

## The Presence

### Chapter 9 - Tripoli

**“No one in real life believes they’ll be faced with the unimaginable; it’s why it’s called the unimaginable. There are no masked slashers at your door in real life, or monsters waiting to come if you get a puzzle right, or shout out their name three times. There was real life and there was fantasy. The two worlds never overlapped.....”**

Σ

Denise Morgan thought it was a good day, when there wasn’t an ornate dining room chair, floating against the ceiling in her lounge. No chair that morning and no nocturnal scratching sounds for several days. Den still had a low level feeling of dread that had started after the window cleaner had been killed, but she was used to that. Like a bad back, or an irritable bowel, it was something that had to be lived with. She didn’t want to leave her home, unless things got much, much worse. Feeding Suki helped her forget the growing list of strange events in the block. It meant getting up a little earlier than she’d have liked, but Drew’s cat was relying on her. A tiny living being needed to be fed and be petted for a while. Plus.....And it was a huge plus; nothing that unpleasant had happened in Nick and Drew’s flat.....

“Have you heard any new about Mary ?” Asked Lilija.

The woman on the ground floor, with two children. There was a husband who worked somewhere locally, though Den had no idea where. Latvians according to Mary and she was the block’s version of the KGB. About once every two months, Den ran into Lilija on the stairs.

“She won’t be home for another two, or three weeks.” Said Den. “You might see decorators around though, her family are redecorating her flat.”

“That’s good.....I heard it was pretty bad in there.” Said Lilija.

“I never saw it, but Nick said it was dreadful.” Said Den.

“Blood everywhere.....Or so I heard.”

There were a few more comments on how horrific Mary’s flat must have been, despite neither of them actually seeing it. Strangely, sharing those feelings helped. Den was actually smiling, as she let herself into Drew and Nick’s flat.

“Don’t worry Suki, it’s just me.” Den called out.

Suki arrived like the wind, fussing around her ankles. Once she’d been fed and had calmed down a little, Den would cuddle the cat for a while. It might make her late for work, but that didn’t really matter. A position at the same grade and pay had sounded good. In reality, it meant being in charge of copying and collating a lot of legal paperwork.....A hell of a lot of paperwork. Still, it meant she could pay the mortgage. Den carefully avoided treading on Suki’s paws, as she looked in the kitchen cabinet.

“What did they leave you ?” Muttered Den. “Wow, this picture of rabbit something or other, looks pretty good.”

A clean bowl for the food and then she rinsed out and filled Suki’s water bowl. The litter tray looked alright, so she’d top that up in the evening. A quick stroke while Suki fed, with a loud purr as a thank you. Den took a few minutes to look the flat over for anything untoward; anything Hammer Filmish, as Nick referred to anything a bit spooky. The kitchen looked fine, as did the lounge. Den wandered

into both bedrooms and everything looked fine. Drew was bound to ask when she called and Den could say with all honesty; that she'd checked and everything was fine. Den looked in the bathroom and that too, looked free of anything even vaguely spooky.

"Time for Suki's cuddles." She muttered.

Actually there was the loft hatchway in the small hallway. It looked to have been lifted up at one corner. Nothing much, probably no more than an eighth of an inch higher than the other side. Once she had Suki in her arms, Den came back for another look.

"No.....I'm going nuts, Suki." Said Den. "It's probably been like that for years."

Ten minutes was allotted, for petting and generally fussing over Drew's pet. No washing up of grubby food bowl, she'd do that when she came back later. She might even watch something on Netflix and spend an hour with Suki. Though, if the poor thing was missing her owner, it hadn't affected her appetite.

"Sorry.....Pudcat." She said. "I have to earn a living.....I'll be back later."

On the way out, Den looked up at the loft hatch, but it had gone. There was no loft hatch, now she thought about it. There was an inspection hatch in the corridor to get at the main water tank, but none of the flats had a loft space. She'd seen it though and remembering that she'd seen it, made her tremble.

"I saw it.....Clear as day." Den Muttered.

