

The Presence

Chapter 2 – The Brown Bear

“Nick had never seen a filmed record of a religious exorcism with a happy ending. They tended to end when the victim’s body was ripped apart or burned to a cinder. For a lucky few, the torment ended when their heart couldn’t take any more and stopped beating.”

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Early Sunday morning, very early. Drew hadn’t resisted the temptation even a little. A takeaway meal the night before, with a bottle of cheap wine from the local off license. When Nick had kissed her and suggested that they went into his bedroom, she’d followed him. Drew had actually undone her jeans on the way. They were still there, out in the hallway, a pile of blue denim which Suki had claimed as a bed. Waking up with Nick next to her felt nice, though she’d wait awhile before telling him that. Sound too keen, too soon and guys could get a bit strange. Add on Nick being quite strange to start with.....Suki had noticed her move and was there in an instant, with her two hundred decibel purr.

“Hungry huh ? Alright, I’ll feed you.” Muttered Drew.

Out of bed naked, with a hungry cat fussing around her ankles. Being comfortable naked was a good sign. She felt comfortable and safe in Nick’s flat. Just enough early morning light coming round the edges of the kitchen blinds, to find a tin of cat food.

“Oh, where did we put your bowls ?”

Top cupboard on her left and they were Nick’s bowls really. Part of a set an aunt had bought him, but he was happy for ownership to be transferred to her cat. Drew tried to avoid smelling the food, as it went into the bowl.

“Here you go.” Drew muttered.

No sane person cuddles a cat while naked. Later on, when she was fully awake and dressed, she’d give Suki a few cuddles and some attention. Back into the bedroom and into bed, cuddling up to Nick. More for warmth than anything else, the kitchen had been quite chilly. Nick had misunderstood and there had been some Sunday morning sex. Nice, really nice; though it had been after ten before they were in the kitchen and having breakfast. Any idea of a proper breakfast was gone. They were both eating a bowl of out of the box muesli, with their coffee.

“I’m sure a woman was following me.” Said Drew. “I was in the supermarket and there she was, and again when I bought the cheese plant.”

Buying a cheese plant for a new home was a tradition of hers. From her very first student digs to the flat in Clapham; every new place she lived, had to have a cheese plant. Nick had understood.

“Yes, probably a police woman.” Said Nick. “Just ignore her.....They’ll soon get bored with following us about.”

There was small talk and she reminded Nick that she had a day job. From nine to five thirty on weekdays, she was a sales and marketing guru at a PR agency close to Cleveland Street and the Post Office Tower.

“.....whatever we plan to do, has to happen at weekends or in the evening.” She’d said.

Nick seemed to like printing maps on a colour printer in a corner of his bedroom, the process seemed important to him. He went into the spare bedroom for a moment. Officially her room,

though she didn't envisage spending much time in there. After a few sounds of searching through drawers, he was back with a fairly bulky, grubby beige folder. Drew could see several of Nick's printed maps, protruding from the file.

"Do you know The Brown Bear?" He asked her. "A large pub near Old Street Station.....It really is where it all started. I think we should go there tomorrow night. I can show you the toilets where I was stupid enough to summon the demon."

"Never been to the Brown Bear, but I know the area." Said Drew. "Not that I fancy wandering round a gents toilet. The men using it might find it a bit weird too."

"Trust me, that won't be a problem."

"Why?" She asked.

"Easier to show you.....It really is a Twilight Zone moment."

"Truthfully, Nick.....Has your life always been this strange?" She asked.

He actually looked a bit flustered, as though she'd asked him some dire secret from his past.

"Can we do the getting to know Nick Rees thing, slowly?" He asked. "I get the feeling that if you hear everything at once, you'll find a room in a bed and breakfast place."

"Alright, keep your dark secrets.....But eventually; you will have to tell me."

"I'll bring back a copy of Motor Mouth's podcast." Said Nick. "He wants to talk about my time in Libya. That is as good a place to start as any."

"What's his real name?" Asked Drew.

