

Chapter 1

Nat

October 2015

Something is wrong.

As I come to, the swish of tyres on wet tarmac blends with wailing police sirens. London's luminescence bleeds through a gap in the curtains. Dragged from sleep, my brain's still buzzing with work. Over halfway through the CEO's script and there's a problem: I don't want to write it. Should've been firmer with Charlie, told her I won't do the arms sector.

I roll onto my side, and with startling clarity *know* what's wrong: there's an icy draught and the smell of cabbage drifting in from another apartment. I locked the front door, double-locked it. Fear scratches my neck like a shard of ice. Someone has broken in.

As if to confirm it, there's a creak in the spare room.

Gripping the duvet, I struggle for a rational explanation. Bernie? Much too polite, he'd message first. The spare room floorboard creaks again, and my heart skitters like a trapped bird. Jesus, this can't be happening. Shouldn't have kicked Bernie out.

Before I can stop it, my mind is racing – burglar, rapist... Stay calm, Nat, be realistic. Who'd want to break into this dump? There's nothing worth stealing. Unless another dealer is after the stash Wayne hid when he moved out months ago.

I tap my phone: 03:30. There's just one exit; the window isn't an option, five floors up.

Without getting off the bed, I reach out, pull my clothes on over my PJs, stuffing bra and pants into my pockets; slow my breathing to reduce racing heartbeat. Try to avoid waking the stray kitten that's adopted me; a purring ball of fur, soaking up love, oblivious to my panic.

Grab what I need – handbag, laptop case, Dad's picture. Shoes. Where the fuck are my shoes? Heart's thumping so hard he must be able to hear it. Shoes, shoes... over there by the door. Creep towards it. Slip trainers over my feet. My jacket's hanging on the door. Put it on and listen again. A soft scraping sound, then silence.

Now the worst part. Hold my breath, grip the door handle.

Stop.

What if he's on the other side with a knife? I've frozen. Nat, either you wait for him to find you, or you make a break for it. Holding the laptop bag to my chest in case he lunges, I

tease the door open with the other hand. Not there, thank God, but I was right – the front door is open a crack, light bleeding into the hallway.

I creep down the corridor towards it. Out and onto the open concrete walkway that runs along the back of the building. Gulping cold night air into my lungs, I glimpse a man's silhouette through the spare room window. Who the hell is he? His head is bowed like he's going through drawers. Must have been the scraping noise. It's dark in there, but one of the security lights is still working; if he turns, he'll see me.

Hasten my step, just avoiding the kitten's bowl, but the kitten must have followed me. It skitters away into the darkness on its own nocturnal adventure.

Now what? Knock on a neighbour's door? This isn't the kind of place you talk to neighbours.

I'll head to the venue.

The lift never works. The stairs are just beyond the lift shaft. An accomplice might be keeping a look-out on the landing. Safest route – the fire escape.

I used to be good with heights. Not anymore, especially in the dark, but it's the best choice. I slip the picture into the laptop bag, do up my laces, and take the passageway around to the side of the building.

The iron fire escape is lit at the top but falls away into yawning darkness. My legs lock, unable to move – stomach cramps as I grip the railing. It's wet. A wave of vertigo makes me want to leap, and I breathe deep to regain my balance.

Got to do this.

Lower my feet onto the first step and remember myself aged eight, slipping over the top of Hay Tor with my dad who disappeared watching from above. Abseiling. I distract myself by thinking of him as I edge into blackness. Warm, strong, reassuring. Anything was possible with him. *'Come on Natalya, you can do it. Don't look down.'*

Dad, I don't know where you are but I'm going to find you.

Halfway down, I stop and look up. Long time since my training but old habits die hard. Nobody following. I'm calmer now, but it's raining again, damn it; fat drops splattering my face.

When I touch the ground, I glance up. Still nobody following. I'll find somewhere near the venue and work, make some use of the dark hours. I stride off towards the Old Kent Road, past homeless men huddled in doorways, nurses on their way back from Guy's, the all-night kebab shop. I'll pick up the N21 from The Bricklayer's Arms. Check nobody's following. Feels safer out here than it did in the flat. *Who the hell was that, opening drawers?*

Near the bus stop someone in a hoodie stands on the other side of the road and stares. My stomach lurches but I make a conscious effort to walk with confidence, act twice my size.

The night bus arrives, and I breathe again. Climb up to the top deck, scanning the empty seats. Sit by the stairwell. Ready. Just in case.

Alone, I sit and shiver.

Should I call the police? Not if they're going to find Wayne's stash. Been nagging him for weeks to take it. No, Bernie's a better bet.

I whip my phone out to message him. My heart jumps at his face still there as my screensaver. I fire off a text, asking if he'll come over and check the flat, but wait until it's light. Shouldn't, but he won't mind. He's good like that.

I catch my reflection in the bus window. What a mess. Not looking forward to today. It's the first time I've felt like this about a job.

