

The Presence

Chapter 17 – Infernal Names

**“No Suki.....I’m hoping one of the messages is about who has my cat.” Said Drew.
The flat had felt dark before they’d put on a few lights and in a way, it still felt dark. Very few lights in the windows of the other flats in the block. Had something happened to cause a mass exodus ?’**

Σ

Jerry hadn’t known what to expect. His only knowledge of Libyan nomadic tribes, had come from inflight magazines and a few unflattering articles in various newspapers. It was quite a pleasant surprise when the headman spoke pretty good English. A bit of an accent, but perfectly understandable.

“Thank you.....You really have saved our lives.” Said Celia.

Not just a ride on their Camels back to the bargain basement car Jerry had hired. There were bottles of water too and a few bags of dried food. It was about a day and a half drive to Tripoli and they had enough food and water to last over a week. After being hungry and dehydrated in the desert....They really did owe the nomads their lives.

“Yes.....We’d have died out there.” Said Jerry.

The headman had seemed embarrassed by their gratitude; he even blushed when Celia gave him a goodbye hug. The young men made whooping noises, as they mounted their camels and headed back into the Libyan Desert. Their car would start, they’d already checked that. Quite soon, it was quiet and if it hadn’t been for the food and water, the whooping nomads could have been nothing but an hallucination.

“They were so nice.....You have to give them a huge mention in the story.” Said Celia.

“I intend to do that.” Said Jerry. “Talking of people in the story.....The Jeep has gone, so it looks like the students have returned to Tripoli.”

“Yes, there’s not even any dirty underwear in their tent.” Said Celia.

Jerry knew what they had to do, but Celia would be scared. Being totally honest with himself, he was pretty scared too. They had very few pictures and there was an obvious conclusion to the piece he wanted to write. The public might like friendly nomads, but they’d love the story of stolen treasure.

“We have to go back to the ruins.” Said Jerry. “Not for long, but we need pictures. Is your camera still working properly ?”

“It is, but please.....I don’t want to go back there.” Said Celia.

“If we don’t.....All we have is a piece about cute nomads and their camels.” Said Jerry. “I don’t need to tell you how desperately we need a good payday.”

“There are days when I hate you, Jerry Zale.” Said Celia. “Alright, let’s go now and get it done. Pictures of the ruins and any smashed artefacts we might see.”

“Preferably gold artefacts my dear.” Said Jerry. “Bodies too, if there are any and pictures of wrecked vehicles. If you can get pictures of smouldering helicopters and soldiers.....Take them. The more horrific the pictures, the better. The paper can always edit them.”

“We’re ghouls Jerry, a pair of ghouls.” Muttered Celia.

Celia drove, while Jerry aimed the camera out of the window for a few shots to give the general vibe of the area, the atmosphere. A large lizard obliged by appearing quite close to the track across the desert. Celia was a far better photographer than him, but she was also a better rough terrain driver than him.

“Did you get the lizard ?”

“Yes.....No being a back seat photographer.....Please.” Muttered Jerry.

The ruins really were smouldering when they got there. Huge blocks of stone had been thrown a long way from the temple. The temple had been just about recognisable. Now it was just a hollow in the ground, full of rubble.

“The explosions must have been huge.” Said Jerry. “I doubt if we’ll find anyone alive.”

Out of the car and Jerry smelt the dead, before he noticed the nearest body. Ripped apart, the images of the dead would be truly horrific. It was depressing to see so much destruction. One of the helicopters looked vaguely like a helicopter. The other was just a tangle of metal debris. Celia had seen something that excited her; she was bobbing about and pointing.

“Look.....Look, Jerry.” Yelled Celia. “A definite glint of gold.....We might have found one of the artefacts.”

“If we’re really lucky, it might be reasonably intact.” Said Jerry.

~ ~

“It’s so nice to get out.” Said Sovi Björlund. “I love the hotel, but it has begun to feel like a very comfortable prison.”

“I know.....I’ve begun to hate journalists.” Said Denise Morgan. “Sorry, no offence meant.”