"Eric something or other.....Dreadful guy." Said Nick. "Betsy, my agent.....Keeps telling me I need the exposure, so I'm off to Manchester to do shouty man's podcast. Travel on Wednesday, do the podcast on Thursday and back.....With luck, not too late on Friday."

"I did introduce myself to Mary." Said Drew. "She knows who I am and that I'll be coming and going from this flat."

Mary Seeley, the grand dame of the block. She had the flat the opposite side of the landing from Nick's. Older than methuselah, she knew everything there was to know about the flats and that part of Islington. Britannia Row studios was just around the corner and Nick had joked about Mary once being a Pink Floyd groupie.

"Mary is a nice lady.....A bit brusque on occasions, but a heart of gold." Said Nick.

Drew had seen Mary twice while carting shopping up several flights of stairs. On the second occasion, Mary had criticised her shoes. No nice lady with a heart of gold would criticise another woman's choice of footwear. Drew already deeply disliked Mary.

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The police still had Nick's motorbike, so it was a cab or the tube to get to The Brown Bear. A nice Monday evening, with no rain forecast for North London. They'd decided to walk down to Angel Tube and get the Northern Line to Old Street, it was only one stop.

"Be nice to get a feel for what shops are where." Drew had said.

Drew was looking in the window of an antique shop, when he had to ask. The question had been eating at him since the night Drew had called him; saying everyone in her block of flats, was going to die.

"Why did you speak its name, Drew?" He asked. "When you promised not to, I was convinced you wouldn't."

"You'd given me its name on one of my notelets, Nick. Typing it into Google was irresistible. There it was though, the demon's name, being talked about by lots of people. Some seemed a little crazy,

but I'd heard of one of them. Dead now, but even I've heard of Aleister Crowley. He seemed to think the name belonged to a good guy, maybe a guardian angel."

"That's what they do.....They convince you they're a friend." Said Nick. "Then they burrow into your life like a parasite."

"I didn't know, not then." Said Drew. "All of those people on Google, using its name so many times. Maybe even then, it was getting into my head. I said the name.....I shouted it out, several times. The voice in my head began about half an hour later."

"Never say its name again; you're linked to it now." Said Nick. "Did everyone in your flats die ? The police aren't telling me anything."

"They're not exactly keeping me in the loop either." Said Drew. "A few of my neighbours were away for the night, but no one is giving out numbers. I'd guess that five or six survived, simply by being somewhere else. It was terrible, truly terrible. It seemed to kill people you cared about, but I hardly knew some of the people in my block."

The great British tradition of living in the same street for years, yet knowing little about our neighbours. Everyone did it, the great habit of keeping to yourself and not quite trusting strangers. Why had the demon slaughtered a block full of almost random people ? Nick had been giving it some thought.

"I think it was just showing you what it could do." Said Nick. "Getting control of you by scaring the crap out of you. Behave, or next time it'll be those who matter to you. As for understanding their motivation.....Why would a hugely powerful demon possess the body of a child for years ? They do it; I've seen amateur videos of it happening and read the journals of priest who've tried to exorcise the demons. It happens, but what the demon gets out of it ? My own view is that we're trying to use human motivation to understand very inhuman beings. One thing I'm sure of.....They will have a reason that makes sense to them."

"Should we do that ?" Asked Drew. "See a priest I mean.....Should we ?"

Nick had never seen a filmed record of a religious exorcism with a happy ending. They tended to end when the victim's body was ripped apart or burned to a cinder. For a lucky few, the torment ended when their heart couldn't take any more and stopped beating. That though, was part of the truth he felt Drew wasn't ready to hear.

"Personally.....I think we're better off on our own, at least for now." Nick said.

Through Camden Passage and they were close to Angel Station. Drew gasped; she'd seen the shimmer first. A shadow really, that looked like a shimmer in the streetlights. A busy place, it passed through two young people, before vanishing through the wall of the NatWest Bank building next to the station.

