



# BRIGHT SHINY THINGS

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Allison & Busby Limited  
12 Fitzroy Mews  
London W1T 6DW  
*allisonandbusby.com*

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2017.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

First Edition

HB ISBN 978-0-7490-2013-2  
TPB ISBN 978-0-7490-2146-7

Typeset in 11.5/16.5 pt Sabon by  
Allison & Busby Ltd.

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Printed and bound by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

## PROLOGUE

As the body hit the floor, some of the dead man's blood caught the side of her face and she gasped. It was still warm.

She made herself look down. Drawn to the source of the blood, she fixated on his torso, which was a mass of red punctuated by deep, black stab wounds. Then she looked at the face. Which she recognised.

## ONE

‘He shit his pants! I’m telling you, I was there!’

Abbas al’Barri was drunk. He’d been drunk in 1991 when they’d first met. Twenty-six years later, he was drunk again.

‘I’ll admit he pissed himself,’ Lee Arnold said.

‘And shit! I’m telling you, man! He shit his pants! I saw it and I smelt it!’

Lee shrugged. There was no point arguing with Abbas when he was rat-arsed. The bottle of whisky he’d opened when Lee had arrived was half empty. And Lee didn’t drink.

‘Fucking “elite” Republican Guard!’ Abbas said. ‘Fucking Ba’athist scum!’

Although it still, sometimes, haunted his dreams, the First Iraq War was over for Lee Arnold. Since he’d left the army, shortly after the War in 1992, he’d first joined the Metropolitan Police force and then set up in business as a private investigator. The bloody battles against Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard were not memories he liked to invoke. But he hadn’t come to this smoke-filled house in East Ham for his own amusement. Abbas was laughing but that was only because he was shit-faced. And

he was shit-faced because he was still there in his mind. All the time.

On the night of 26th February 1991, Lee had been driving a Challenger 1 tank into battle against the 52nd Iraqi Armoured Division. As a corporal in the 7th Brigade of the British 1st Armoured Division he'd been part of the multinational force that had been sent to recapture Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. He'd been sweaty with fear, hoarse from smoking too many fags and he'd also had a passenger on board. One of the Brigade's Iraqi interpreters, Abbas al'Barri was a Shia dissident from the northern Plain of Ninevah. He'd been arse'oled before he'd even got on board.

The first thing he'd ever said to Lee had been, 'I'm a very bad Muslim. But what in the name of God are you to do?'

They'd hit it off straight away and when what became known as the Battle of Norfolk was over, they'd gone out drinking together in the southern Iraqi city of Basra. There, for the first time, they'd discussed how many Republican Guards had pissed or shit themselves, or both. Back then, a good night out for Lee Arnold had meant a bottle of vodka and a 'ruck'.

Abbas had been handy in a fight all those years ago too. But, although the drink was still in his life, the fight had gone. That had disappeared the day he'd discovered that his eldest son, Fayyad, hadn't gone to Ibiza for a booze and birds holiday with his mates, but had joined the Islamic State Group in Syria. Lee remembered that day well because it had been the first time that Abbas had called him for years.

When Lee had returned to the UK in 1992, Abbas and his family had also left Iraq. Like most of those who had translated for the foreign coalition, the al'Barri family would have been at risk from Saddam Hussein had they tried to stay. So Abbas, his wife Shereen and their children Fayyad, Djamila and Layla had been settled in a

council house in East Ham. Two years later the al'Barris' youngest child, Hasan, had been born in Newham General Hospital. Lee and Abbas had 'wet the baby's head' for two days of happy drunkenness. The next time they'd seen each other, Abbas's name had been all over the newspapers as the father of the latest ISIS recruit. And his drunkenness was dark.

Now, it was even darker.

Hasan and Lee put Abbas to bed when he finally became unconscious. The boy, unlike his mother, was embarrassed. Shereen was furious. Later, sitting down in her kitchen with Lee and a jug of strong coffee, she told him why Abbas had really wanted to see him.

'We got this in the post on Monday,' she said as she pushed a large Jiffy bag across the table.

Addressed to Abbas, the postage stamp was Dutch.

Lee opened the bag and frowned. 'Ivory?'

'No,' Shereen said. 'It's the tooth of a whale.'

Lee removed it. About ten inches long, it looked like a massive incisor from a chain-smoker. The surface of the tooth was rough and, when Lee held it to his nose, it smelt of damp.

'So . . .'

'Lee, may I have one of your cigarettes, please?' Shereen asked.

He didn't think she smoked any more. But he said, 'Course you can, darlin'.'

He offered her a fag and took one for himself. Once her smoke was alight, Shereen said, 'You know that we come from Ninevah. Do you remember?'