“None taken, Den.” Said Sovi. “You’ve seen the worst of the bunch. Most are just trying to earn a crust.”

Den had begun to feel trapped, with no proper home and always a dozen reporters outside the hotel, waiting to pounce. She’d thought it couldn’t get any worse. Then the university in Tripoli had announced the death of Travis Givens and things had got worse, much worse.

“Are we taking the rolled up carpet in the cupboard ?” Asked a removal guy.

“Yes.....Everything is going.” Said Den.

She was moving out of the block of flats in Islington. Den’s appearance on Rob Fong’s chat show had worked wonders, though it had seemed a disaster at the time. Den had taken Sovi’s advice and told the truth about her relationship with Stuart. That it had all been nothing more than a one night stand. She’d even cried, mainly because Rob seemed to want her to. Her lack of a safe home had been mentioned, along with her employers treating her like a junior. Photocopying all day, had been mentioned. A teary dumpster fire of an interview that had lasted no more than five minutes.

“To think.....When I moved in here, it was my big move.” Said Den. “A flat in Islington.....All of my friends were so jealous.”

“The new place is safe, Den.” Said Sovi. “The rent is quite cheap and it’ll give you a chance to catch your breath.”

“I know and I’m very grateful for it.....Crying on Rob’s show turned out to be a good thing.”

Den’s five minute train wreck interview with Rob, had ended up giving her life a reboot. A public relations company had asked her to come in for an interview. A proper job she could get her teeth into and she’d received a job offer after the interview. Best of all, the pay was about the same as her current position. Actually, best of all was getting away from a job where every day was a reminder of Stuart and how he and his wife had died.

“I’m surprised Mary hasn’t come down.” Said Den. “I told her I was leaving today.”

“She’s probably upset that you’re leaving.”

“Yeah, maybe.....That reminds me, I must call Marsha and give her my new address.”

As for the mortgage on her the flat she was leaving ? Sovi and her solicitors had helped Den apply for various grants and payments. There were quite a few schemes for homes blighted by crime. It was hard to think of anything worse than a block with several murders and other assorted injuries.

There’d be fights with her building society, but the solicitor was confident she’d win in the end. Her new home had been another result of her five minutes with Rob Fong. A social housing organisation had seen her tears and someone had called her. Rob had a reputation for being a monster off screen, but onscreen.....Den owed him a lot.

“You have to come over to the new place this weekend.” Said Den.

“Of course I will.....Edgware, top end of the Northern Line.” Said Sovi. “See.....I did look it up on the internet. Not a bad journey from the hotel.”

The man in charge of the removal men made a huge thing of checking every room for something that might have been missed. Hinting at a tip really. Den already had the cash in her pocket and he went away happy. By the time Den had locked up her flat, the van was about to leave. Everything she owned in the world was in the back of a van.....Everything with sentimental value, everything she’d had to struggle to buy. There was something weird about it all being in one large removal van.

“We’ll stop off for a coffee somewhere.” Said the removal guy. “Give you a chance to get there.”

“Any problems, you have my mobile number.” Said Den.

As the van drove away, Den had that prickling feeling in the back of her neck. Someone was watching her. Mary was at her bedroom window, waving at her. Den waved back.

“Mary could be dreadful.....But I’ll miss her.” Said Den.

“Neighbours huh.....We get used to them, even the awful ones.” Said Sovi.

They were going in the car Sovi had hired when arriving in London. The way things were going, it would have been cheaper to buy a second hand car. Den made herself comfortable in the passenger seat, with a large leather bag on her lap. The bag contained all her really precious belongings, the ones she’d happily run into a burning building to save from the flames.

“Ready to go.....Or do you need a moment ?” Asked Sovi.

“No.....Let’s go.” Said Den.

Den looked over her shoulder, as Sovi turned right at the end of the road and headed north. She might see Mary again one day, but otherwise. She never wanted to see the block again.