"Just a reminder it's there.....Keeping us in our place." Said Nick.

"But.....The two people.....The man and woman it went through."

"They'll be fine; demons must pass through millions of people every day." Said Nick. "They're only ever half in our world and half into..... Somewhere else."

Drew stopped, right in the middle of the entrance to Angel Station. She grabbed his hand, though her expression was angry.

"Are you lying to me Nick Rees ?" She asked. "Just to stop me going crazy."

"No, but I am holding things back a little. Honestly, the man and woman it passed through, will be fine."

Such wonderful things had been promised when the station had been refurbished. After using Angel Station for years, the sight of the platforms was enough to make him feel depressed. It was said that

the bing-bong sound, followed by 'this is Northern Line information,' was the most depressing sound in the known universe. So many mornings he'd arrived late for a job he loathed, to get a bollocking from a boss he'd hated. There was a delay indicated on the information screen, of course there was. "It's only one stop." He said. "Give it a few minutes, before we go looking for a taxi."

Luck was on their side, the train arrived in about seven minutes, though it did crawl all the way to Old Street. Out at Old Street and through several tiled corridors to reach the steps up to the surface. The huge City Road roundabout, gave the illusion of coming out into somewhere with lots of open space. A gang of kids on pedal bikes seemed to be shouting abuse at passers-by.

"Hmmmmmm, I remember it being nicer during the day." Said Drew.

"Everywhere looks better in the daylight.....This way." Said Nick.

The Brown Bear was down a kind of back alley, but there were a lot of places like that in the area. Once you saw the large building with its hanging sign depicting a huge brown bear, you wondered why you'd never been there before.

"Wow, this place looks impressive." Said Drew.

"Yeah.....My old company booked a room upstairs for Kwai's leaving do."

"The windows actually shine." Said Drew.

"Never been in there, but I'm told the ladies toilets are spotlessly clean."

Intuitively Monday night should be a busy night for pubs, but it never seemed to be. The wish to take the edge off yet another Monday, was countered by the thought of nursing a hangover on Tuesday morning. No fight to get served and the guy behind the bar actually smiled.

"Well, what do you think of the place?" Asked Nick.

"Great.....If I'd known Kwai, I'd be happy to come here for his goodbye bit of a do."

"Yes, we all liked Kwai.....No dark foreboding, or hint of anything strange?" Asked Nick.

"Alright.....Tell me what's wrong with the Brown Bear?" Asked Drew.

"Finish your drink.....Then we'll both go to the gents' toilet."

"Oh, you really know how to show a girl a good time."

Nick had been there several times, looking for clues he might have missed. Drew could look at it with new eyes and might well spot something he'd missed. The gents' toilet was down a set of stairs near the entrance to the beer garden. Two rickety tables and a few chairs, surrounding several dying pot plants. The beer garden was somewhere for people to dump the kids on a summers' day and it was the one area where The Brown Bear didn't excel. Nick grabbed Drew's hand as they both went through the door at the bottom of the stairs. No weird modern sign on the door that no one really understood. The pub was old school and had a sign saying 'Gents,' on the door.

"Ewww, this place is filthy." Said Drew.

"It's a gents; they're all a bit grubby." Said Nick. "This one is better than most. That's it though, the only thing you've noticed? I did wonder if you'd arrive here with me. Maybe holding your hand made it work."

He saw the moment when Drew looked around the slightly smelly toilet and the penny dropped.

"I saw two men in front of us." Said Drew. "It's just us here. Where are all the guys needing a pee?"

"We could spend hours here, I've done just that." Said Nick. "No one else ever enters that door."

Demons are incredibly powerful and to them, a thousand years is the blink of an eye. I believe this is a frozen moment in time, held as it is for.....Maybe forever. What it definitely isn't, is the gents at The Brown Bear."

"Fuck!" Said Drew.

Which seemed a reasonable reaction, he'd said something similar, more than once.

"I have a theory, that might be crap." Said Nick. "I believe there was something left uncompleted the night I summoned the demon. I have no idea what, but finding out might well be important."