There it had been, the frame painted a kind of cream colour. She even remembered a grubby mark, as though someone had squashed a bug on it. Now it was gone, leaving just painted wood chip paper. Like her keys, it had been there, but was now gone. Whatever haunted the block was playing with her, though she had no idea why. She wasn't the first person to aim the question into the ether.

"What do you want?" She asked.

No answer, her heart might have stopped if there had been one. A last quick cuddle for Suki and Den was on her way to Angel Tube. She was at the end of Camden Passage, when a text message arrived on her phone, asking her to call the head of human resources where she worked. It seemed her old boss was dead in horrific circumstances. Stuart Goodford was dead, as was his wife. Worryingly, the HR department didn't seem to have a clue about what to do about it.

"Come into the office." Said the HR manager. "The police want to talk to anyone who knew Stuart."

Oh yes, she'd known him.....They'd been in her bed, getting hot and sweaty, all too recently. Den ended the call, before shouting at the plate glass window of an antique shop.

"Fuck!"

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Sovi Björlund didn't have a large news organisation behind her. No army of solicitors to threaten the police with all kinds of expensive litigation. Stuart Goodford had been old money and the authorities would use every resource to bring the murderer to justice. Whoever got in their way would be sorry. The problem was that there were already rumblings in the undergrowth about Sovi getting in their way. After being escorted out of Stuart's house, there had been a quick interview at a Police Station in Camden Road. Nothing heavy, it seemed to be accepted that she had an appointment with Stuart Goodford. Just an independent journalist in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

No one had even asked if she'd taken any pictures of the crime scene. She'd signed a one page statement and gone home. Someone had asked if she needed to see a doctor, but it felt like they were ticking a box on a form. Sovi knew it would happen of course, cop brain was a real thing.

Someone senior would realise she'd been alone in the Goodford residence, for quite some time. It

began with a call, from a detective, a detective chief inspector no less. His seniority shouted that the police were coming around to thinking that Sovi Björlund might be a problem.

"....the family are worried." Said the DCI. "His briefcase was open and a few legal documents are missing. As part of your meeting with Stuart Goodford, did you remove any documents from the house?"

"Stuart was dead when I arrived." Said Sovi. "I never spoke to him and nothing was removed from the premises."

"There is a chance that we may need to see you." Said the DCI. "Are you going to be in London today? You can come here, or we could come to you? Whichever is more convenient."

Sovi had copied all the pictures to several cloud servers, two of which weren't under her name. She'd also copied them to a Darth Vader thumb drive. None of it would hold up a special branch enquiry for more than an hour or two. Stuart and his wife were pillars of the community. Just the sort of murders to get a watching brief from several organisations within the intelligence services. Sovi needed time to think.

"My movements are private." Said Sovi. "I'm quite happy to make an appointment for early next week."

"Not a problem.....As I said, Ms Björlund. We may not need to bother you at all." Said the DCI.

Sovi knew that was far from being her last contact with the police. Most investigative journalists try to build a relationship with the police and intelligence community and Sovi was no exception. She'd once been invited to a wine and cheese do at the Hotel in Vauxhall. MI6 might have a glossier image than the average copper, but once you got under the veneer.....They were quite similar.

Sovi sank into a bath full of scented water and waited for the knock on the door, which she was certain would happen, very soon. Her Finchley flat was connected to the world by a fairly state of the art entry phone system. When it started to ring, she wrapped a towel around herself and looked at the tiny screen. Colour, but not the best definition on a dull, cloudy day.

"There you are.....Might as well have 'Police' tattooed on your foreheads." She muttered.

Police all over the world had that look, the certain something that yelled 'Cop' at the world. There were three of them at her door, one in uniform. The other two were plain clothes detectives, which meant quite expensive looking suits. They wouldn't have a search warrant and were unlikely to force an entry into her home, or not yet at least. For once she envied the tabloid journalists. One phone call and there'd be an entire team of solicitors telling the police to get lost.

"I just need time.....To think." Sovi muttered.

She ignored the entry phone and went back to finish a good long soak in the bath. By the time she was dressed and ready to leave, the police had gone. Sovi had a plan starting up in her mind. A plan that would move her investigation forward, while keeping her well away from the police in London. Eventually she'd be brought in for questioning, but it might take them a while. Sovi called a number in Manchester, which Nick had given her.

