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For Samantha Golding



# Chapter 1

Kate Pearl stood on the green wheelie-bin in the alley that ran along the back of her mother's house and watched her half-sister play in the sandpit. Sitting in a pool of summer sunshine, the little girl's platinum blonde hair glowed white hot—Kate's own colouring, though hers was hidden under a baseball cap. Frustratingly, Kate couldn't see if the child shared her hazel eyes. She didn't need a mirror to notice the differences between them: the toddler had the plump, pink complexion of a happy three-year-old, nothing like the skinny, tanned older sister. The little girl was having great fun burying her doll in the sand and conducting some kind of funeral with a boy doll officiating in a Hawaiian shirt. Despite her grim situation, Kate had to smile. It looked like her sister was quite a character already.

'Sally?'

Kate moved further into the shadow of the bitter-smelling evergreen hedge that grew on the boundary. Cut back too radically some time ago, it wore a brown scar of the exposed inner branches, never regrown. Kate hadn't seen her mother for four years so her sister had not seemed real until now. What on earth was she doing coming here, Kate asked herself, invading their nice ordinary lives?

*Still, there's Sally. I have a sister called Sally.* Touching a hand to her heart, she held the thought like a fragile pressed flower.

'Mummy, Barbie is dead.' The little girl patted the top of

the grave with a plastic spade.

'How lovely, darling.' Their mother, Maya, clearly wasn't listening. A slim, dark-blonde woman in her early thirties, she had the toned muscles of a regular yoga practitioner, as hinted at by her exercise mat spread out on the lawn. 'I brought you some biscuits and milk, then it's time for your nap.' She scooped the toddler out of the sandbox and brushed her down. 'My goodness, look at you! You *are* in a state!'

Sally was still staring at the sandpit. 'She's dead—like your other little girl.'

Kate almost fell off the top of the bin to hear herself mentioned. Her mother had told her sister that she had died?

The toddler patted Maya's cheek. 'So now I'm sad like you.'

Maya swallowed, then buried her head in the crook of her baby's neck. She cleared her throat. 'I can see you are sad, sweetness. Let's find Barbie and everything will be all right. Where is she?'

'Ken buried her.' The little girl pointed at the boy doll lying on his back staring wide-eyed at the sky.

Maya put Sally down on the grass and rooted around in the pit. She pulled out Barbie, who was dressed for her funeral in a glittery blue ball gown. With a jolt of recognition, Kate realized it was the same dress she had treasured for her doll when she was Sally's age. Her mother must have kept it. Kate had a vivid recollection of the pink plastic toy box—something she hadn't thought about for years. She had covered it in sparkling fairy stickers: was that somewhere in Maya's house too? Kate hadn't thought Maya cared enough to give houseroom to something of hers, seeing how their last meeting had ended so badly.

'See, Barbie's fine,' said Maya, her voice quavering. 'Just shake her off and she's as good as new.'

Holding Barbie upside down, death forgotten, Sally ran up

the garden to the table in the tiny conservatory on the back of the pebble-dashed house. She dropped Barbie, picked up a two-handled cup, and grabbed a biscuit. Sally then disappeared inside, some other idea for play having taken root in her quick mind. Maya stayed where she was, hands on hips, head bowed.

Kate's throat went dry. Could she risk speaking? Her mum had remarried four years ago on a beach in the Caribbean, no family invited—that had been the catalyst of their final horrible row. Both had said stupid, *stupid* things to each other like a pair of screaming gulls scraping over the same bit of bread. Maya may not like the existence of her older child but even she had to admit she had given Kate the dubious gift of her temper. And, of course, Kate hadn't been able to resist rubbing salt into the wound by looking up the pictures on Facebook: the sun-kissed couple in white swimsuits and flower garlands, the new husband a handsome computer programmer who worked for the university, dark hair, white even teeth shown by his proud smile. Kate had hated him on principle.