'Yes,' he said. 'The Ninevah Plain used to be full of all sorts of people before ISIS. Shias, Christians, Yazidi people . . .'

'That's right. Many, many mosques, churches, monasteries – holy places of all kinds. Even under Saddam. The monks even

taught our children. But that was then,' she said. 'Now these monsters my son has chosen to join . . .' She threw her arms in the air. 'Since when were we Sunni? Tell me, Lee, since what time did my son become someone else?'

'I don't know.'

Her eyes filled with tears. 'What did I do, eh? We always kept the children away from religion. We saw this madness coming. What did I do for . . . this?'

He said nothing. The poor woman was confused and who could blame her? Her son had chosen to go to a lawless country to fight for a cause she couldn't understand.

Shereen shook her head. 'But . . . Look,' she said, 'we've not had a word from Fayyad since last August. Not one text, not one phone call. Then . . .' She pointed at the Jiffy bag. 'This.'

'It's his handwriting?'

'Yes. But more significant is the content,' she said.

'A whale's tooth?'

'Yes. But not any whale's tooth,' she said. 'This is the tooth from the whale that ate the Prophet Jonah.'

'In July 2014, ISIS blew up the Mosque of the Prophet Yunus, which is our name for Jonah,' Shereen said. 'It contained the tomb of the prophet as well as a relic, which was a copy of the Tooth of the Whale.'

'A copy?'

'Yes. Given to the shrine by American soldiers in 2008. We were so embarrassed.'

'Why?'

Shereen had switched off the harsh neon lighting strip in the kitchen in favour of candles, which gave off a softer light. She was beginning to get cataracts and candlelight was more comfortable

for her eyes. But Lee noticed that it also made her look older. The light and shade the candles threw picked out every hard-won line and crinkle on her beautiful face.

‘The Americans believed the story we told about the tooth being stolen,’ she said. ‘It was a story that the people of the Ninevah Plain created to protect our relic. Even then there were people coming onto the Plain who meant us harm. Al-Qaeda, Salafis, madmen. The imam of the Mosque of Jonah gave the tooth to the monks of the Monastery of Mor Isak. High up in the mountains behind the Christian town of Bartella, it is a hard place to get to. And it is big. Now there is only one monk, but in the past there were thousands. Brother Gibrail put this tooth into the wall of the monastery. He told no one the exact location, not even Brother Serafim, his only companion at that time. That way if anyone came and asked where was the tooth, no one but Brother Gibrail would know and he would kill himself before he would give that secret to the madmen. In December of last year he did just that.’

‘He took his own life?’

‘Yes.’

Now the low light was eerie. Shereen was calling back the memory of Iraq far more powerfully than her husband. She spoke of a place Lee remembered as a pressure cooker of the fanatical. One day he saw a huge group of men, Shias someone had told him they were, beat themselves with chains until they fainted from blood loss. It was an act of devotion apparently. But to what?

‘ISIS came and they blew up Mor Isak,’ she said. ‘Brother Serafim escaped. He said that they left not one stick of furniture intact, not one plant in the garden alive. There is a woman who lives in Dagenham that I know, Nasra. She is a Syrian Christian from Ninevah. She told me that everyone was saying that the tooth was lost. And I believed it to be so, until this arrived.’

Lee held the artefact up to the light. 'You're sure this is the real deal?'

'Lee, I grew up looking at that tooth,' she said. 'And so did my two eldest children. The tooth was very precious to both Fayyad and Djamila. One of their favourite things as little ones was to go to see the tooth when it was in the Mosque of Yunus. When we heard it was moved to Mor Isak, my Fayyad cried.' She touched the rough surface of the dark-brown object lovingly. 'Abbas and I believe that our son has had a change of heart.'

'About ISIS?'

'Why else would he preserve something those madmen find abominable?' She leant towards him. 'Lee, Fayyad is reaching out to us. He wants our help.'

'To do what?'

'To come back to us!' she said. 'The Tooth of the Whale tells me this more powerfully than any letter.'

'Maybe he just sent it home for old time's sake,' Lee said. 'Shereen, love, I don't mean to rain on your parade, but this needn't mean anything. Worse, it could be a trap.'

'A trap?'

'To give you false hope. You know how twisted these bastards are! They encourage these young blokes to reject their families, to actively torment them in some cases. You're "infidels" now, why should he care about you?'

Shereen looked down at her hands.

'I can see it's crossed your mind,' he said.

'But not Abbas's.'

'Well, no.'

'Lee, if Fayyad doesn't come home, Abbas will drink himself to death,' she said. 'He can't take it. He just can't.'

'Have you told the coppers?' Lee asked.

