

The Presence

Chapter 14 – Grave Marker

'The Matrix box in their Jeep beeped, the first time Henrike could remember any reply arriving. Kevin went to look; he was their official expert on the large high tech box.

"They want confirmation on the death of Travis." Yelled Kevin. "They're also asking about our current status."

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Naomi had known Diane and Roger. If they'd been killed by something strange that haunted the ruins, then she respected the threat as being very real. They'd just been informed that Travis had been killed and buried quite close to the ancient temple. So many red flags were waving in her mind, she should have been screaming at Henrike to leave and go back to Tripoli. Instead she was following Nick and Marwa, deep into the dark areas of the ruins.....

"On the way, you have to see the famous mosaic." Said Nick.

There was still some dirt on parts of the mosaic, but it was clean enough to be an impossibility. A mosaic made up of tesserae, the tiny stone blocks of different colours. No prehistoric tribe in North Africa had ever heard of tesserae, much less used them. Then there was the image of Baphomet. Naomi knew the image; it was in dozens of books on the occult.

"The 19th century image of Baphomet in a prehistoric ruin." Said Naomi. "And.....I'm not even going near tesserae being used to make the mosaic."

"Someone must have created the mosaic as a joke." Said Henrike.

"It is a joke.....One being played on us by something demonic." Said Marwa. "Wait until you see some of the finds from the offerings pool."

"You found an offerings pool ?" Asked Kevin.

"Not far now.....It'll blow your mind." Said Nick. "Your survey must have missed the stairs."

The stairs hadn't been missed; they had never been there for the initial walk through of the ruins, when Louise had arranged things from London. The stairs hadn't been on the police reports either and they had delved into every nook and cranny. Naomi would never have claimed to be an expert on the temple, but a wide set of stone stairs leading down. She'd have noticed them on the drawings of the place.

"Not missed.....These stairs weren't here six months ago." Said Henrike.

"Can we take the ruins being strange as a given ?" Asked Marwa. "It'll save a lot of time and arguments."

"Fine.....But we didn't miss a twenty foot wide set of stairs." Muttered Kevin.

"We're not complete newbies at this sort of thing." Added Naomi.

Despite trying not to let Nick and Marwa behave like Howard Carter, about to show off the tomb of the Pharaoh Tutankhamun, Naomi found herself letting Nick go first down the stairs. Even Henrike didn't seem keen on being at the front. The stairs were an impossibility after all, relatively modern in an incredibly old temple.

"I'll show you the pool first." Said Nick. "Sadly the dead minions were reabsorbed into the rocks.....Or something like that. I guessed they would be."

"This is a very strange place." Added Drew.

She must have come looking for Nick and followed them. Naomi had spoken to Drew twice on the phone and both calls had lasted less than three minutes. No time or inclination for a huge welcome, Naomi was too keen to see the pool and the artefacts that had been found in it.

“Sad news about Travis.” Said Henrike.

“Adie hated leaving him in an unmarked grave.” Said Drew. “Not even a simple wooden cross. We were worried about the police digging him up, after we leave this dreadful place.”

Drew had the same look in her eyes, which was worse in just the bright LED lights of their lamps. Nick hadn’t stopped; he was walking towards a dark shadow quite some distance away. Naomi followed him and after a few moments, everyone followed her.

“We found a Napoleonic musket next to an Egyptian mummified cat.” Said Drew. “This place is amazing.....Louise will probably get the equivalent of an Oscar in archaeology.”

There was that look in all their eyes and Kevin was rolling his eyes at her when he was sure no one was watching. When she’d been a first year on her degree, there had been a regular on the morning bus. An old guy with a grubby shirt and wearing worn out trainers. He’d gone on about knowing the location of the tomb of Genghis Khan. There was something about Nick and Drew though. They looked on the edge and sounded a little nuts.....But Naomi would have bet anything they were sane, just scared shitless by something.

“We only use the lights when we’re working.” Said Marwa.

There was a proper lighting array, the kind used on most night time excavations. It had been in a few of the pictures taken of the site. Batteries that periodically needed charging, but Roger had made sure they were charged quite recently.