"Sort of.....Finish the job and everything gets reset." Said Drew.

"Hmmmmm, not everything perhaps.....But it can't hurt."

Nick had been expecting the question, but it still made him feel guilty when Drew asked. A mixture of guilt and shame, though she had a right to the truth.

"Tell me Nick.....No crap about being drunk and not knowing why." Said Drew. "I'm pretty sure anyone summoning a powerful demon has a reason. A reason they're not proud of and would like kept secret. What was your reason?"

Nick leant against the wall between two toilet cubicles and slid down to the ground. He even let his bottom land on the orange streaked tiles, that had once probably been a nice cream colour. He placed his arms on his knees and then his head on his arms. Nick tried to think of his good place and failed. Drew sat cross legged on the floor in front of him.

"Tell me, Nick?"

Nick looked up and thought that any woman willing to sit on the floor of the gents in a pub, deserved to be told the truth.

"You'll hate me." Said Nick.

"Yes, I might."

"I don't want to mention her name." Said Nick. "The name of the woman who humiliated me here, in this pub. It might think it amusing to kill her in some horrific way. I don't want that, not now. I did when I summoned the demon. I wanted her dead for rejecting me in front of friends and then mocking me. Right then, that night.....I wanted her to have a slow, lingering and painful death. I could have used the demon to do it, once it was inside me. I'd have got away with it too. Yes, I know that makes me a bad person."

"So, you never went through with it?" Asked Drew. "I'm assuming the lady is still alive."

"Yes, she's still alive. I never asked the demon for anything. That might be why the summoning is incomplete.....I'm still not sure if I wanted her dead, or it was just a fantasy."

"No.....I don't hate you." Said Drew.

"Why not? Most people would." Asked Nick

"There's something about teenage love, an intensity." Said Drew. "Read Romeo and Juliet and you'll understand. When I was fifteen I fell in love and he was my first lover. The first for just about everything and when someone presses all your sexual buttons.....I'd have done anything for him. As we're not using names, he can remain just a he. He was eighteen when I was fifteen, an aunt warned me of the perils of dating an older and more experienced guy. He had his fun and dumped me. I wanted to kill him, Nick. I really thought about waiting for him near his house and hitting him with a hammer, until my pain went away. I refused to live in a world where he existed. I never hurt him of course, but I really, really wanted to. That's why I can't hate you."

"We make a strange pair." Muttered Nick.

"Yes, I'm beginning to realise that."

Nick remained sat on the filthy floor, while Drew began opening the cubicle doors, one after the other.

"Which was the one you used for calling the demon?" Asked Drew.

"You'll see when you get to it, there's a summoning circle on the floor."

"We need to treat this as an investigation, go over everything the way the police would." Said Drew.

Drew gasped when she opened the door of the cubicle he'd used, he knew she would. It wasn't just the complex circle on the floor, or the Latin text written around it. The thin partition walls still held some kind of power. They pulsed ever so slightly with a yellow light.

"Take me through it.....Tell me everything in detail." Said Drew. "Once you wanted to summon the demon, tell me exactly how you did it?"

Nick thought about it and considering how much he'd had to drink that night, he could still recall most of it. He organised his thoughts and tried to explain what he'd done, without mentioning any names. Apart from Kwai of course who he hardly knew and would now be in his dream job in Seoul, South Korea.

"Had nothing to draw the circle, so I went back upstairs to Kwai's leaving do. I asked a table full of women for a lipstick and one of them actually found one for me in her bag. Dark red, perfect for what I needed."

"So, you went back upstairs?" Asked Drew. "Did you notice the time?"

"I only went upstairs once.....Someone shouted about last orders, so it was probably about eleven. Not that it mattered; they'd arranged to use the room until two in the morning. I went back to the gents and chose a cubicle at random. I could hear several men using the toilet, so I drew the circle and waited for them to leave. Normally you'd draw a summoning circle to hold the demon. You'd also do a protection circle to stand in. The cubicle was small though and to be honest.....I wanted the demon to enter me."