"Hi, this is Sovi Björlund.....Hopefully; Nick Rees mentioned that I'd be calling."

"Yes.....He did mention you before heading for the airport. I'm Marsha Miller."

Nick had described Marsha as a black woman who was very much into the spiritual side of life. It seemed she had a thing for crystals. The last sort of person you'd expect to be working for someone like Eric Hardy. Eric was well known as the man most likely to cause a minor riot in Manchester one day. Nick had mentioned that Marsha was well paid by Eric.

"I know it's short notice, but do you have time to see me.....Hopefully this week?" Asked Sovi.

"I can make time.....Anything to get a break from Eric." Said Marsha. "Don't get me wrong, I like the guy....Most days. Eric's got a new thing to shout about. He wants to bring back National Service."

"Jeez.....That's an idea out of the ark." Said Sovi.

"Tell me about it.....So, when do you arrive ?" Asked Marsha.

"I can get on a train now and be there this evening.....Is that alright ?"

"Yes.....Expensive hotel, or cheap ?" Asked Marsha. "I can book you in, so you can go straight there.....By the way, Nick hated the cheap place."

"Expensive hotel it is then. What time do you get into the office in the morning ?" Asked Sovi.

"About half past eight."

"I'll be there.....See you in the morning."

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Josh Wiebe had worked for Nick Rees before, giving a few graphics his magic touch. He'd also provided similar services for Travis Givens. There wasn't a huge amount of money in tarting up pictures these days. Certainly nowhere near as much as there'd once been, but Josh was good. His fame in getting a useable image from just about anything, meant he could pay his bills and still have the occasional break in the Caribbean. He'd never be rich, but he'd never starve either. It was better than his last full time job, doing IT support for a merchant bank. Josh was now his own boss.

"Wow, Nick.....Where the hell did you get these ?" Josh muttered.

Josh knew that Nick often worked with independent models and small photographic studios.

Wherever it was, the location in the pictures looked sinister. Worse than simply sinister, it seemed to ooze an aura of something dreadful. There was a man in a few of the shots and he looked dreadful, as though the weight of the world rested on his shoulders.

"If this ever becomes a low budget horror movie.....I want to see it." Josh muttered.

It had to be that, fifteen hundred pictures to see if the set worked. There was no way that such a place really existed. When Josh played around with colour saturation, there appeared to be areas of the wall that.....The colour, the hue; it could only be fresh blood. Yet the man just hunched himself up and looked half asleep most of the time. Something dreadful had happened in that dark stone building.....Or at least that was obviously the intended vibe.

"Jeez, Nick.....You've got me spooked." He mumbled.

Josh had a long term problem with anxiety; it was why he'd decided to ditch one boss, in favour of a dozen people wanting their pictures yesterday. Yes, the implications of working for himself, had taken a while to sink in. He was in a small darkened room, his spare bedroom with the curtains closed. When he heard quiet giggling, he put it down to anxiety. A panic attack had ended up in A&E with a suspected heart attack. A little audio hallucination.....That was nothing. Josh looked again at the half dozen images that were either the artwork of a genius, or.....He didn't even want to think of the alternative.

"That.....I have no idea what it is." Josh muttered. "I just never want to meet it, anywhere."

It had been hard work and the solution had come to him while having an afternoon nap. Josh had started off with a fairly standard graphics package. Then he'd used a few of the applications that were his....He'd written a hundred percent of the code. There it was among the smoke, where there was no smoke.

"Fuck.....Nick was cagey." He mumbled. "What if it is real ?"

Briefly, Josh thought about how much the pictures might be worth, if they were authentic. Money genuinely wasn't his thing though, as long as he had enough to survive. Hygiene money his girlfriend

called it, enough to eat and keep yourself clean. Nick might not realise it, but he'd chosen to trust the right guy with his precious pictures. There was the giggling sound again.

"Go away.....Fuck off, you don't exist." Shouted Josh.