“The plastic sheet was cut up to wrap Travis.” Said Drew. “It seemed sensible to make use of all of it. Better than priceless relics lying on a filthy floor.”

Drew didn’t sound right. Her voice.....If she’d told Naomi the time, it would have sounded sinister. Yet there was the proof that neither Drew nor Nick, were talking nonsense. They still might be crazy of course, but the finds on the plastic sheet were genuine.

“This is amazing.....You say everything came out of the pool ?” Asked Henrike.

“Yes.....And the pool was full of water when we found it.” Said Nick. “It was damaged when the minions were.....It’s a long story and you probably already think we’re half crazy.”

“No.....Not at all.” Said Henrike. “You’ve all obviously been under a lot of stress.”

“Stress.....Yes, we’ve been stressed out.” Said Marwan.

It was the way she’d said it and at one time, Naomi would have described Marwan as a good friend. The fact that her good friend was carrying an assault rifle, had become slightly worrying.

“Exactly.....How was Travis Givens killed ?” Asked Henrike.

No.....Oh no, Naomi wasn’t going to get involved in that conversation. Henrike had to ask of course, but Naomi decided to use the time to look at the finds from the offerings pool. It was easy to see why the pool was empty; there was a wide crack that went right across its base. Lots of dead algae that had probably once all been dark red. Now much of it was black, as it dried out and shrivelled. Behind her, Naomi could hear Nick pleading with Henrike.

“So.....You didn’t plug it into the Matrix.” Said Nick. “That gives us a bit of wriggle room. You could leave it until tomorrow, before sending a message about Travis dying.”

“The university will just think we’re stuck on the road somewhere.” Said Kevin. “We were for a while.....Stuck behind a broken down bus.”

Everyone talks about the finds that mattered the most, being the ones that added to the grand sum of archaeological knowledge. Naomi had noticed though, that most articles fed to the media, started

with pictures of any gold items in the find. There was something about the yellow metal, that made it special. Her mind was concentrating on the gold finds, without her having to think about it. There was a gold oil lamp, which couldn't have been over three hundred years old. Bent about a little...The big disadvantage with gold, was the softness of the metal. Naomi was trying to ignore the argument, but some of it made it through her ears and into her brain.

"Adie will go nuts, if she thinks Travis might be dug up." Said Marwa. "We used three rocks as a grave marker, but otherwise. The police could dig up half of Libya and not find Travis."

"You're asking me to lie.....A serious lie." Said Henrike.

"Stop being awkward.....Just say we took the body with us." Said Nick.

Lots more gold on the plastic sheet, everything from small statues of wildlife, to a long and heavy looking ceremonial spear. Lots of armbands, that nearly everyone at the university called bangles. Naomi picked up a bangle with inlaid gems.

"Hey, this is an opal.....There are no opals anywhere in Libya." Yelled Naomi. "I know there are some in Ethiopia, but we're a hell of a long way from....."

A shout at the wrong moment and lots of unhappy faces looking at her. Not that she was going to apologise, they were archaeologists and the finds always came first.

"Don't give me the stink eye." Said Naomi. "I bet Henrike has agreed to lie about when we arrived and what happened to the remains of Travis Givens. Then.....Tomorrow all the people from London will hurtle off in their truck. We'll be left to deal with the police and.....Worst of all, Louise."

"We all know Nick." Said Henrike. "The story is plausible and again.....We know Nick."

"Plus.....The finds are amazing." Said Kevin. "Louise will be so happy about the finds, that we might not even get one of her famous bollockings."

Nick began going on about needing to get back to London, to visit a pub near Old Street Tube. That was the key to it all, according to Nick. Naomi was pretty much with him, until he talked about releasing Baphomet onto the streets of London. Unsurprisingly, the argument with Henrike smouldered back into life. Naomi put the priceless bangle she was holding, back on the plastic sheeting.

"The way I see it." She shouted. "We came here to help Nick and we trust him."

Naomi thrust her arm into the air, stretching her arm to get her hand as high as it would go.

"I vote that we get our story straight and lie about whatever we need to lie about."

"Yes....We're students after all, sent here to have a look around." Said Kevin. "We found nothing here, apart from all the wonderful finds. No one will lock us up for that."