~ ~

Despite Jerry yelling at her to go slowly, Celia scrambled over the rubble at speed. Some of the stones were still hot; she felt at least two burns on the palms of her hands. She still didn’t slow down. She’d seen the glint of gold, she could still see it, but it was now closer.

“Be careful.....There could be a hole in the ground waiting to collapse.” Yelled Jerry.

There was something about gold, even if it wouldn’t end up as theirs. A museum somewhere would probably keep it in a drawer in a vault, where no one would ever enjoy looking at it. Jerry might be able to agree a finder’s fee though; he was good at that kind of thing.

“It’s something big.....I can see it better now.” Shouted Celia.

“No amount of gold is worth getting crippled for.....Slow down.” Shouted Jerry.

He was following her, but doing it with a little more care. Jerry was right of course and she slowed down, just a little. Testing which stones were fairly steady, wouldn’t slow her down that much. As she got closer to the golden artefact, a voice was there. Soft, but quite clear.

“Abaddon

Adramelech
Ahpuch
Ahriman
Amon
Apollyon
Asmodeus
Astaroth
Azazel.”

A voice saying a list, very softly. Celia recognised a few of the names, though she had no idea who they were, or why someone would be speaking them. When the voice reached Behemoth, Celia began to understand.

“Do you hear that ?” She yelled at Jerry, who was still some distance from her.

“Hear what ?”

“A voice.....Reciting what I think are the Infernal Names.”

“I can’t hear anything.” Shouted Jerry. “Move away, Celia.....It might be targeting you for something. Don’t touch the golden artefact.”

The voice droned on and on, but it sounded so soft and pleasant. Definitely not a very demonic voice, but then again.....She was making her assessment based on movies and TV shows. If the devil could convince the world he didn’t exist, a few pleasant voiced minions had to be childsplay.

“Mammon
Mania
Mantus
Marduk
Mastema
Melek Taus.”

The voice carried on, with nothing at all threatening in the voice. Celia had once been religious for a while, an almost card carrying catholic. She hadn’t so much grown out of it, as simply had no time left in her life for religion, any religion. She remembered reciting many repetitions of phrases supposedly beloved by the saints.

“I think.....It seems to be reciting names, the way Catholics recite the Hail Mary.” Yelled Celia.

“Just move away from there.....Please.” Shouted Jerry.

“I can almost reach it now.....The gold.”

Celia kept moving towards the artefact, which might well turn out to be more than one golden object. Jerry kept yelling at her and the voice became louder with each step she took. There was definitely a single gold artefact. It was a statue, of a woman with the head of a goat. A heavy looking statue, though Celia was certain she’d be able to carry it. She stretched out her right hand.....

“Mictian
Midgard
Milcom
Moloch
Mormo
Naamah
Nerga.”

As her hand touched the statue, the voice stopped. Celia didn’t care; she was already fed up with the constant droning, even if the voice was pleasant. She used both hands to grab the statue. It was

heavy for its size, it had to weigh a good six or seven pounds. Nothing she couldn't manage using both hands. She'd have to be sure of her footing though, with no hands left to grab hold of any stones.

"I have it, Jerry.....Beautiful." Yelled Celia. "Heavy.....Must be worth a fortune."

"Look, you crazy idiot.....Look in front of you." Shouted Jerry.

That was why he'd been yelling at her. It was like a spinning lake of fire, growing as it came. A way off yet, but it was growing quite quickly. In a few minutes it would have her in a deadly, fiery embrace. No dropping the statue, she'd worked too hard to get it. The flaming lake appeared to be spinning around where the centre of the temple had once been.

"Drop the statue and get back here.....Quickly as you can." Shouted Jerry.

"No fucking way." Celia yelled. "Get back, I'm going to arrive running."

Had it got to her? Something had happened, she wasn't usually so brave, or maybe foolhardy was the word. It might have been holding seven pounds of gold of course. A priceless statue in her hands, even if some faceless bureaucrat would claim it. Celia jumped up from stone to stone, until she was on the highest she could see.

"Celia.....please!" Shouted Jerry.