Josh centred the six images on his wide screen monitor and enlarged them to completely fill the screen. It looked like an asymmetrical plume of smoke, but in three images there was a trace of symmetry. It was the eyes that made Josh think of the horror movies he loved. Glowing yellowish, red eyes. They seemed to live beyond the picture, to stare into his soul. It had fairly nebulous clawed hands, that were probably not as harmless as they looked. Josh sent an email to Nick Rees, to the address of the Uni in Tripoli.

'Sending all fifteen hundred images, but these six are a bit special – Josh.'

Send and delete had been the instructions, but Josh always kept everything. For his own safety really, no one could deny giving him a few images, if he kept the originals. Josh used a script file to copy the pictures to the twenty or so servers he used, right across the globe. There was the giggling sound again.

"No.....No.....You're not really there." He muttered.

As he turned on the main light, Josh saw it. The smoke that wasn't really smoke. It giggled at him, before vanishing. Too much imagination, mixed with anxiety, as his doctor had once described it. The same reason why one burglary in an area can get thousands signing up for burglar alarms.

"Too much damn imagination." Josh muttered.

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The weather in Tripoli was thirty three degrees and the forecast only gave a five percent chance of precipitation. At one time Nick Rees would have loved the dry heat, but he'd probably lived in North London for too long. Drew had rubbed sunblock onto the bits he couldn't easily reach and he'd done the same for her. The sun felt so direct though, as if it was cooking the skin on his face. The car sent to bring them from their hotel had aircon, but it didn't seem to work that well. The student driving it, pulled up outside a nondescript office building across the street from the Ladybird International School.

"This is it, our headquarters in Libya." Said Kevin. "Louise is on the third floor..... Henrike said he'd watch for when you arrived. He should be there to open the outside door. Any problem, give them a call."

Kevin looked about twenty and had a midlands dialect that could have been from anywhere from Birmingham to Stourbridge. He'd given them each a litre bottle of water, with instructions to drink a lot while they were in Libya. Not easy in a country with an official water shortage.

"Thank you for driving us here." Said Drew.

"Yeah, hope we see you again." Said James.

There was the feeling of cooking skin again, as Nick got out of the car. Five of them crammed into the car had felt suffocating, but it was worse out in the open air. Nick knew that in a few days, they'd all acclimatise. Eventually it would all be just another hot, dry day.

"Get a decent four wheel drive with aircon that works." Said Kevin. "Then I'll drive you right out into the deep desert."

A girl wearing a hijab was holding the door open, as they arrived at the building. She smiled and said hello, but never said another word. Nick trusted that she knew where she was going. He heard Louise's voice before they were anywhere near her office.

"Tell the embassy to keep pushing for more water." Yelled Louise. "Remind them we have young students.....Mention angry parents on the evening news in London."

Nick never did see who Louise had been shouting at. There she was, beckoning them into her office. It was a little cooler than the outside air, but still uncomfortable.

"Come in.....There should be enough chairs." Said Louise.

The two couples sat together, of course they did. James ended up sat at the back, but he did have the most comfortable looking chair. There were boxes of bottled water against one wall. Water was obviously a huge issue for Louise.

"Hi Louise.....There were times when I thought I'd never see Libya again." Said Nick.

"Don't believe the media here, we still get power cuts." Said Louise. "Water is scarce and there are still bandits operating in the deep desert. So.....Don't cheer too loudly about being back here. Now....Thanks to Nick sending me pictures and social media, I recognise you all."

"We did meet last year." Said Travis. "You were speaking at a conference on biodiversity."

"Yes.....I remember now." Said Louise. "A weird subject for me, but it gave me the chance to moan about cuts in funding for archaeology projects."

"It's nice to meet you, in the flesh." Said Adie.

"Yes.....And thank you for still helping us." Added Nick.

"Talking of help.....An email dropped into one of our general accounts." Said Louise. "Someone called Josh, sent Nick a large number of pictures. He thought six were particularly interesting, so I took the liberty of printing them off, on our laser printer."

The girl in the hijab chose that moment to bring in a tray, with a jug of coffee and enough cups for everyone. Everyone smiled and she smiled back, but not a word was spoken.