She sighed. Recent events had made her wiser, that row so trivial. Maya's new life had no place for the awkward fact of a teenage daughter, Kate understood that now. Maya had had Kate when she was still at school and it had taken her years to get back on track after that early setback. And now the couple had a sweet little girl—a reward for finally doing everything right.

Had she ever been as cute as Sally? Kate felt so tired of herself, she couldn't imagine anything nice, even in her early years. Her mum hadn't wanted to keep her so she guessed not.

Kate picked a leaf out of her hair and let it fall, still debating whether or not to make herself known to her mother. Kate hadn't lived with Maya since she was five—that was when her grandparents on her father's side took over so the

young mother could go back to college. Mother and daughter had kept in touch, Kate coming to stay for holidays with a young woman who increasingly felt more like an older sister or cousin, but then Kate had had to ask for more and Maya had dropped her bombshell about getting married and moving on in her life. Kate still remembered the gutting pain of knowing she was unwanted. So, after that, Kate had protected her heart and stopped hoping Maya would play a bigger role in her upbringing; Gran had done a grand job of filling in for the absent mother. Even so, it came as a shock to hear that Maya had decided to say Kate was dead.

There were days when Kate felt she might as well be.

She looked over her shoulder at the quiet alleyway. She was being hunted. The last thing she wanted was to bring trouble on her family but she couldn't go without saying something, not after having taken the risk and come all this way. 'I'm sorry' probably about covered it.

'Mum?' Her voice came out rough, barely above a whisper.

Maya lifted her head, disturbed but not certain she had heard a voice. Her cheeks were wet.

'I'm . . . '

A crash from the house, followed by a wail, cut off Kate's words.

'Sally?' Maya spun round and ran towards the house. 'Sally? Are you OK?'

From the loud sobs coming from inside Kate guessed Sally was fine. Silence was always more ominous. Kate closed her eyes and squeezed the frond of evergreen, releasing more of the tart resin smell. Sally had saved her from making a bad mistake. It hurt that her mother treated her as dead but that was safest for the little family. What Maya didn't know about her older daughter couldn't hurt her. Better to remain a ghost.

Kate jumped off the bin, picked up the rucksack that lay

propped against the fence and shouldered everything she had in the world. Family didn't fit inside that.

# Chapter 2

Nathan Hunter entered the briefing room on the top floor of the Young Detective Agency to find he was the last to arrive.

'Hey, guys. Am I late?' He checked his watch. Four o'clock. 'If so, please accept my humble and most abject apologies.' He made a bow worthy of a musketeer.

'You're right on time,' said the agency's founder and leader, Isaac, or Colonel Hampton as those outside the YDA knew him. He gestured to Nathan to take the last free chair as he set up the computer projection. Isaac's personal assistant, Tamsin MacDonald, was helping him sort out a problem with one of the leads. They made an interesting pair: Isaac, cropped fair hair, blue eyes, coiled strength of an ex-serviceman, dressed in dangerous black, being fussed over by Mrs MacDonald in her sensible shoes, beige business suit and flowered blouse. She had been with Isaac since the founding of the agency and was the only one who could get away with treating him like her son. Popular with the students, she always had an open tin of biscuits for them while they waited to see her boss.

Circling the table, Nathan bumped knuckles with his best mate, Damien.

'Glad you could finally make it,' Damien drawled, grey-blue eyes cynical, arms and legs sprawled in his usual confident slouch. Give him a heads-up that danger approached and he'd change to alert in a split second. 'Where were you, you slacker?'

'Gym. Not slacking; physical training: you should try it some time.' Nathan had been practising some agility skills taught him by a circus performer who had been brought in to train and entertain the students last year. 'Hi, Raven.' Nathan carried on round the table to kiss the newest recruit to the YDA. A gorgeous American girl with spiralling black hair, she still bubbled with enthusiasm for her new life in the agency, not having been there long enough to take things as routinely as the three boys did. Her partner, Kieran, was totally devoted to her; quite a turn-around for a guy who had, in the era known as BR (Before Raven), lived only for obscure knowledge and logical puzzles.

'How's your day so far?' asked Raven.