"Shut up.....I'm not dropping the statue."

A little over her right shoulder, she could see the spinning flames. Rotating faster now, but there was still time. Celia jumped onto the next high stone and the one after that was a long jump holding the statue. Over three feet, with no hands to steady herself.

"Jump Celia, you need to keep moving." Said a voice in her head. "Keep jumping and running, I won't let you fall. You can trust me."

Another voice, though she knew this one was invading her thoughts. Another nice voice, though that might mean nothing. She trusted that voice, despite knowing that could well be a trick.

"Who are you?" Celia Yelled.

"No time for that, trust me. Run, or you're going to burn."

Celia ran and jumped and she felt far more sure footed than she usually felt. The fire wasn't far behind; the heat was biting at her from behind.

"Alright I'm running.....Who are you?"

"Aiwass.....I am known by many names, though mainly Aiwass."

She could smell the soles of her shoes burning, as she took the last few jumps. Worn out and terrified of being burned alive, she lived to drop the statue at Jerry's feet.

"A present from Aiwass....I think." She said. "I could never have run that fast without his help."

"Who the hell is Aiwass?" Asked Jerry.

"Being completely honest.....I have no idea." Said Celia.

The lake of fire stopped spinning and became quite still. They needed to move further away from the heat. It was going to burn away any trace of everything; she could see it melting solid stone blocks. Eventually there'd be nothing left but a dip in the ground where the temple had been. Celia picked up the gorgeous gold statue.

"Can we go now?" She asked.

"A few pictures first, of the fire." Said Jerry. "No one will believe us, if there are no pictures."

Celia took twenty pictures, before her camera ran out of battery. Not that it mattered; the pictures were saved to a memory card. She drove of course, she nearly always drove. There was a feeling of unreality about it, after a few miles. As if the statue lying on the back seat, would vanish, which it didn't.

~ ~

They'd talked right into the night; the next few decisions could change both their lives. Who to talk to, who not to talk to, even who to avoid. Then there had been the subject of how honest they could afford to be. Even if they weren't thrown in jail; too much honesty might follow them like a bad smell. A bad smell with the potential to ruin future careers.....

"Do you think the cop truck might upset the locals ?" Asked Naomi.

Henrike was driving, though Naomi had offered to try and take over for a while. As long as he wasn't too tired, Henrike saw no reason to risk making her leg worse. With a lot of help, Naomi could now put a little weight on her bad leg. They were both stood next to the truck, in Castelverde. A town not far from Tripoli as the crow flew, though there were no crows in Libya. Their mobile phones should have been working, but many things were like that in Libya. There were a lot of things that should have worked, but didn't.

"We agreed to call Louise, before arriving in Tripoli....In a cop truck." Said Henrike. "Castelverde has always been reasonably safe, even during the worst of the uprisings."

"Reasonably safe.....Anywhere we can go that is completely safe ?" Asked Naomi.

"Well.....If no one shoots us, if we don't get arrested and if we ever get out of Libya. We could go on a holiday somewhere nice. I've always fancied Aruba; I heard the flamingos are cute."

"Oh yes.....Aruba sounds perfect." Said Naomi.

"Alright.....Lean on me." Said Henrike. "All of your weight.....I won't drop you."

It looked like a general store, with all sorts of things hanging from the awning over the door. A bit of a trudge from the truck, but it seemed sensible not to park too close. Some locals thought of the cops as friends, while some didn't. Carrying Naomi would get noticed; a really huge amount of unwanted attention. Henrike put his arm around her and held her tight against him.

"Crap, that still hurts." Said Naomi. "If we ever do this again, you can be the one to break their leg."

"Aruba.....Think of sun, sand and flamingos." Said Henrike. "It'll be my treat."

The store had a counter, with a few seats in front of it. The man behind the counter looked middle aged and wary. Being wary was probably his constant expression. Henrike gently lowered Naomi onto one of the chairs.

"Brilliant.....More comfortable than it looks." Said Naomi.