"Sip your coffee, Marwa makes it very strong." Said Louise. "I'm sure she thinks I'm in constant need of being kept awake."

Nick sipped at the coffee, which could have woken sleeping beauty. His attention was all on the pictures though and the creature of smoke and heat. It was so clear, far better definition than anything Nick had seen before.

"Wow, Josh did a good job." Said Nick.

"He certainly did." Said Louise. "Your friend Josh has captured the bogeyman you're looking for. Though officially of course, I believe there is no bogeyman."

The pictures were passed around, with everyone looking surprised. All they'd seen before were a few low definition hints about what might be there. Now they had several pictures that left no doubt about it. The Presence was a living entity of some kind. An entity made of smoke, heat and fire.....But still a thinking being.

"Crap.....We have to visit the temple." Said Travis.

"During the daylight hours though." Said James. "And no sleeping there, ever, under any circumstances."

"All important, but for the moment.....The police are still at the tomb, temple, or whatever else we're calling it.....I heard Kevin refer to it as the ruins. Anyway.....Call it what you like, the police are still there." Said Louise.

"Any particular reason?" Asked James. "Initially.....It was assumed they'd be gone by now. After all.....They put the deaths down to an attack by wild dogs."

Louise dug through a few of the post-it notes attached to the monitor on her desk. One seemed to particularly interest her.

"Just making sure I have the phrase they used." Said Louise. "One police officer had an emotional breakdown, after being in the ruins for too long. Did he see the beast, the thing you call the

Presence ? Maybe, but the police will never budge from their wild dogs nonsense. The police are saying they'll be out of the site in twenty four hours."

"Good.....Then we can get to work." Said Nick.

"You'll need a day, Nick." Said Louise. "Kevin will drive you anywhere and carry anything you give him. You do need to buy a vehicle though. I recommend a solid four wheel drive, maybe a small truck."

"It'll bite a hole in the budget.....But I'll find a vehicle today." Said Nick.

"Henrike has volunteered to be your guide." Said Louise. "It seems he feels guilty about Roger and Diane. He has no reason to be, they were told not to sleep inside the ruins."

"Can we agree on a name ?" Asked Adie. "Let's call it the temple."

"Fine.....The temple it is." Said Nick.

Travis glared at him, as if upset about Nick making the decision. It was hardly the sort of thing that required a vote. Temple, ruins, or tomb.....To be honest, it didn't seem to matter what it was called.

"Naomi has agreed to be another helper." Said Louise. "You haven't met her yet. Like Henrike, she is fluent in standard Arabic and the local version of Arabic. They can get you past any minor pieces of local bureaucracy. Oh.....And I think Kevin knows a little Berber and some Domari."

"Good.....We'll be able to buy food in every corner shop in Tripoli." Said Drew.

Not that funny, but after hearing about police officers having emotional breakdowns, and those pictures Josh had sent.....Everyone needed an excuse to laugh at something.

"I'm sure we can find what supplies we need today." Said Travis. "Anything we forget though.....Can we raid your supplies and pay for what we take ?"

"Yes.....Though I did say this to Nick and it still stands." Said Louise. "Cooperation stops when you enter the ruin.....Sorry, the temple. I've told the students that anyone I hear has entered the temple with you, will be on the first plane home."

"Yes, we understand that.....Poor Diane and Roger." Said Drew.

Marwa came in for the coffee things and saw the picture Josh had sent of the Presence. She looked terrified and pointed at the image.

"Djinn.....A Djinn.....A thing of evil." Said Marwa.

"Calm yourself.....I don't want you talking to others about the picture." Said Louise. "I want your promise, Marwa."

"I promise."

The poor girl looked relieved to get out of the room; she even forgot the tray full of cups. No one said anything for a while, as if they needed to digest Marwa's words.

"A Djinn, that's a new one.....I can see how the picture might suggest that." Said Travis.

"To Muslims the Djinn are just another part of creation." Said Louise. "Creatures formed in the smokeless flames..... Does that begin to sound familiar ? Your Presence would appear to be created from smoke, heat and flames. Then there is the length of time that Djinn have been around....At least according to legends. The Sumerians were here about five thousand years ago and Djinn were here long before them."