'Good. You?'

'Great.' Raven nudged Kieran who was head down over their briefing papers, lost in his own thoughts. 'Action stations, Ace.'

'Hmm?' Kieran lifted his intense green eyes to his girlfriend. She nodded at Nathan. 'Did I forget again?'

'Uh-huh. You can't only think hello and move on, you have to go ahead and say it.' Raven had taken Kieran in hand and was trying to steer him into being more sociable. Nathan enjoyed watching the tussle.

'Hello, Nathan.' Kieran's eyes travelled over his friend, not missing anything. 'How was the BLT you had for lunch?'

Nathan was used to his friend's deductive powers. 'Too much mayonnaise.' He suspected he had a minuscule smear somewhere on his clothing that Kieran had spotted.

'I see you trained on the parallel bars in the gym, swam in the pool, then chatted to Miranda Yang afterwards—that was why you were on time rather than early as is usually your choice.'

Raven groaned. 'You are supposed to ask the guy what he's been doing rather than tell him, sweet-cheeks.'

Kieran made one of his puzzled I-really-want-to-please-Raven expressions. 'Oh yes.' He searched the list of acceptable remarks Raven had suggested in previous socialization sessions. 'So, how is Miranda?'

Nathan chuckled. 'Good, thanks. And you knew I talked to her because . . . ?'

'Perfume. She wears DKNY Red. Coming straight out of the girls' changing rooms, her newly applied perfume was still strong enough to transfer to you.' Kieran's eyes were twinkling with some knowledge he was too discreet to share.

Nathan sniffed his T-shirt. It was true, he had a slight scent on his chest from where he and Miranda had, er, *chatted* in the corridor. They had gone out with each other briefly and now had a jokey/flirty thing between them, neither taking it seriously—a stolen kiss or two. In truth, he had several jokey/flirty things going with female students—something that they seemed to expect as he cultivated what Raven teasingly called his loveable rogue image. But, hey, he liked to be liked—and no one got hurt—so he saw nothing wrong in that. (That was the point in his self-justification when Raven usually batted him around the head for his attitude.) 'Not cool. I'll have to change.' Nathan sat down next to Damien, facing Raven. He winked. 'But he's making progress. Well done, Saint Raven, miracle worker.'

'Baby steps,' she said with a huge smile at Kieran. Everyone knew she really liked Kieran's awkward ways: after all, they had fallen for each other on a mission at Raven's school when Kieran was even more social inept than he was now.

'Thanks, Tamsin: that's working now.' Isaac passed the PA the old lead to throw away. 'I don't know what I'd do without you.'

'Perish miserably from running out of biscuits,' suggested Mrs MacDonald.

Isaac's smile acknowledged the truth of that. 'Can you tell Jan to come in?'

Mrs MacDonald nodded and headed to the door.

'OK, team, time to start.' Isaac clicked on the first slide. 'Kate Pearl.'

Routine went out of the window. Nathan looked up at the screen, his good mood draining away. There was Kate's familiar face as she had appeared on her last YDA identity card: blonde, beautiful, his once perfect girl.

'Nothing but trouble,' muttered Mrs MacDonald. She shook her head reprovingly and exited the room.

Damien swore under his breath. He knew everything. 'You OK, Nat?'

'Fine.' Nathan swallowed. He wasn't fine; he was gutted.

'The boys will remember her, but for Raven's benefit I'll just run over the background,' continued Isaac. 'Kate was one of our top students, placed in C stream, or Cats, for her ability to blend in and move freely among all kinds of people. Highly rated both by myself and Mrs Hardy, we picked her for a difficult mission to Indonesia, to accompany fellow student Agustina Meosido and penetrate a new human trafficking ring in Jakarta run by a nascent gang called the Scorpions. The mission was supposed to be a joint operation with the Indonesian intelligence service. It was a daring idea—considering the age of those concerned—but Agustina was over eighteen and Kate seemed mature enough for the task, so we took the risk.'