I get off at St Paul's, walk up to Smithfield Market and choose a seat at the back of the all-night Smithfield café with a good view of the door. Give the room a quick sweep. Nobody suspicious, just white van men tucking into bacon sarnies. I'm about to open the laptop when a tingle runs up my spine. A burglar would have taken the TV in the spare room. A dealer would know Wayne's stash couldn't be in a sock drawer. The front door wasn't jemmied; he must have had a key. So, who was he? What the hell was he looking for?

Seven-thirty at the venue, and I feel as if I've done a full day already. Push the revolving door. Halogen spotlights bouncing off plate glass. It's a five-star hotel, much like others I've been in all over the world. My sister accuses me of being blasé, but when you've edited presentations in as many darkened ballrooms as I have, they all end up feeling the same. This time it's different though – my first, and I hope last, arms company gig.

I understand why they're protective, but the non-disclosure agreement contained strange phrases I've not come across before. The penalty clause for breaking confidentiality – *'Money is not enough.'* What the hell does that mean? Shouldn't have told Jenny. Not with her being a journalist.

I emerge on the other side of the revolving door and almost collide with a tall man. Slim, forties, dressed in a charcoal suit and a tie that might be something military. A Roman nose, blue-grey eyes. His cologne is unusual, almost exotic. His eyes light up, and I remember – Jake, the security consultant. Not sure what his role is. He isn't one of the client team, but he has hushed conversations with them.

We spoke briefly yesterday when he asked me what I do.

‘Scriptwriter,’ I said, and looked back at my laptop. Sensing him still there, I glanced at him again.

‘Aah, thought so,’ he said. Someone called him, and he moved on. Almost like he was checking me out.

I was planning to go to the toilets and attempt to make myself presentable, but now I’m cornered.

‘Oh, hi Jake.’ My voice croaks, and I clear my throat. ‘You’re early.’

His voice is a warm treacle baritone. ‘Good morning. I was hoping to have a word when you’ve got a moment.’

‘I need to watch the tech,’ I reply, fumbling for excuses. Don’t like him seeing me like this.

‘Sorry?’

‘Technical rehearsal.’

He frowns.

‘Just cue-to-cue. We’re running it now, so we don’t disturb the presenters. I could catch you at lunchtime.’ The cue-to-cue is for the technical team to practise entry points for lighting, sound, video and graphics. Jake wouldn’t be interested.

‘OK, lunch time.’ Those blue-grey eyes are piercing. ‘Are you alright?’

Must look as bad as I feel.

‘My flat was broken into last night. I haven’t had much sleep.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. Are the police involved?’

‘No.’

‘Do you want them to be?’

I shake my head. Strange question. ‘Thank you, but I’ve asked a friend to check it for me.’

‘Alright. Talk later.’ Jake heads for the lifts, and I’m left wondering what that was all about. Was it a coincidence – Jake bumping into me? What if he knows about me talking to a journalist?

Changing in the toilets, I stuff PJs into laptop bag, and stare for a moment at the mirror. God, I look awful. My roots are showing again. Wish I could get rid of the fringe, but it conceals the scar high on my forehead. Some quick concealer and foundation to hide the tiredness. A little blusher might make me look half-awake. Quick lipply and mascara. Force a smile. Nat, you look almost presentable.

The ballroom is dark, save for red lamplight over the show-caller's desk, halfway up the central aisle. Annie is on cans, the headphones and mic that connect her to the crew, and as I close the door, she says something inaudible. There's a roar that makes me jump, and footage of a jet fighter tears across the LED screens that wrap around the stage. The vibration of the surround-sound runs up my legs. This is the film that covers the CEO getting on stage to read the script I don't want to write.

I take a seat close to Annie, open my laptop and fire up emails. With a knot in my stomach, I re-read the briefing note from the CEO's executive assistant. *Can we get it across that ordnance will reach customers wherever they are through the 'creative use of certification?'* *Of course, we can't say it quite like that, but you get the drift. Just be wary of anything that sounds like crossing a line.*

Oh yes, I get your drift. Circumvent end-user certificates that are supposed to stop certain nations receiving banned weapons.

I check the Gov.uk website for *'End-use controls applying to military related items,'* and scroll down to the list of forbidden territories. I request audience profiles from clients to understand them better. Quite a few are on that list.

Annie leans over and smiles.

'Morning.'

'I was broken into last night.'

'Oh no. You OK?'

'Yeah, nothing strong coffee won't fix.'

'Can I get you one?'

'Thanks for asking but I've already had three.'

Annie's the closest I have to a best friend. She's freelance, so unless we're on the same show, we don't see each other much. But she knows about Wayne, Bernie and most of my chequered love life.

'Could you play CEO for me?' she says.

'Sure.'

'He's a bit of a slimeball, isn't he.' When she smiles, the cans wiggle on her head.

'I wish I wasn't writing for him. As they say, "You can put lipstick on a turd but it's still a turd."'

She almost chokes with laughter. Someone must have asked what's so funny. 'Sorry,' she says. 'OK, let's go to CEO entrance.' In an instant, she's the consummate professional again.