"Fine.....I know you're busy while the sun shines." Said Henrike. "Tonight though, we need to agree on a story. You need to trust us too and show us where you buried Travis.....Just in case."

"We also need to tell them about the mummified baby, Nick." Said Marwa.

"Oh yes.....They need to know about that." Said Nick. "This place can play tricks on you."

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As the whole story began to appear in Sovi's articles in her chosen tabloid, the less savoury side of journalism, homed in on what might be a real money earner. Marital infidelity, the occult, murder and maybe even the illegal digging up of antiquities...The story had it all. Nick and Travis both had reputations for digging up authentic stories on the paranormal. Well.....Authentic sounding stories. Louise had gone from nonbeliever to not quite sure about such matters. Something had killed Diane and Roger and it definitely hadn't been wild dogs. There had been stories, just rumours really. During the civil war, people claimed to have seen things feeding on the dead. Of course, being an

educated professional, Louise hadn't repeated any of it. That didn't mean she wasn't starting to believe though. She looked at the business card of the reporter she'd grudgingly agreed to see. "Everything going on in the tabloids, is nothing to do with me, or the university." Said Louise. "I had heard the British authorities were informing the press of copyright issues."

Jerry Zale it said on the card in front of her and the address was in Abilene, Texas. There were two lines giving his areas of expertise, but realistically, he was a reporter looking for stories that just might, bring in a lot of money. A rogue reporter, he even had the seemingly obligatory aftershave, which arrived in the room five minutes before he did. Louise instinctively didn't like Jerry.

"I think journalists attempting to come from London have been given a hard time. I came from the other direction, Louise. A little friction with immigration at Tripoli airport, but nothing I couldn't smooth out. Can I call you Louise?"

Smooth out, code for pushing enough hard currency at the right people. How deep were the pockets of the people who'd sent Jerry Zale to Libya? Probably deeper than those backing Sovi. Luckily Louise had a way of saying no, that no amount of cash could cure.

"I don't mind being called Louise, Jerry." Said Louise. "Is it just you in Tripoli, or did you arrive with a full team?"

"Just myself and Celia, my full time camera person." Said Jerry. "You'd think modern cameras would have made us all experts, but if anything.....Photographers are more important than ever. It's all the software needed to enhance that perfect image. Celia is an artist.....She goes everywhere I go."

Wife or girlfriend? Louise thought the much praised Celia, had to be one or the other.

"I don't see why you came to see me." Said Louise. "The university have ceased to have a connection with Nick Rees, or any of his team. I can talk you through getting fresh water and travel permits, but otherwise.....I can point you at the right people in the British embassy."

"I was told you have a SatNav location for the temple." Said Jerry. "If you could give me that information, I can be out of your hair."

"Which temple do you mean?"

"The temple, the one where the two students died." Said Jerry. "Allegedly killed by a pack of wild dogs."

"Any data regarding locations of historic buildings, is private I'm afraid. The police might be able to help you, but I can't."

"Tried the local cops.....They sent me to see you." Said Jerry. "Come on, Louise.....I can call your boss in London, who will then give you tons of attitude. Far easier for you to help me now."

"Sorry....Against university policy to give out that kind of information."

"Very well.....I'll call your boss." Said Jerry, as he left.

He'd do it too, he seemed the type. Louise would then avoid calls from London for a few days. Quite easy to do in Tripoli, where she could be at any number of official functions and cell phone reception was decidedly iffy. Eventually Jerry would find the information he wanted, but the name of the game was slowing him down.

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It looked like they'd be staying in the hotel in Stoke Newington, for longer than planned. Sovi liked the place and as they seemed to dote on Eric, they were happy to shoo away any unwanted callers. There had been a growing number of local paper reporters simply turning up, and quite a few strange members of the public. Sympathetic staff on the reception desk, had proven to be a real blessing. Plus there were a few decent takeaway places in the neighbourhood.

“You will be missed, Marsha.” Said Den. “I was hoping we’d end up being here forever, like Thelma and Louise, but in a threesome.”

“Don’t say threesome.....A tabloid reporter might hear you.” Said Sovi.