"Be honest, Nick.....Did you expect to die that night?" Asked Drew.

"I err.....I'm not sure."

"Think, Nick.....Did you expect to survive the summoning?"

"Probably not, Drew.....There was only the summoning circle and I was stood in it. The demon would have probably killed me, after putting an end to her.....The woman who'd destroyed my life. Or so my thoughts were telling me. I wasn't totally sane that night and barely on nodding terms with reality."

"Alright Nick.....So, you had a circle and there were other guys in the gents toilet....."

"I had to wait a while until I had the place to myself. It's not something I'd done before, so I was nervous about saying the words of the summoning incantation. I was drunk and full of venom for her.....Mainly I was worried the incantation wouldn't work. It did though; I felt a jolt of power as the demon arrived inside me."

Nick remembered the feeling of euphoria as he and the demon, had shared the same small space. She had made him feel as though he was nothing; something not fit to be in the same room as her. For a fraction of a second, as his body held the demon, Nick had felt important. Not that he intended to tell Drew about those feelings. Truth and honesty were fine, as long as they weren't humiliating, or too embarrassing.

"And?" Asked Drew.

"And what?" He asked.

"You're alive and the woman who wronged you is alive." Said Drew. "So, what did happen when you and the demon became one?"

There was a gap in his memory, maybe in his mind.....For some reason the gap hadn't worried him until Drew had pointed it out.

"I have no idea, I honestly don't know. I remember the jolt as the demon arrived, but after that.....It's like a hole, a gap in my mind."

"Did you go back upstairs?" Asked Drew. "Do you remember leaving the pub that night?"

“No, I don’t remember any of that, though I must have gone back upstairs at some point.” There had been a much loved uncle in his family, a real character. That lovable old man had developed dementia and most of his memories had kind of corroded away. Nick still remembered how frustrated his uncle had been, when the right word or name, refused to pop out of his memory. Nick was feeling the same kind of frustration about his memories of that night, after the demon had arrived.

“After the demon entered you.....What is your next clear memory ?” Asked Drew.

His much loved uncle had passed on at a good age. When he’d found a memory that refused to appear, he’d rubbed his temples and looked so helpless. Nick felt he had to look the same, as he tried to pull something out of his mind, during what felt like three or four missing hours from his life.

“A cab, I was in a cab going home.” Said Nick. “I don’t do Uber.....I’m guessing someone called a cab for me and sort of poured me into it. I’m sure I mentioned being very, very drunk.”

“Think.....You’re in a cab on the way home, Nick. Was there anything to indicate the time ?” Asked Drew.

“The driver had the radio on, a station with a lot of old hits.” Said Nick. “I can remember humming along to something by the Pet Shop Boys. The station did a time check, which surprised me. Funny how my memory seems to have worked that night. I was shocked that it was five minutes after two in the morning, so I remembered that time check.”

“So, we have some time just after eleven, until a few minutes after two.” Said Drew. “A huge hole in your memory that needs to be explained. You must have been doing something.”

“That has to be the next step in our investigation.” Said Nick.

“I agree.....Oh, look.....The lipstick is still there, down by the side of the toilet seat.”

Drew was chuckling as she handed him the dark red lipstick. One look at the name on the side and he could understand why.

“Even as a horror writer.....You couldn’t make it up.” Said Drew.

On the side of the lipstick was its name.....‘Demon Red.’

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Mary Seeley had lived in the block for years. Originally moving in with her husband, though he’d died many years ago. He’d never been around to see the internet, social media and online TV. He was the sort of man to snort at the very idea of mobile phones. Sometimes Mary felt sad that she had a nice home, but no one to share it with. At other times she was happy to only have herself to worry about. Keeping the other residents of the block under control was a full time job.

“Don’t get me started about the new woman.” She muttered to herself.