He saw the candlelight flicker in her slightly milky eyes. It gave them a vaguely sinister, unearthly look.

‘Oh, no,’ she said. ‘Abbas is adamant. No coppers. He wants you to find Fayyad.’

‘I said I’d finish my A levels and I will.’

The gangly girl sprawled across the sofa didn’t take her eyes from the TV as she spoke. Shazia Hakim was, to the annoyance of her stepmother, addicted to dark, Scandinavian crime dramas. Wasn’t there enough gloom in everyday life? She was also, in Mumtaz Hakim’s opinion, being dangerously casual about her own future.

‘If you go in under the graduate entry scheme . . .’

‘I don’t want to wait that long,’ Shazia said. ‘I’ve already taken an extra year for my A levels. And, anyway, I want to go in as an ordinary constable. I want to learn from the bottom.’

‘Shazia, you know that, at that level, you may face . . .’

‘Racism and sexism. Yeah, I know, Amma.’ She shook her head. ‘You’ve talked about it, Lee’s talked about it, Vi’s talked about it. And as I’ve said to all of you, if Asian girls don’t go in and change it, then who will? Anyway, if I join up when I’ve finished my A levels I can start earning and you won’t have to worry about nine grand a year uni fees.’

Mumtaz put the book she’d been trying to read down. Science fiction had never really been her thing but she was giving it a go because her cousin Aftab had recommended it.

‘Shazia,’ she said. ‘As I’ve become tired of telling you, don’t think about money. I have that covered.’

The girl looked, briefly, away from the TV. ‘No you don’t.’

Mumtaz ignored her. ‘What about your application to Manchester University? What happened to that?’

‘You know what happened.’

Shazia turned back to the TV and Mumtaz said no more.

The subject of the Sheikh family and what they had done to Mumtaz and Shazia was a closed book. Shazia’s late father had been in debt to the Sheikhs, a local crime family, when he’d been stabbed to death on Wanstead Flats nearly four years earlier. A gambler, a drunk and a womaniser, he’d habitually raped both his first wife and Mumtaz. He’d also abused his own daughter. Shazia hadn’t cried when her father died. She still didn’t know that Naz the spoilt favourite nephew of the Sheikh family patriarch, Wahid-ji, had been the one who had killed him. And now that Naz himself was dead, theoretically that information had died with him. Except that Mumtaz knew it hadn’t. Because she’d been there when Naz had killed her husband. She’d let him get away as Ahmet had lay dying. She’d let him die. Then the Sheikhs had begun blackmailing her.

The two Hakim women had secrets from each other that neither of them barely dared to even think about. Shazia carried guilt, Mumtaz did too, but there was also fear because the Sheikh family hadn’t finished with the Hakims. Only one person apart from Mumtaz knew about the Sheikhs and that was her business partner, Lee Arnold. And even he didn’t know the whole story.

Fayyad was not the skinny boy that Lee remembered. Now a tall, muscular man in his thirties, he had a beard and carried a semi-automatic rifle. In this picture he was smiling. Lee pointed at the computer screen. ‘How’d you find this?’ he said.

‘They have websites dedicated to getting brides for their fighters,’ Shereen said.

‘But this is Facebook.’

‘Read it,’ Shereen said. ‘He says he’s looking for a wife.’

Lee had heard that one of ISIS’s most powerful recruiting tools

amongst Muslim women was its stable of young, fit, handsome fighters. Pictures were put online to draw in those already in the early stages of radicalisation. A handsome face and a set of muscles like Fayyad's could clinch it. Lee barely recognised him. He called himself Abu Imad. All the fighters had new names signalling their 'rebirth' as adherents of ISIS.

'When did you find this?'

'We've been looking online ever since he left,' Shereen said. 'Djamila found this a few days after we got the tooth.' She touched his arm, desperate for him to believe. 'You see he's reaching out online and by post.'

'Yeah, reaching out to entice some vulnerable girl to go and join him in Raqqa,' Lee said.

'No! No! Lee, you don't understand!'

'I think I do,' he said. 'Shereen, love, I know you want to think—'

'He sent the tooth from Amsterdam,' Shereen interrupted. 'ISIS people use Amsterdam as a transit point to go on to Istanbul and then into the Middle East. They come into Europe via Schiphol Airport and they leave from there too.'

'How do you know this?'

'Because I have read everything there is to read about these bastards!' She began to cry.

Lee let her and then he said, 'Whatever's going on here, you have to tell the police. I can't help you. I'm not an expert on terrorism. I'm not an expert on much.'

'But you work with a covered lady,' Shereen said.

Lee frowned. 'How's that relevant?' he said.