Marsha was going home, back to Manchester and working for the infamous shouty guy, Eric Hardy. Not her idea, there had been a call from Eric. It seemed he’d reminded Marsha how much he was paying her, to actually be in the Manchester office. As someone with a legal passport not on any no fly lists, Marsha was booked on the morning plane to Manchester Ringway Airport. Sovi hadn’t known Marsha long, but she was genuinely going to miss her.

Den was staying and with every passing day, she seemed less inclined to move back into her Islington flat. There were schemes to compensate victims for properties blighted by serious crime. Sovi had asked the solicitors Betsy used, to look into making a claim for Denise Morgan. The problem ? There were always problems. Such claims took a long time to happen and Den needed a new home, right away.

“I will really miss you guys.” Said Marsha. “Next time I’m in London with Eric, we’ll run up his room service bill in a spectacular way. Champagne and the most expensive nibbles on the menu.”

There was a hug; of course there was a group hug. It had begun to feel as though they were under siege from crazy people and reporters for local papers. They’d bonded, in a very real way.

“You can still get on a plane with a massive hangover.” Said Sovi. “We’ll order in something good for tonight, with plenty of booze. There must be a decent movie to watch on one of the cable stations.”

“Yes, Marsha can’t have a sober last night in North London.” Said Den.

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It was time for the big goodbye, or as Naomi put it, the great getaway. They’d left the location of Travis’s final resting place until the very last minute. Even Adie was there, though she had barely said two words to anyone all day. Kevin appeared from the direction of their Jeeps and simply nodded at him. Henrike felt it was up to him to state the obvious.

“That’s it, the death of Travis has been sent by the Matrix box.” Said Henrike. “No cancelling it, no pretending it was a typo, or an accident. For better or worse, the cops will be here in a day or so. We’ll tell them you left in your truck, heading north towards the sea.”

“I still think you should leave when we do.” Said Nick.

“Yes, go back to Tripoli.....Leave an empty ruin for the police to find.” Added Drew.

“Travis wouldn’t want you to get into any trouble.” Said Adie.

A full sentence, the first Henrike had heard her say. Marwa held her hand, while Adie began to cry again.

“It’s the finds.....They’re too good to simply abandon.” Said Henrike. “Some of the oldest items are truly priceless. At the end of the day, we are first, second and maybe third, archaeologists. We’ll stick to the story and after a lot of bullying; the cops will let us go.”

“We’re hoping they let us go.” Said Kevin.

“One day.....We will all get together in London.” Said James.

“Last item and yes, we’re all here looking at it, but.....Run us through the grave marker ?” Asked Henrike.

“I found the symbol on a small stone.” Said Adie. “Then I put three of the purple stones next to it.....There aren’t many of the purple stones. Find the symbol though, that’s the important part.....Please don’t disturb him unless it’s unavoidable.”

The symbol was a small version of the symbol on many stones inside the temple. A small version of the symbol on a stone, was rare. There’d be no trouble finding the grave again.

"It's just that.....There's no telling what might happen." Said Henrike. "Telling the police Travis is buried here will be a last resort. As far as they'll know, you took him with you to bury close to the ocean."

"We won't tell them where he is." Added Naomi.

There were lots of goodbye hugs and promises to meet up in London, maybe over next Christmas. Nick and Drew were excited about getting to London and down into the gents toilet of a seedy sounding pub. It sounded crazy; but Henrike was beginning to realise there was a method to the madness. Henrike didn't want to know the name of the pub in London, or how they intended to leave Libya and get to Britain. There was one definitely final, final matter.

"Well, Marwa.....Going with us, or are you staying with them?" Asked Henrike.

"I never mentioned you on the Matrix." Added Kevin.

"I'm going wherever Nick and Drew are going." Said Marwa.

Marwa might never get whatever qualification she was working towards, but Henrike did think her route was going to be far more fun. If she survived whatever was coming, of course.

"Alright, time to wave you guys off." Said Naomi.

They spread out on the way to the truck, trying as much as possible to wipe away their tracks leading to the grave. There was no real need; the wind would soon give the sands a smooth and undisturbed look.