Despite being thought of as a senior guy at the university and something of an expert on Libyan archaeology; Henrike wasn't that fluent in the local version of Arabic. Some would say that no one was, even the locals. He managed though, to get the use of a telephone. It took a little upfront money, before the man presented him with a landline phone that looked like something out of an eighties BT advert. Henrike picked up the receiver and almost cheered, when he heard a dial tone.

"Do you need my list of numbers ?" Asked Naomi.

"Might as well, your writing is probably easier to read than mine."

It was.....Far more legible than his spider scrawl. Easy to get past the inevitable minion who shielded Louise from unwanted calls. It almost felt as though his call was expected.

"It is so good to hear your voice, Henrike." Said Louise. "After being told about poor Kevin.... Then nothing else for a while."

"Naomi and I are both alive and well, but there are complications." Said Henrike.

"Start with where you both are.....I'm seeing a Tripoli number coming up."

"We're in Castelverde.....Driving a cop truck." Said Henrike. "That is a very long story. As far as we can tell, the temple at the centre of all this was destroyed, probably by the army. We need help, Louise.....Urgent help."

“There was recent trouble in Castilverde.” Said Louise. “Be exact.....Where exactly are you in Castilverde ?”

“We’re in a general store.....Find the large police truck outside the education centre and you’ve found us. We’ll come out to whoever arrives. Our phones don’t work here.”

“Alright.....Give me a moment.” Said Louise.

She was gone for a few minutes, while the owner of the shop glared at him. Henrike dropped a couple more Libyan Dinar notes onto the counter, which cheered him up. Judging by the lack of customers, a visit by two westerners was a boom day in the store.

“She’s gone to make arrangements.” Henrike said to Naomi.

“No joking.....I really need that two weeks in Aruba.” Said Naomi.

“I wasn’t joking.....We’re definitely going.”

When Louise came back, she sounded different, perhaps a little pleased with herself.

“No more students saving students, Henrike.” Said Louise. “Two British diplomats and they know where to find the education centre. They know Castilverde as Gasr Garabulli and they’re not really diplomats. I’m sure you understand what I’m saying.”

“Yes, I do understand, Louise.”

Of course he did, they’d be black ops of some kind, or maybe even from one of the intelligence organisations. Hopefully tough as old boots and able to carry Naomi out to whatever vehicle they arrived in.

“They’ll be on their way really soon.” Said Louise. “Keep a watch for them and.....Clear any personal belongings out of the borrowed police truck.”

Louise fussed a bit and talked to him as though he was about ten years old. She was allowed though, she had organised a rescue by the British equivalent of the A team.

“Louise is sending someone.....They’ll be here soon.” He said.

“That is such a relief.” Said Naomi.

Without asking, or even introducing herself; a woman came out of the back of the shop. No covering herself from head to foot, though she had put on a thick scarf that covered most of her head and face. The wife of the man behind the counter ? They never did find out.

“You poor thing.” Said the woman, in Arabic.

She’d brought Naomi a cup of what looked like tea, with no milk.

“Thank you.” Said Naomi.

That was it; the woman went back the way she’d arrived. Naomi seemed to enjoy the tea, she drank every drop. About forty minutes later, two large black SUVs pulled up next to the cop truck.

“Looks like our lift has arrived.” Said Henrike.

He went outside and waved and much to his relief, the three men waved back at him.

~

~

“Oh no, the machine has thirty four phone messages.” Said Nick. “I was hoping we’ve have at least one quiet night and the circus would begin tomorrow.”

“No Suki.....I’m hoping one of the messages is about who has my cat.” Said Drew.

The flat had felt dark before they’d put on a few lights and in a way, it still felt dark. Very few lights in the windows of the other flats in the block. Had something happened to cause a mass exodus ?

“I’ll put coffee on.....It’ll all seem manageable after coffee.” Yelled Drew, from the kitchen.

“Brilliant.....I’ll start on the messages.” Said Nick.

“Take notes.”

“I will.”