The next slide came up. Agustina, the shy little Indonesian student who had been Kate's best friend at YDA. The vibrant butterfly Kate and the mouse-like Tina—they had both been very good at infiltrating in their different ways: one because she was so confident none thought to question her right to be somewhere, the other because no one noticed her.

Unfortunately Tina had been far better at infiltrating than anyone had realized.

‘That mission went badly wrong as it turned out Agustina had been sent by the Scorpions to destroy the credibility of the YDA. Kate walked into a trap masterminded by Agustina’s older brother, Gani Meosido. Not that any of us knew he was Tina’s brother until too late.’

Isaac put up a slide of a good-looking Indonesian guy of about twenty: black hair, square jaw, charming smile, total snake. Nathan stabbed his pad with his pencil, breaking the point.

‘He persuaded Kate that he was in love with her and needed saving from the traffickers. Kate fell for him big time. He presented himself as a minor operative who had seen the error of his ways, when in truth he was close to the leaders. We’ve since learned that his cousins run the Scorpions: Alfin and Yandi Gatra.’ Isaac put up two more pictures of men in their late twenties: one an overweight guy with small eyes and a chunky gold necklace; the other more like Meosido, good-looking and sophisticated, slicked-back hair and a disarmingly pleasant smile.

‘Kate went against mission protocol and tried to smuggle Meosido out of the reach of the gang through the confidential chain of agents we’d planted in the Scorpions’ network. These were brave people willing to save the young women and children that the gang were trafficking into the Middle East and the West. Of course, once she did that, Meosido told his cousins and they took out all of our agents. One woman was murdered; two people were hospitalized; the rest fled when they saw what was happening. A carefully constructed operation was thus dismantled in a couple of days. The YDA itself almost got shut down as the catastrophe raised questions over our suitability to do such difficult work. We were allowed

to stay open by the skin of our teeth but as you'll all know rules have changed. No relationships with outsiders while on missions.'

Raven and Kieran exchanged a wry look. They had broken the rules and barely been forgiven by Isaac, but no one was stupid enough to remind him while the Pearl fiasco was the subject of the briefing.

'Then we failed Kate badly. I had sent a team to extract her, but we didn't move quickly enough. Kate disappeared. At first we thought the worst had happened and she had been killed, but then Agustina emailed us, telling us that Kate had been devastated by what she had done but escaped—at least she had the decency to let us know Kate was alive. As one of our best Cats, Kate proved impossible to trace. I had to call off the search when months passed and the trail had gone cold.' Isaac returned to the photo of Kate. 'She has weighed on my conscience ever since. She was dropped into the middle of a scorpions' nest and got badly stung, with no backup to help her as her partner was a fraud. I've been looking for any sign of her since but nothing's come up on the radar—at least, not until today.'

The door opened and Jan Hardy, mentor for C stream, entered. A small woman, formerly a Metropolitan Police commander, with iron-grey hair and a steely air of determination, she nodded to the company and took her seat next to Isaac. Isaac paused to let her settle. Nathan turned his gaze from the screen to look out of the window at the view of the Thames and St Paul's cathedral on the opposite bank. Rain splattered on the window, blurring the buildings. The weather matched his mood. Everyone in the YDA had liked unconventional Kate and her disaster had hit them hard.

'That is the past.' Isaac moved on to the next slide. 'There are more details in your briefing papers. Jan, perhaps you would like to explain what happened next in Jakarta?'

Mrs Hardy picked up the laser pointer. The screen showed a room with a bed, overturned chairs and two people sprawled on the floor. ‘The body nearest the camera is Gani Meosido. I’m sorry to say the one on the far side is Agustina. Both were found shot in the head eight months ago. Kate’s DNA was all over the place—hair on a brush and traces on make-up, so she had definitely been there—but no weapon was found. We think it is where the Scorpions kept her for a while. The Indonesian authorities have put another spin on the evidence and are seeking her in connection with the murders. She is their chief suspect.’

‘What?’ Nathan threw down his pencil. It overshot the table and clattered to the floor. ‘They have to be mad! That couldn’t be Kate!’