"Djinn or Demon, does the name really matter ?" Asked Adie. "We seem to get bogged down on names."

"It matters if we want to bind its powers." Said Nick.

"Actually I think it might be something else.....Something not in the books." Said Louise. "Not that I officially believe in any of this nonsense."

"Can we borrow Marwa ?" Asked Nick. "Another viewpoint is always useful."

“Yes.....But don’t take her into the temple.” Said Louise.

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Florence was in a cab on the way to Islington N1, Nick and Drew’s flat to be precise. She’d hoped to get there without Betsy calling her with a few last minute instructions.

“A neighbour is feeding the cat.” Said Betsy Nagle. “I have her number if there are problems. The main thing is not letting the cat out. Make sure the damn thing is in the flat when you leave.”

“I can manage that, I used to have a cat.” Said Florence. “I understand their weird little ways.”

Florence could have simply picked up the post from the pile inside the front door to the block. It had been Betsy who’d insisted that she gave the flat the once over while she was there. Leave any post for Drew on the kitchen table and if there was time, pet the cat before she left. Easy stuff, but it got her out of the office for a while. Betsy was even allowing Florence to put the cab fare on her expenses. The phone answering machine was to be ignored. Nick had already changed the outgoing message to say that he and Drew were away for a while.

“If Mary Seeley returns, don’t engage with her.” Said Betsy. “From what I’ve heard she’s a gossip and a busy body. Be polite, but tell her nothing. That is important.”

“I promise not to break under interrogation.” Said Florence.

“Wait until you meet Mary.....You’ll see.” Said Betsy.

The cab dropped her off right outside the block. There had been problems there quite recently Florence knew that. The police scene of crime vehicle was now gone, leaving the block to look peaceful, quiet and ordinary. No lifts in the block, none at all. The common areas were supposed to have had a fresh coat of paint years before and looked a bit grubby, according to Betsy. The lighting in the stair wells was fairly primitive and the fire alarm system was out of the ark. On the plus side for some, the flats were a long way from being the most expensive in the postcode. There were a few pensioners like Mary in the block and quite a few young couples, using it as their first starter home. Nick had left a few notes with Betsy, which Florence had added to by her own online research. It was that weird time in the morning, when no one seems to be around. Florence opened the outside door and stepped inside the block. Despite Betsy’s rather negative notes, the place looked alright.

“I could happily live here.” She muttered. “Though I don’t know how Mary manages the stairs several times a day.”

It took a few minutes to dig Nick and Drew’s post, out of the pile on the table. Then up the infamous stairs, which didn’t bother her. Florence was ready to try and grab the cat, as it made a break for freedom. As she opened the door, there was no cat in sight. Suki, Betsy had told her that Drew’s pet was a girl cat called Suki.

“Don’t worry Suki.....I’m friendly.” Shouted Florence.

Drew’s pet was at one end of the sofa in the lounge. No touching yet, until the cat was used to her. Suki opened her eyes enough to see her, before going off to sleep again. Good, Suki obviously wasn’t a nervous creature.

“I’ll be back soon, Suki.” Said Florence.

Into the kitchen, which had a large table against the wall. Florence went through the post and left anything for Drew in a neat pile. There wasn’t much and nothing looked official. There was a standard instruction to open anything for Drew, that looked like it couldn’t wait six months to be opened. County Court actions were the main worry, bills that had been forgotten about. County court letters were pretty easy to spot.

“Oh, Nick Rees.....I can see you’re going to keep me busy.” She muttered.



Nick had a lot of post from his bank and a credit card bill. None of it was difficult to deal with. Florence had decided to keep a handwritten list of Nick's post in a ledger. There was also a column for what she intended to do. Letters from publishers regarding the new book would go to Betsy. She was probably up to speed on what Nick was up to. Something from the local council about construction in the area and that was it, the last letter in the heap.

"Not too bad.....Still time to cuddle Suki." Said Florence. "If.....She'll let me."