Truthfully, he might not have bothered if Drew hadn't mentioned it. There was a writing pad next to the phone. He had to flick through five or six dusty pages to find a pristine page. The last message he'd made a note of was from a friend in America. They'd just heard on Twitter that Michael Jackson had died. Nick ripped off the dusty pages and found a pen, one that actually worked.

"You're right, Drew.....I need to get better organised."

"Told you."

By the time Drew arrived with coffee, Nick had dealt with at least a dozen scam calls. Did he realise there was malware on his PC ? They could fix it. All he had to do was give them every password for every web site he used.

"Oh, when did the world get so.....Scummy ?" He asked.

"That was the day when they invented social media." Said Drew. "How are you doing ?"

"Not one genuine message, so far."

There was a message from Den, saying something dreadful had happened in their flat. She went on to mentioning taking Suki to her flat. An old message talking about horrendous events, but not giving details. It had happened inTheir flat. Nick felt a chill run through him and Drew was looking around, as if expecting something to leap out at them.

"Jeezzzz, what the hell went on here ?" Said Drew.

"Lots more messages.....Wait until we've heard them all." Said Nick. "Then we'll have a full on, twenty two carat panic."

A message from Florence next, calling for Betsy Nagle, his agent. It seemed there had been an horrific event in Den's life and Suki was now being looked after by Betsy.

"I never knew Betsy even liked cats." Nick muttered.

Florence used the term spoiled rotten and assured Drew that her cat was safe and being well taken care of.

"At least I know Suki is fine." Said Drew. "I'm almost scared to hear the other messages."

The newer messages were if anything, far more worrying. Two from the local police, asking them to make an appointment to discuss matters of importance. Nick took a note of the names of the police officers who wanted to see them, and their phone number.

"No mention of Barlow and Jennings, but I bet they're at again." Said Drew. "Trying to find some reason to drag us in for another interrogation."

"We don't know who died here.....I bet someone died while we were away." Said Nick.

Several new messages were from reporters, insisting that Nick or Drew, called them back as a matter of urgency.

"Yeah right, they can all be ignored." Said Nick.

"Scumbags." Added Drew.

Down to just the last three messages and two of them were from Betsy. She said that they must have realised, that various major events had happened at the block while they were away.

"No kidding Sherlock." Nick muttered.

Betsy ended by saying they needed to call her, to get the quick and dirty version of what had occurred since they'd left Heathrow, heading for Tripoli International airport.

"Shall we call her now ?" Asked Nick.

"Not tonight, it's late." Said Drew. "I just fancy something delivered for dinner and a night in front of the TV."

"First thing, we'll call her first thing in the morning."

The last message had only arrived an hour before Nick had unlocked their flat and put a few lights on. It was from a journalist, of course it was. Nick muttered 'another scumbag'; before he heard the message was from a Jerry Zale. An American accent that sounded seriously American. Jerry went on to say that someone called Aiwass had saved the life of the woman he loved. He went on to say that he believed Nick knew something about Aiwass. Nick looked at Drew.

"Who the hell is Jerry Hale?" Asked Drew.

~ ~

After landing at the airstrip near Rochester, there had been a few options as to where to go next. James had accepted a lift from the jet's stewardess. She'd dropped him off outside a car hire place in Ashford. They'd exchanged numbers and a promise to keep in touch, but that would probably never happen. Ideally he'd have been with Adie, but she'd driven away with Marwa. It seemed that new friends took second place to mourning husbands and looking after sons. James could understand that, though it still hurt.

"One of the parachute club guys has offered me a ride." Marwa had said. "Prefer it if I had company.....I don't know the guy."

"I'll go with you." Adie had replied.

There was a train station in Rochester town, a newly refurbished one; according to the guy from the parachute club. Adie and Marwa could get a train to London and fairly soon, Adie would see Silas again, her son. There was a spare room in the Givens house in Uxbridge, for Marwa. All wonderful, all well thought through.....But James couldn't help feeling depressed and a little angry. It should have been him going home with Adie.

"It should have been me." He mumbled.