‘I agree with you, Nathan, but that’s not how it looks. You have to remember we know her and the Indonesians don’t: to them she is just the girl who was to blame for destroying their network of agents. They think she stayed on in Jakarta and took her revenge on Gani.’

‘Bollocks—it’s a set-up,’ muttered Damien, saying what Nathan was thinking.

Mrs Hardy let the crude language pass. ‘Very likely—but why?’

‘So you want us to find that out? Are you sending us to Jakarta?’ asked Nathan.

Isaac shared a knowing glance with Mrs Hardy and shook his head. ‘Forget Indonesia. They won’t let a YDA operative in again no matter what the reason. No, your job is here. Since the Meosido siblings were murdered, the criminal underground has been working overtime to find Kate Pearl. She is Alfin and Yandi Gatra’s Most Wanted. The whisperings are all pointing to this country; the Scorpions and their allies are turning up here with one objective in mind: finding Kate Pearl. So we think she

is finally back in the UK, almost a year since we last heard from her. Your task is to find her first and bring her in. Whatever she has done, she is safest here rather than in an Indonesian jail or in the hands of the Scorpions. The YDA cannot fail Kate again.'

'So where is she?' Nathan turned to the back of his briefing papers. Leafing through, he saw that the sightings were extremely sketchy: a possible on a cross-Channel ferry, a more recent report from a neighbour near her mother's house, nothing definite.

'That's what I want you to find out. Nathan, as a Wolf, I'm putting you in charge of the manhunt.'

'Girlhunt,' muttered Kieran.

Isaac scowled at him. '*Kieran* and Raven will back you up, helping you get information out of witnesses and putting the pieces together. Damien will go along in case you meet any of the Scorpions, or if Kate resists capture.'

'From what I remember of her,' said Damien, 'I'd predict that Kate won't come in quietly. She has huge determination and she has to be running scared.'

Mrs Hardy smiled without humour. 'Then you have to use your legendary Cobra ruthless charm to persuade her that it is in her best interests, Damien.'

'Nat would have more luck at that than me. She told me she thought I was too smooth, like an oil slick.'

Isaac rubbed his chin. 'I'd forgotten. She did have a great line in put-downs, didn't she, Jan?'

'She liked Joe Masters most of all of us. Is he fit for duty yet?' asked Nathan. They all missed Joe, the fifth in their friendship group, but he had come out bruised from the operation that had brought Raven and Kieran together.

Mrs Hardy shook her head. 'I've signed him off for another month. He's with his parents in the States on vacation so I'd prefer not to call him in.'

‘OK. We’ll see what we can do,’ said Damien, casting a worried glance at Nathan. ‘You cool with this?’

‘Fine,’ Nathan said tersely.

‘Is there something I don’t know here?’ asked Isaac, eyebrow arched.

Nathan decided it was better to lay his cards on the table. ‘Damien is just anxious because I used to have a crush on Kate. I’m well over it. She’ll be just another mission.’

Isaac held his gaze for a moment then nodded, satisfied by what he read in Nathan’s expression.

Maybe he was better at hiding his feelings these days, thought Nathan, if he could fool Isaac?

‘Not just another mission, Nathan.’ Mrs Hardy tapped her copy of the briefing papers. ‘She was one of us. We don’t know exactly what she’s been through but none of it will have been pretty.’

But Kate had also abandoned her loyalties to the YDA—Nathan had never forgiven her that. If she’d managed to escape from the Scorpions, why hadn’t she come back to the YDA? He had felt the betrayal like a personal insult. He couldn’t imagine running out on the YDA like that, with no explanation or attempt to make up for a mistake. It wasn’t the poor judgement over Gani Meosido—he understood how that could happen—it was how she handled the fallout that had been wrong.