Nick was nice; he’d even bought her flowers for Christmas a few times. He had no car to jam up the street though, or weird letters from foreign places. Monitoring residents’ cars and mail often gave Mary a bad migraine. Did anyone ever thank her ?

“No.....Some call me a busy body behind my back.” She mumbled.

Yes, Nick was a decent guy and there had never been one visit to his flat by debt collectors, unlike a few she could mention. Then Drew arrived, a young woman no better than she ought to be, as Mary’s mother used to be fond of saying.

“Known him five minutes and she’d moved in with him.....Strumpet.”

The damned woman had even brought her cat with her. Mary had tried; no one could say she hadn’t tried to befriend Drew. Every comment was taken the wrong way; some people could be like that.

Mary had decided to carefully monitor any mail arriving for Drew Benton.

“Nick may be alright, but she’s up to something.....I know it.”

There was a knock on Mary's door, which was very strange. Door to door salespeople used the entry phone system, as did the postman with the occasional parcel. A knock on her door tended to mean one of the other residents wanted to see her. Mary still used the peep hole in her door though, to see who wanted to disturb her. It was late and Mary didn't like to open her door after nine in the evening.

"No one there.....Some idiot playing games." She muttered.

There was another knock, yet the lens in her door was showing her an empty hallway.

"Idiots.....Go away or I'll call the police." Mary shouted.

After the third clear knock on her door, Mary was in a dilemma. The fear of opening her door to who knew what, was fighting her inner need to know everything happening in the block. How could she not open her door to find out who was knocking on her door? She was the undisputed queen of the block after all. A few women had tried to take her on and none had taken her crown. A few had gone away in tears.

"I fear nothing in this block." She muttered.

There was a strange feeling of dread as she opened her front door. As if someone had just walked over her grave, as her husband used to say. No one outside her door, so Mary walked out onto the small landing.

"Who is out here?" She asked.

There was a window on the far side of the stairs, but even during the day her landing had always been fairly dark. No automatic lighting or anything clever, the lights came on when a button was pushed at the foot of the stairs. Then it could be a rush to get into her flat before the timer turned itself off.

"Come on, you've knocked three times.....What do you want?" Shouted Mary.

Nick was out; he'd gone out earlier with Drew. Mary had heard them talking about walking down to the Angel to get a tube. There was something though, movement in front of the door to Nick's flat. Like a shadow where there was no light to make a shadow. Mary took a step forward and then very slowly, another step. The shadow vanished....There one moment and simply gone the next. Again, there was the odd feeling that made the back of her neck tingle.

"Who is there?" Mary yelled.

A door opened on the landing below and there was the sound of footsteps.

"Are you alright Mary?"

Denise asking, a woman who lived on her own and worked for a large firm of solicitors in the city. A large black woman, who kept herself to herself, which pleased Mary. When Mary had once asked her where her family came from, Denise had said Stourbridge.

"I'm fine Denise.....Someone has been playing games." Said Mary. "Knocking on my door and then running away."

"Awful.....I'll keep an eye out for them."

"Thank you, Denise."

Mary went back into her flat, closed the door and bolted it. Thinking kids were teasing her was almost comforting, but she wasn't daft. There were a few kids in the block, but the entry phone usually stopped them being a nuisance on the end staircase. It might be one of the residents she'd upset at one time or another, there were a few of those.

"Bastards." Mary muttered.

A cup of tea and there was a film on TV that Mary had thought sounded quite good. Mary had become a creature of habit, always in bed by twelve thirty. She turned off the light in her lounge and

turned on the light in her hallway. That was 'the light,' the only light in her flat for the entire night. Keeping lighting to a minimum had become a bit of thing since the electricity company seemed to think she could afford millionaire's prices. Just enough light spilled into her bathroom, for her to be able to use the toilet in the middle of the night. At the other end of the hall, there was enough light in her bedroom for her to undress and get into bed. What Mary saw in her bedroom, made her turn on the seldom used big light and the lamp on her bedside cabinet. She shook her head in disbelief. "How could they ?.....I've been in all day." She muttered.