Would using his driving licence to hire a car set off alarms and the arrival of the police? James had wondered, right up to the point where he'd driven away in a fairly tidy looking Peugeot saloon car. Not an easy drive from Ashford in Kent, to Harwich in Essex, if you want to drive as the crow flies. The River Thames gets in the way, as though it's determined to be annoying. Across the river at Dartford and fairly quickly, he'd been on the A12 and heading towards home. James hadn't been away for that long, but he felt himself relax, after seeing the first road sign for Harwich.

"Almost home." He muttered. "Lots of phone messages will be waiting; nearly all from my customers in Dovercourt, wanting their gardens tidied up."

He'd done his best and Travis had still died. James was famous, the guy to have watching your back. The man to drag you out alive, from almost unimaginable danger. But Travis hadn't been dragged out alive. James was determined to go back to his old life and ignore any future phone calls from Nick Rees. Over a hundred and twenty miles driven since Ashford and he hadn't stopped once. He should have, his entire body ached as he got out of the car. His house looked the same as when he'd left it, but a few of the bushes in his garden, were in need of some gentle pruning. Bags out of the car boot and into his house. There was the smell of furniture polish and the perfume Jackie used, his daughter. He'd tell her off for cleaning his space, his territory.....But actually it was nice to arrive home to no dust on the furniture and clean carpets.

"You're going in the front parlour, bags." He mumbled. "I'll unpack you later."

Two letters on the doormat and about a dozen stacked up on the hall table, next to the telephone answering machine. Crap! Over twenty telephone messages, something of a record.

"They can all wait a while."

James even ignored the envelope on the kitchen table and the box next to it. He needed a drink and water from the tap would do. He should have stopped somewhere of course, for coffee and some

kind of breakfast. A coffee cup off the rack and he let the tap run for a while. James drank two cups of water and instantly felt far less wretched.

"Never.....Ever, again." James mumbled. "I'm going to become a hermit."

Time to open the birthday card from Jackie. She hadn't mentioned his actual age since he'd been about fifty five. A daughter like that was worth her weight in gold. The usual happy birthday message, plus a hope that wherever he was, he was alright.

"Am I alright ? I think part of me died out there.....In Libya." He mumbled.

Jackie did alright, but as she put it.....There wasn't much cash to splash about. The box would probably be male smelly stuffs, usually a selection including body spray and some soap. He wasn't wrong; it was Lynx this year, though it could vary.

"Always appreciated, Jackie." James Muttered. "Stops me smelling of sweat after a morning digging in gardens."

The phone rang; not his mobile, that had a flat battery. It was the good old landline and he picked it up straight away, out of habit. A reflex from before everyone seemed to let the machine grab it, just in case it was a scammer.

"James.....This is Doris from Dovercourt." Said a quiet female voice. "From Ramsey Road.....If you remember me."

"Yes, Doris.....Of course I do." Said James. "I quoted on digging up an old concrete pond in your back garden."

"I'd like you to do the work.....Can you come over and see me ?" Asked Doris.

"I can be there at say.....Ten tomorrow morning." Said James.

"Perfect.....I'll have the deposit ready."

Some of his customers had been known to accept a quote and then argue about the price after the job was done. Taking little old ladies to court over unpaid bills, wasn't how James had envisaged his retirement from accountancy. If there was a doubt, he now asked for half upfront.

"See you in the morning." Said James.

A call to his daughter next, but after he'd been to the supermarket and filled up the fridge. The freezer was full up, but he wasn't putting up with black coffee, no bread and not even a couple of potatoes for dinner.

"Not the local place, they charge Harrods prices." James mumbled.

There was a proper supermarket not far away, a large Morrisons. No point in hiring a car, if he wasn't going to use it. James locked his front door and as he turned, there was something at the rear of the hired Peugeot. A shimmer, like a small piece of fog, with a faint red hue.

"Go.....There's nothing for you here." Said James.