Nathan doodled a sketch of Kate’s profile in the corner of his notepad while Mrs Hardy ran through the material they had gathered on their missing girl. Nathan wanted to make up for her lack of duty by bringing her in—irrational, he knew that, but it was as if he was somehow responsible for her and could repair the harm she had done to the YDA. *Where had that stupid impulse come from?* As the YDA’s longest serving and most faithful recruit, Nathan knew he was fiercely

protective of the organization that had raised him—maybe too protective if his friends were to be believed. Still, he lived by the motto that without loyalty, you were nothing. Painful though it was to admit it, Kate had chosen to become zero.

‘OK, guys.’ Isaac checked his watch. ‘I want regular reports. Get yourself down to the last credible sighting near Kate’s mother’s house. Do not approach Maya Hubble directly.’

‘Hubble?’ asked Kieran. ‘New surname?’

‘Maya Pearl married a couple of years back and has a little kid. There was a falling out before Kate joined the YDA. Mrs Hubble hasn’t seen or communicated with her older daughter. When I contacted her yesterday, she was understandably upset and refused to speculate where her daughter might be. She says Kate has to be dead to have stayed away so long from her grandparents.’ Isaac’s frown deepened. ‘She’s rather bitter and doesn’t want to talk to us.’

No surprise there. ‘Kate lived with them out of term time, didn’t she?’ said Nathan. There was no need to phrase it as a question: he knew the answer. Everything about Kate had stayed with him.

Isaac nodded. ‘But there appears to have been some communication between Maya and the grandparents about Kate before the Indonesian mission. Maya has heard nothing for a year from any of them.’

Nathan put checking on the grandparents high on his to-do list. ‘Did you tell her she was wrong about Kate being dead?’

‘Yes, but Mrs Hubble refused to believe me.’

Frowning, Raven tapped her pencil on her notebook. ‘Do you know what Kate is doing back here? If I were on the run, I’d make a new life in another country where there was no chance of being traced.’

‘Unfortunately, I don’t know what her intentions are,’ Isaac admitted. ‘Her training as a Cat would lead me to anticipate

her doing something of that nature, Raven. She should be hiding out in another English-speaking country: the US or Australia maybe. But she's returned to her roots, bringing trouble trailing after her.'

'I see.' Raven rubbed her cheek with the pencil end. 'I don't know her like you guys but that suggests she's hurt in some way, coming back to lick wounds.'

'Very possibly,' agreed Isaac. He highlighted the little village of Castle Combe near Bath.

'Or to take revenge,' suggested Damien. 'In her shoes, I would feel angry with the YDA for dumping me in the situation. And from the sounds of it, her family have cut her off too or she doesn't feel able to approach them. She's on her own, nothing to lose now. Maybe she has a score to settle? She and her mother had argued, you said?'

From the twitch of the muscle in his jaw, Nathan could see that Isaac didn't like that idea, though he now would have to consider it.

'She didn't contact her mother and there was no indication that she was there to harm anyone,' said Isaac.

'She's not like that, Damien,' said Nathan. 'Not vindictive.'

'But we don't know her—not any more,' countered Damien.

Isaac looked to Mrs Hardy who nodded reluctantly. 'I'll put the local police on alert,' said Isaac. 'I'll ask them to keep an eye on the Hubbles. If other people are trailing Kate, it would be a wise precaution. OK, guys, I'll leave you to draw up a plan of action. Bring it to me this evening and, when I approve it, you can get moving on this tomorrow morning.'

Isaac picked up his briefcase and chucked Nathan the clicker for the computer display. 'Nathan, the mission is now yours.'

# Chapter 3

It was the leather jacket that proved her downfall. A dark-haired girl slid into the coffee shop booth opposite her and unzipped the tan jacket with a satisfying zurring sound, like a cat's purr. Kate couldn't help looking up with a smile. She never normally made eye contact.

'Nice jacket.' She could almost feel what the buttery soft leather would be like to wear.

'Thanks. It was a present from my boyfriend. I take it this seat is free?' The girl finished a text with a quick tap for send. An American. Most likely here in Bath with her school for the Jane Austen tour, escaping her party for a latte.