The old Russian truck was noisy, but it looked sturdy compared to their Jeeps. Sleeping the night before in the truck had been crowded and smelly, but it had felt safe. It was like seeing their two star motel disappear over the sands, heading who knew where.

"A noisy brute, but I'll say it again." Said Henrike. "Louise should have bought something similar for the survey teams to use."

"It's Jeeps, tents of sleeping inside the ruins tonight." Said Kevin.

"I refuse to go inside that place again.....Ever." Said Naomi.

"None of us will go in their again." Said Henrike. "We'll sleep in the Jeeps and spend the days waiting for the cops to arrive. Hopefully, we won't be waiting long."

The Matrix box in their Jeep beeped, the first time Henrike could remember any reply arriving. Kevin went to look; he was their official expert on the large high tech box.

"They want confirmation on the death of Travis." Yelled Kevin. "They're also asking about our current status."

"Wow, maybe the cops will arrive by helicopter this time." Said Naomi.

The university was doing it by the book, which meant it was going to be huge. Diane and Roger dead and now a renowned author. There would be no more blaming everything on wild dogs.

"Confirm Travis, Kevin." Shouted Henrike. "Say all three of us are fine and waiting for help to arrive."

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Nick Rees noticed that Adie was perking up in relation to her distance from the ruined temple.

Perked up wasn't probably the right description, but the haunted look was going, as were the dark circles around her eyes. Everyone looked better, but it was most notable with Adie Givens. Drew was driving their truck and gave him an inquisitive look, when he used the rear view mirror to examine his own face.

"Hey, don't go all vain and weird on me, Mr Rees." Said Drew.

"I look better.....We all look less stressed since we got a few miles away from.....Those dreadful ruins." Said Nick.

“Yeah.....My wound that was healing really slowly, is tingling.” Said Marwa. “I bet that when I look at it tonight, it’s healing properly.”

“Mine too.....A definite healing kind of tingle.” Added Drew.

James was at the back of the truck, talking to Adie. There had been a lot of that, sometimes into the early hours of the morning. Nick thought James was just what the doctor ordered for Adie. A father figure type of guy, who’d give her lots of TLC, but not to try to take advantage of the situation. Or, Drew seemed to think it might develop into some kind of record breaking May and December relationship. More of a March to December thing really. They were both adults though, so good luck to them.

“So, you haven’t seen this guy for years ?” Asked Marwa.

“No, but Beni always said that if I was in the area.....He’ll be fine, you wait and see.” Said Nick. Beni Melgar was one of life’s wanderers. Born in Tangiers, he’d tried everything from managing a hotel, to obtaining exotic pets for wealthy foreigners. Beni also knew people and some of those people had been useful to Nick on his previous expeditions to North Africa. The problem ? There is always a problem. Beni had an unmarried sister and she’d liked Nick. Not a problem really, not even when Beni had caught Nick kissing Faiza. They’d both been fully clothed and Beni liked to think of himself as being more liberal than most of his friends. Booze had been the problem. Beni had noticed his sister was a little squiffy from drink and Nick had been blamed. Beni liked to think he was a reconstructed male, but his sister drinking.....Things had quickly turned nasty.

“Didn’t he once threaten to stab you ?” Asked Drew. “Something to do with a sister.....I’m sure you told me about that.”

“Friends fall out all the time.....Beni will be fine.” Said Nick.

“I hope you’re right.” Said James.

Nick hoped that too, the whole drink business with Faiza had never been properly resolved. Nick might be expected to offer something, or pay a penalty of some kind. He honestly had no idea, but hoped it didn’t involve being stabbed. Adie came up to the front and Nick gave up the passenger seat, so that she could sit down.

“I take it your old friend has a way I can contact London ?” Asked Adie.

“Yes, I called London from there quite a lot.” Said Nick. “I used to get a clearer line to London, than I did on a trip to Chicago.”

Drew had the map taped up beside the windscreen. Their destination had a large red X next to it. Adie looked at the map for a few seconds. The question she asked wasn’t about the number of miles to cover. On less than wonderful roads in wild parts of the world, there were only a few things that really mattered.

“How long will it take us to get to Tobruk ?” Asked Adie.

Nick was ready to answer, but Drew beat him to it.