No rushing about turning on every light in the flat, before calling the police. Mary was tempted to do that, but she still didn't quite believe what she was seeing. Nick had suggested a cork board after seeing Mary's old family pictures, scattered over the sideboard in her lounge. He'd helped her put it up in her bedroom the previous summer. All the photographs of her husband had been on that board. Grainy black and white pictures of her parents, alongside colour photos of Mary's sister's kids on a holiday in Australia. She'd even put up the photographs of a few work colleagues from her last job.....That had been a while ago. Mary's life had been on that board. She touched one of the defaced pictures and she wasn't imagining it....There were scratches across the face of Melanie, her niece.

"This.....This isn't right." Said Mary.

Some of the pictures had been ripped apart; the pieces screwed up and left on the floor. Most were still there, but every face had scratch marks across them, especially the eyes. Without picking up the destroyed pictures it was hard to be certain, but it looked as though quite a few of her precious photos were missing. That cork board had been her life, her good place to come and relax after a bad day. Now.....Someone had destroyed it and Mary had a good idea who it had been.

"It was her, that Drew creature." Muttered Mary. "I don't know how, but I'm sure it was her."

Then came turning on every light in the flat and looking in every cupboard and place big enough for anyone to hide. By the time Mary called the police she was certain no one was still hiding in her flat.

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Nick got up with Drew on Tuesday morning and they'd had coffee together at around seven. She'd left in her work clothes and heels, at around seven thirty. He'd almost forgotten what it felt like to get up before eight fifteen and shower before ten. Drew had looked so smart and professional as he'd wished her a good day. Nick kissed her careful, making sure he didn't smudge her makeup.

"I should be home by seven.....I'll get us a takeaway." Drew had said.

He was still posting random nonsense on Twitter when he heard the sound of a police radio outside. There was the unmistakable sound of someone shouting into a radio, to receive a loud, distorted reply. Into the front bedroom, which Drew was now treating as a large linen basket. He stepped between her dirty washing to reach the window. There were three uniformed officers outside, one of them female. Just one police car and that didn't have its sirens flashing. Whatever was going on, it didn't it didn't look likely to end up as a true crime drama on Netflix.

"Probably a lost dog, or Mary calling them about littering.....Again." Nick muttered.

Nick lost interest after that, before going back to Twitter and reposting a few random posts from fellow writers. He heard the police, as they went from door to door, though even that didn't get his curiosity going. Most writers he knew weren't that extroverted as a group. To him, it seemed the world of writing was populated by introverts, who crept out of their garret rooms to buy food. Crept back home again and kept themselves very much, too themselves. That was certainly the life he'd aspired to. Never engage with the crazies, who seemed to make up so much of the general population....Bless em.

"This one?" Someone outside his door asked.

"No.....They're coming later for this one." Someone replied.

At least the introvert life was what Nick aspired to. The life he'd lived, as he approached his thirtieth birthday, was very different. He found it impossible not to engage, usually with the kind of people who created havoc on their way from cradle to grave. Mind you.....Some of it had been incredibly enjoyable.....

'Cold and chucking it down here in Stornoway.' Tweeted Rob, who was writing a horror novel where Zombies were the good guys. The reading public would never go for that.

'Wonderfully sunny on the Amalfi coast.' Tweeted Lucile, who was the kind of poet whose poems never rhymed.

With all the comings and goings and the sound of yet more police radios.....Nick wasn't surprised when his doorbell was rung just after midday. Not an ordinary one press ring, they'd kept their finger down for a second or two. He'd expected a young uniformed officer, maybe a man and a woman. Nick hadn't been expecting the two detectives he already knew. He still had no idea of their official titles or ranks, but there they were..... Jennings and Barlow. A long way from Lavender Hill police station, they must have set a flag on his name and Drew's.

"You're not what I was expecting." Said Nick. "Do you want to come in?"

"Better than discussing it on your doorstep." Said Jennings.