No getting her bits and pieces together, there was time for coffee and getting to know the sole inhabitant of the flat, Suki. Florence had heard about the death of Amy Tynes, her predecessor in the role of PA to Betsy. She knew Nick blamed himself for her death, but Betsy tended to put that down to Nick Rees needing therapy, or something similar. Florence hadn't been in the job long, but she trusted Betsy's view of the situation. When Florence found Suki sat in the hall, looking up at a loft hatch, her first thought wasn't to get out of the flat.

"What can you hear, Suki? Mice up in the loft?" Florence asked.

The cat was stood there, concentrating on something up in the ceiling. No picking her up yet, but it was the perfect opportunity for a little careful petting. Florence knelt on the floor and stroked Suki, from the top of her head and down across her shoulders. Wonderful, she was rewarded with a nice loud purr. It stopped quickly though. Obviously not scared of her, the cat seemed to be anxious about the loft hatch and what lay beyond it.

"Just mice.....Brave mice, now Nick and Drew are away." Florence said.

More stroking for Suki, which progressed to ear rubs. The cat purred a little, but seemed obsessed with the ceiling in the hall. Florence stood up and looked at the loft hatch. Cream painted wood, just about large enough for someone to get up there, into the loft. Imagination of course, but looking at the hatch, seemed to cause a scratching noise.

"Might be rats.....I'll tell Betsy." Florence mumbled.

No one in real life believes they'll be faced with the unimaginable; it's why it's called the unimaginable. There are no masked slashers at your door in real life, or monsters waiting to come if you get a puzzle right, or shout out their name three times. There was real life and there was fantasy. The two worlds never overlapped, Florence knew that. Florence was in her late twenties and had always worried about being too middle of the road, too ordinary. When about nineteen she'd looked for a biker to date; her best friend knew a few of them. Florence had wanted to satisfy a need to rebel. She and Tony had done everything her mother had tried to protect her from. It had been fun, but Tony was gone after less than a year. Her choice.....The life of a rebel hadn't been her thing after all.

As the loft hatch began to open, Florence almost fainted. It was impossible, as were the clawed fingers, which appeared as it opened. Maybe the hatch was stuck; the fingers seemed to be having trouble pulling it up. As the claws lifted the hatch, there was something there, something looking down at her. There was no conscious decision, just terror and panic. Florence grabbed Suki, holding the cat tight against her chest.

"No nonsense, Cat.....Behave, keep still.....We're leaving here." Florence muttered.

Out of the front door and onto the landing, she didn't even pull the door fully closed. Florence sat on the top step, holding Suki in her arms. The inch or so gap in the door became her biggest worry, but nothing would make her go close enough to close the door. Running down the stairs and away was a huge temptation, but not yet. Everything Florence needed was on Drew and Nick's kitchen table. Her bag, her keys, her phone.....Her wallet with all her bank cards inside it. Running away from all her

things was unthinkable, unimaginable.....For now. There was a loud scratching sound coming from inside the flat. Worse still, Suki was trembling and making whimpering sounds.

“Don’t worry Suki.....Whatever happens, you’ll be coming home with me.”

There was no way she was going to leave the poor thing in that flat. Florence did briefly wonder if she’d gone crazy and imagined the clawed hand. No, she’d seen some seriously heavy things during her year as a rebel. None of that had caused her to see weird shit. Whatever had happened in that flat.....Was real. Florence decided to shout for help. Someone might be home from work, or be a full time mum looking after a rug rat.

“Hello.....I need help.” She yelled. “Can anyone hear me ?”

The scratching sound moved and seemed to go over the top of the flat’s front door. If the door had started opening, Florence had decided to run. She had friends who’d put her up until she’d got into her own flat. Betsy would probably lend her enough cash to survive, until her bank cards could be replaced. Of everything on the table in that dreadful flat, losing her phone worried her most. The scratching went around the door, but the door didn’t move.

“For fuck sake ! Is there anyone who can help me ?” Yelled Florence.

Suki was making crying sounds, but she seemed happy to stay where she was. There was a sound of a door opening somewhere below.

“Is someone in trouble ?” Asked a female voice.