“Two days, maybe a little longer.” Said Drew. “We have enough fuel to get there and.....Thanks to Henrike, we have a pile of really nice ration packs. We will get there Adie and.....We won’t starve. As for water.....We left Tripoli with both tanks completely full. We’ll be fine.”

“Good.....I can tell you’re really organised.” Said Adie.

The problem was ? Of course there’d be a problem, there always was. Nick couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but the damned thing was bound to appear before they reached Beni and the hotel he owned in Tobruk.

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Mary Seeley had been offered a health visitor to accompany her, but she didn't like the sound of that. Her family had tried to organise her return home properly, but Mary had put a few shots across their bows. Melanie her favourite niece had been quite upset, but Mary needed her independence.

"Come and visit me at the weekend, Mel.....I'll be settled in by then." She'd told Melanie.

About nine on Saturday morning, every Seeley in North London would be on her doorstep. That was good, that was fine. Mary actually liked some of her family, but on her terms and only when she was prepared for them. The taxi driver retrieved her case from the boot of his car and even stood with her, as she opened the outside door to the block.

"Been a few problems here, some of it was in the papers.....I'll just make sure you can get inside."

"They have changed all the locks, but I have the new keys." Said Mary.

Someone had probably sprayed the locks with something, the new key fitted better than the old one ever had. No fiddling with it, the door was open with zero hassle.

"Do you need help with your case?"

"No....Thank you, but I just want to get indoors and put the kettle on."

The taxi driver was still giving her a worried look, as she closed the door. A nice guy, but all Mary wanted to do was get into her flat and see what the decorators had done with it. Someone had mentioned lilac woodwork in her bedroom. That could be repainted, once she was her old self again.

"Oh, a bit of a mess.....Not too bad though, someone has made an effort." Mary muttered.

Mel had told her to forget about the post, but Mary had been looking after it for decades. There were a few letters on the table, but most of it had been sorted and dropped into people's baskets for their flats. Nick's basket held just two items of post and both looked like sales junk. One letter in Den's and then on to her own.....About five letters, far less than she received in the average week. Her family were taking it in turns to take her mail upstairs and put it on her kitchen table.

"Sarah.....I bet Sarah has been looking after things." Mary mumbled. "She's a good girl is Sarah.....Reliable."

Not even a member of the family, not really. Sarah was the girlfriend of a particularly useless nephew. Once they were married, which seemed to be on the cards, Sarah would then be family. Her case wasn't heavy, but it was still hard work to drag it up the stairs. Mary stopped on the first landing and looked at her five letters. All of them were bills or circulars.

"Oh, another electric bill.....What a welcome home." She muttered.

The stairs were becoming more of an issue with every birthday. The block now had a reputation too; there could be no denying that. Her family had been on about her selling the flat and buying a bungalow.

"Near the coast....Clean air and no stairs." Mel had said.

The thing was, the flat in Islington was her home. There were bad memories there, but the good ones outweighed them by a long way. She opened the door to her flat, leant in through the doorway and took a deep sniff.....Of home.

"Paint.....I bet it's bloody lilac paint." She mumbled.

A hint of coffee too and someone had cooked a bacon sandwich fairly recently. The smells were reassuring though, her home hadn't been abandoned for weeks. Mary dragged her case into her bedroom and.....The woodwork had been painted a nice sensible cream colour. It had to be the spare bedroom with lilac skirting boards.

"I can live with that."

From her bedroom window she could see the street, which looked great from that height. Close up she'd be able to see all the litter and the occasional mound of dog poo. There'd need to be a call to

the local police, maybe more than one. Mary left her case and went from room to room; simply looking to make sure everything was alright. No walls painted mauve, No blood, No pieces of poor Bert. By the time she was filling a kettle in the kitchen, Mary was feeling far more relaxed.

“Leave me alone and I’ll give you no trouble.” Mary said, while looking at the ceiling.

There was something there, an atmosphere maybe. Definitely something that was new and shouldn’t have been there. There had been no answering voice though, no cackle.....Not even a quiet chuckle.

“Toast I think.” Mary muttered. “Then I think.....I’ll have a look through the post baskets.”