Nick took them into his lounge and let them decide where to sit. Jennings chose a straight backed chair, while Barlow sprawled over one end of the sofa. Drew had told him Suki was wary of strangers. She'd had found a way up to the top of the unit that housed the TV and a few books. Nick could see her yellow eyes, as she looked down on the two detectives.

"Your name came up on the system." Said Jennings. "The Islington boys guessed we'd want to interview you."

"I'm sure you know why we're here." Said Barlow.

"No, I honestly don't have a clue." Said Nick.

"One of your neighbours seems to have had an intruder last night." Said Jennings. "There was some vandalism involved. Where were you and Drew between nine and ten last night?"

"Which of my neighbours?" Asked Nick.

"Please answer the question.....Where were you both last night?" Asked Barlow.

No one had cautioned him and refusing to answer would probably mean a trip to Islington police station. Nick wasn't totally sure if he was about to make a huge mistake, but there seemed no way to avoid it.

"Drew and I were at The Brown Bear near Old Street, last night." Said Nick. "We were there most of the night and used our Oyster cards to get there, and back. I'm sure you can look up where we were and when."

Barlow was definitely the boss. He muttered at Jennings, who then scribbled something into a note book.

"Tell me now.....Who had the intruder?" Asked Nick.

"Mary Seeley." Said Barlow. "No sign of a break in, but there was damage to property. There are a few.....Worrying elements to the incident, which is why we're going door to door."

"Mary doesn't seem fond of your girlfriend." Said Jennings. "Is the feeling mutual?"

The penny dropped as they say, a huge penny that woke Nick up better than his two cups of morning coffee. Drew's neighbours had been killed where she'd lived and now Mary's home had been

damaged in some way. Mary had probably pointed a finger in the direction of Drew as number one suspect. He didn't like saying anything, but Mary was hardly a first time caller to the local police. "Mary must have the cop shop on speed dial." Said Nick. "Everything from kids dropping sweet wrappers, to dogs crapping on the pavement. I really wouldn't take her too seriously....Drew would never hurt anyone."

About a full ten on the crappy and disloyal neighbour scale, but Drew was now his live-in girlfriend. "People died where she used to live, Mr Rees." Snapped Barlow. "I think you both know a hell of a lot more than you're telling us."

"Is Mary alright?" Asked Nick.

"So, now you're taking it seriously." Said Barlow. "Mary Seeley is fine, the intruder left after causing damage to the flat."

"I was always taking it seriously." Said Nick.

"There's some news about Drew's neighbours in Clapham." Said Jennings. "Can we rely on you to pass it on when she returns home?"

"Yes, of course you can."

Suki made her presence known by hissing at the two police officers. Nick felt a little jealous; he'd have loved to hiss at them too.

"Niki in flat seven was a puzzle and we hate puzzles." Said Jennings. "Not one of the known dead, yet there was no sign of her. We tried where she worked of course and her family. No one had seen her since the night of the murders. The crime scene cleaners found her cat, but no sign of Niki."

"Until last night." Said Barlow. "Her body had been pushed inside a foot wide ventilation duct. You're a horror writer, Nick. You must have a pretty good idea of the damage caused to a body, by being shoved into a foot wide metal duct?"

"Yes, I have a reasonable idea." Said Nick.

"So much damage to Niki's body and the duct." Said Jennings. "The body was found because of bodily fluids leaking out of the ventilation system. No one will be able to return to the flats for some time. We're now checking for any other surprises."

"Personally.....I can see them demolishing the block." Said Barlow. "I really hope you and Drew aren't trying to protect anyone."

"Tell Drew about Niki and remind her how bad it is to withhold information in murder enquiry. We don't want to find any more victims like Niki." Said Jennings.

"Was she.....Was Niki alive when it happened?" Asked Nick.

"You mean when she was rammed into the ventilation duct?" Asked Barlow.

"Yes...Was she alive?"

"Difficult to be sure.....But yes, she probably was." Said Jennings.

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