“Yes.....My name is Florence. Something bad happened in Nick’s flat.....I left with the cat, but my things were left behind.....Things I really need.”

“I’m Lilija.....I have two young children. I can’t leave them on their own. Too many strange things have happened lately.”

Yeah, tell me about it, thought Florence. Betsy had mentioned a few odd rumours, but nothing to prepare her for the clawed hand and.....The dreadful scratching sound.

“Perhaps you could call my boss ?” Yelled Florence. “I can give you her number.....Tell her to get here quickly and that I need a box for the cat.”

“You’re taking the cat ?”

“Of course.....I’m not leaving the poor thing here.” Said Florence.

Time ticked by, with no further words coming up the stairs from Lilija. Florence noticed a shadow in the doorframe of the flat, which for a second, looked like a claw. Just her imagination, but her heart began to beat far too fast.

“Do you want that number for my boss ?” Asked Florence.

“My husband works in Essex Road.” Shouted Lilija. “I’ve just called him.....He will help and he’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“Thank you.”

Florence had become reconciled to the idea of waiting an hour for Betsy to arrive, maybe longer if the traffic was bad. Yet, she found herself getting anxious about the time it seemed to be taking Lilija’s husband to arrive. Essex Road was really close, but it was fifteen minutes before a man she didn’t know, came trudging up the stairs. He was a little overweight and breathing hard. He was also carrying a large cardboard box with a few holes cut in the sides.

“How do they survive up here, with no lift ? I brought a box for the cat.....It’s quite strong.”

“Thank you.....You’re very kind.” Said Florence.

There was a towel in the bottom of the box and Suki didn’t object to being placed in the box. No purr as Florence gave her a quick stroke, but she definitely looked more relaxed. The top of the box

flapped down and looked solid enough to stop Suki from getting out. It was time to either enter the flat, or pick up the box and run away. It seemed, Liliya had given her husband some instructions. "Where are your things?" He asked. "My wife says, I am not to let you go back in there. We have heard about some terrible things happening in this block. Describe what you need and I will go and get them."

"Thank you.....I am Florence."

"I know."

"What is your name?"

"Kārlis, but everyone calls me Karl."

Florence described her bag and that it was on the kitchen table. Most of her things were on the large kitchen table. Her phone was either there, or next to the coffee maker. Karl listened and nodded quite a few times. As he opened the door, she expected to see a clawed hand appear. The open door showed just a small hallway with an answerphone on a table. It felt like a blessing, that the height of the door didn't allow her to see the loft hatch.

"Be careful." Said Florence.

"I will be..... Very careful."

Karl wasn't gone long, before he returned with her bag and all her things. It seemed her phone had been near the cooker. It had two text messages. Both work based and nothing to worry about.

"There's no damage in there." Said Karl. "Everything looks fine, but my wife has told me about the tricks this place can play. We should lock the door and never return."

"Yes.....I'll phone Denise later and tell her I have the cat."

When she was near the door, she had a good view of the hall and the kitchen. It all looked so normal, so nice.....It was Drew and Nick's home after all. There was Suki's food in the kitchen, tins and tins of the stuff. It was so tempting to grab a bag full of cat food, for Suki. There was no sign of anything nasty. Everything looked so.....Normal.

"I'll just get some food for Suki." Said Florence.

"That is a very bad idea." Said Karl.

"I'll only be a minute or so.....Then we can lock the place up."

Karl stood in the hall, looking a bit vexed with her. Two carrier bags from....Where? Florence kept hers in the cupboard under the sink and so did Nick and Drew. Open a kitchen cupboard and it took about a minute to fill two bags with tins of cat food.

"There.....Done." Said Florence.

Something moved very quickly, as it came out of the loft hatch. One moment Karl was there, just your average father of two, in a rather worn suit and tie. The next he was part of a cloud of blood and body parts. So much blood, Florence was covered in it. Hot blood, sticky blood.....Enough to make the hall look as though it had been spray painted with blood. Florence had seen the impossible, the unthinkable, the unimaginable, and her mind couldn't cope with it. Florence screamed and screamed and carried on screaming.....

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