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Jerry Zale hung up the phone in their hotel room and simply sat on the edge of the bed for a couple of minutes. He needed to think, the next decision meant paying out a hefty bribe, or going back home to Abilene. There were a few other stories running across the globe, which had potential. He’d set his heart on the bonking toff though, with all the links to Satanism. Actually it was the occult rather than anything definitely satanic, but the public loved a good devil worship story.

“You’re worrying me Jerry, are you alright ?” Asked Celia.

Celia had been with him for years. Once just his photographer and then as his significant other. She’d have been his wife, if he still wasn’t married to his first wife. The divorce was a messy one and might well takes years to sort out.

“I spoke to Tom and he said Sterland is on his way.” Said Jerry. “If that wasn’t bad enough, Lakey just got on a plane from San Francisco. Soon every fucking hack looking for a story, will be in Libya. I need the location for the temple and I need it today. Otherwise.....We might as well use the return half of our tickets and put Tripoli down to experience.”

Two of the best on his trail, though some would call them the worst. Sterland had a backer with very deep pockets and Lakey had family money behind him. Both of them could outspend Jerry for solid information.

“We can’t give up this early; the story is going crazy in Britain.” Said Celia. “There’s that senior local government guy. I know he wants silly money.....It might be worth it though, Jerry.”

Every nation on the globe had them, civil servants, or government officials who could find out anything with a single phone call. This particular contact wanted a lot of cash to make that call, a hell of a lot of cash. Jerry couldn’t really afford to pay him, but he couldn’t afford to go home, either.

“Will you still love me if we end up living in a burnt out car, in a car park in Albuquerque ?” Jerry asked.

“No of course not.....I’ll tell my mother she was right about you and go back home.”

“Bitch !” He yelled.

They laughed and cuddled, which almost became naked, hot and sweaty. Jerry had made a decision though, to spend money he’d vowed to never touch. A little nest egg his mother had left him for a rainy day and currently.....It was pouring. His mother on her death bed had probably envisaged the money going into a college fund for a future grandchild.

“Alright, we’ll catch up on this later.” Said Jerry. “Right now I have to call Youssef and see if he’ll settle for two thirds of a King’s ransom.”

A wire transfer had to be turned into a pile of cash and a vehicle needed to be hired. It was three hours after the call to Youssef, when Jerry drove a rental out of Hertz in Tripoli. Nothing fancy, just a four door saloon with local plates. Youssef was a minor minister, but he knew people. Someone had provided him with an exact location for the temple. As Jerry turned roughly south east, he was following the route Nick and his group had taken in the truck.

“We needed a bit of luck.” Said Jerry. “Thanks to Youssef, we’re a good two days ahead of anyone else, maybe three days.”

“I dread asking, but are we going to be sleeping in motels ?” Asked Celia.

“Hmmm, maybe the first night.” Said Jerry. “After that, we’ll probably be sleeping in the car. The back seat looks fairly comfortable.”

“Wonderful, in the back of the car with my guy.....I bet it’s nowhere near as much fun as when I was eighteen.” Muttered Celia.

Jerry had thought about getting a tent, but he’d heard about the wild dog problem. Canvas wouldn’t stop a pack getting at them, but the car was made of steel. There was enough bottled water in the boot to last them for days and there were a few bags of dried food and things in tins, that didn’t require cooking. Hertz even provided a fairly basic first aid kit with the car.

“It’ll be fun, Honey.” Said Jerry. “I’m sure we’ll have forgotten something, but we’ll survive. We have water, food and a tank full of gas.”

“Yeah.....We came out of that business in Guatemala in one piece.” Said Celia. “This should be a walk in the park compared to that.”

No one puts a gun in their luggage on a plane, unless they’re insane. But Jerry had never been to any city, where you couldn’t buy a handgun without too much trouble. He had a Glock, which he’d acquired quite cheaply. It had come with enough ammunition to take out several packs of wild canines. He’d shown it to Celia, she’d nodded, and that was it. Unless it was needed, the gun would never be mentioned again.

“It’ll be fun.....Now we’re on the road, I really can see it being lot of fun.” Said Jerry.

“Yeah, if I’m asleep.....Wake me up for the fun.” Muttered Celia.

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