Something following him home had always terrified him, his hands were shaking. James had long since outstared death, but if anything should happen to Jackie. It wasn't the Presence itself, James knew it was a minion of some kind, a demonic foot soldier. The shimmer crossed his small driveway and was still visible, as it moved along a row of trees. James finally lost sight of it, when it crossed the road and headed across a farmer's field.

"It seems the war isn't quite over." James muttered.

~ ~

Adie's phone had come to life and beeped, while she was on the train from Rochester to London, Victoria Station. Just a text about her next bill payment, but it showed her mobile was working again. So much had happened, that she hadn't even thought about trying to make a call. Surprisingly for a phone left to its own devices for a while, it had a fair amount of battery left.

“Can I call my mum ?” Asked Marwa. “As far as she knows, I’m still in the student accommodation in Tripoli.”

“Crap, I hadn’t even thought about it.....Your family will think you’ve vanished.” Said Adie. “Yes, use my phone.....Just keep it quick, I need to let my sister know I’m home. She’s minding my son most of the time.”

Adie could have never managed a private conversation in a fairly full train carriage. Marwa was talking in the Libyan version of Arabic though, probably quite a rare language on the Rochester to London train. Marwa became quite upset at one point, but no one was likely to know why. Perfect privacy, even if her body language hinted at an unhappy conversation. Marwa handed her back the phone, after the call ended.

“How is your mum handling you being in England ?” Asked Adie.

Poor Marwa, her expression said it all. Not only a row with her mum, but she was in the UK with none of the required paperwork. No asking her on a crowded train, but she probably wasn’t even carrying a passport. Adie would help her sort things out though; she was good at those kinds of things.

“I.....I made my mother cry.” Said Marwa.

Her expression didn’t encourage asking further questions and Adie knew that Marwa would eventually need to talk about it. Besides, Adie wanted to make her own call to the people she loved. She pulled her phone down inside her coat, but knew it wasn’t going to be a private call. Strangely, her mother answered Bree’s phone, her older sister’s phone.

“Mum.....Is Bree alright ?” Asked Adie. “Just calling to say I’m home, or soon will be.”

“It’s so good to hear your voice. After the news about Travis.....I was so worried.”

“No need to worry mum, I’m on a train to London, Victoria Station.” Said Adie. “Where is Bree though ? I called her phone.”

“It’s half term and you know your sister and animals. She’s taken Silas to the zoo. I think she took a few of his friends too.” Said her mum.

Half term, Adie had forgotten half term. It seemed such a mundane thing after everything that had occurred in the Libyan Desert. She should have remembered though, the important school dates were in her pocket diary.

“How are you doing ?” Asked her mum. “We got very little information from Libya. What we did get was from a university out there.”

“I’m doing as well as you can probably imagine.” Said Adie. “Silas can stay with Bree tonight. No bringing him home to a grubby house, with no food. Ask Bree to call me and we can arrange for me to pick up my boy in the morning.”

Adie heard her mum sob and knew her mother was building up to a full blown emotional episode. In the past, some had gone on for hours. Adie knew that she’d end up crying with her mother and eventually needing Marwa to help her off the train.

“We were all so sorry to hear about Travis.” Said her mum. “What did happen to him ?”

“Mum, I’m on a fairly full train, talking into a mobile phone. Ask Bree to call me.....And I’ll call you this evening. I promise to tell you as much as I can.”

Her mum was sobbing as Adie ended the call. She’d beat herself up about being a dreadful daughter, when she was in her own home and there was a pot of fresh coffee. Anyway.....She had called Bree. It wasn’t her fault if her mum was answering her sister’s phone.

“Mums huh.....Have to love them though. We’re not allowed to shoot them.” Said Marwa.

A terrible joke, but they both ended up laughing. Half term.....Of course, that made sense now. That was why the train was so full of mums with kids. A sunny day in London, the Piccadilly Line out to Uxbridge would probably be just as busy.

“I’ve decided.....We’re going to get a cab from Victoria.” Said Adie. “I think we’ve both had enough of packed trains.”

~

~

© Ed Cowling ~ October 2024