Not that Ruby intended to leave a dead body on the premises. The best way to avoid a crime scene investigation was not to leave a crime scene. Pseudo-Serge would be taken somewhere else to be disposed of, somewhere quiet, isolated and rarely visited.

“I think apartment eleven will be on the first floor.” Said Ruby.

They stood side by side as Ruby opened the laundry room door. All they could hear was the sound of the dog barking. It was an almost soothing sound now, background noise to help muffle the sound of their footsteps. The floors were concrete, as were the stairs going up. No need to worry about creaking floorboards and stairs. At the top of the stairs was room nine, with room eleven on the other side of the corridor. Ruby looked at Lily and nodded at her. She leant close to Lily, close enough to talk in a low whisper.

“He has to die.....Agreed ?”

“Yes.”

Lily nodded at her and Ruby inserted the key to apartment eleven, into the lock. The slight click it made as it was turned, was easily swallowed up by the continued yappy bark of the dog. Inside the small apartment, all the internal doors were open. The only light was coming from a flat screen TV in the lounge. Lily pointed down the hallway to their right and took the gun out of her bag. Lily was going hunting, or at least checking each room for fake Serge’s accomplices. Ruby entered the lounge, where a man was asleep on the sofa. His hair had been styled differently to the way Todd had described, but it was Pseudo-Serge. She’d have recognised him anywhere, due to the likeness to the real Serge, the genuine article. He’d been looking at the output from the camera over the front door. There he was, asleep and gently snoring. If they’d know he was sleeping, it would have saved them a lot of aggravation. Lily came back quite quickly.

“Just him.” She whispered.

No booze or pills to be seen, it seemed their fake Serge was a naturally heavy sleeper. Ruby had her gifts, but sometimes a situation just needed a little strength. She was far stronger than any human male and sometimes a demonstration of that strength, was worth a thousand words. She grabbed Pseudo-Serge’s head in both hands, with her right hand clamped over his mouth. His eyes popped open and she saw fear in them, genuine debilitating fear. Ruby let him struggle for a minute or so, before easing up on her grip, just a little.

“You will be quiet and answer my questions.” She said. “Shout or scream and you’ll end your days in agony....Do you understand ?”

He nodded and Ruby gave him one of her smiles. Not on enough power to lobotomise him, but he was going to be a grinning fool for a few hours. Nothing that damaged his memory though, she needed to know where he’d been and who’d hired him to act the part of fake Serge.

“Wow, what did you do to him ?” Asked Lily.

“Nothing too extreme, just complete trust and adoration in a single smile. People respond, it’s something built into the human psyche. For two or three hours he’ll tell me anything I want to know. He’ll also gladly come anywhere I wish to take him.”

“And.....You really can’t teach me any of this ?” Asked Lily.

“An MI6 operative with super mental skills.....That sounds like a definition of hell.”

“Hey.....And I’m not in MI6 anymore.”

Ruby looked into the mind of the man in front of her and found someone eager to please. It was never easy; the human mind was too complex and easy to break. Care was needed and at least an hour of hard work.

“Watch the screen, Lily....He might have friends turning up at weird hours.”

Ruby looked into his smiling eyes.

“Tell me.....What is your full name ?” She asked.

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