Kate pushed her empty cup aside. 'The table's all yours. I was just going.'

Tucking the phone away, the girl grimaced in disappointment. 'Don't rush off because of me.' Glancing towards the door, she gestured to where the street fair was visible outside on the market place. 'Are those stalls always here?' The Georgian colonnade of sandstone pillars that ran through the plaza was giving shelter this weekend to a mixed collection of stalls selling artisan bread, stacks of cheeses, piles of olives, glittery crafts, doughnuts, candy-floss, and pot plants and flowers. Buskers had set up at intervals, one playing a flute, another further off singing Mozart. A man in long striped trousers walked by on stilts, juggling flaming torches. Twilight

was closing in and the stalls were looking pretty, decked out with fairy lights.

‘No. Just this weekend.’ Kate pushed her novel into the side pocket of her backpack. ‘You’ve picked a good time to visit.’

‘Perfect. It’s such a beautiful city—unreal, you know? Any advice what to see?’

Kate couldn’t afford to continue the conversation. Her survival depended on not being remembered. She got up and zipped up her puffa jacket. ‘Just walk around. Bath is like one big museum. Have fun.’

‘Can I buy you another drink?’ The girl seemed strangely keen to prolong the conversation—clingy. Maybe she was just lonely or eager to talk to a native, but an alarm bell went off in Kate’s mind all the same.

‘No time, but thanks for the offer.’ She slid out of the booth.

The girl made to follow her, ignoring the fact she hadn’t started her drink. ‘OK, but could you point me towards the Assembly Rooms, then?’

‘I . . . er . . . don’t know the city that well myself. Sorry.’ Kate took a step towards the front door but stopped abruptly when she saw two boys coming towards her. She knew them instantly: Damien and Kieran. The Yodas—operatives of the YDA—had found her. Spinning round, she headed for the side entrance. She never went anywhere without scoping another way out.

‘Please, wait.’ The girl tried to block her path—another Yoda, Kate now guessed. Kate slid over the table, sending sugar bowl, pepper and salt to the floor.

‘Oy!’ protested the cafe owner as the escape became a chase. Kate sped through the shop and burst out of the side exit only to collide with a fourth Yoda waiting outside. She should have guessed it would be a trap. He made a grab for her.

She had a second to register a vague familiarity as she bumped against him, but couldn't place him. A quick twist and knee to groin incapacitated him, but he still had hold of her backpack. Slipping free of the straps, she ran.

'Kate!' The boy shouted hoarsely as she plunged into the crowds visiting the fair. 'Stop! We're here to help you.'

*Yeah, right.* Glancing behind, Kate put on an extra burst of speed. They were all running after her, even the boy she had thought she had put out of action. Knee must have missed its target. Noticing a well-placed bin by the back wall of a bike shop, she jumped on top and leapt onto the brick ledge. Quickly scoping out her route, she saw she could escape over the connected roofs of a row of two-storey buildings. She pulled herself up by the guttering, scrambled up the tiles, and slid over the apex of the extension at the rear, out of sight of her pursuers. She was grateful to her puffa jacket for preserving the skin on her elbows as she grappled for a firm hold—and slid.

The slates were wet. Not good.

Refusing to scream and give her position away, she carried on skimming down, taking part of the guttering off before she went over the edge. Luck was with her as she landed on the roof of a van parked outside the back of the shop. Mentally sending her apologies to the owner for leaving a dent in the top, she jumped down, lost for a moment as she had no idea which direction would serve her best.

Looking up, she could make out the silhouette of one of her pursuers running along the roof ridge like a circus performer on a high wire. Crap. She set off along the alley heading for the busy shopping street.

'Kate!' From the rattling sound overhead of falling slates, he was sliding down the same path, confirmed by the thump of a body hitting the van roof. Kate didn't look behind, using

the cover of the parked vehicles to hide her flight. Reaching the main road, she darted through the stream of traffic and headed for a large open-air car park on the edge of the shopping centre. Risking a look behind, she saw that she was still being chased.

Had to be one of the Wolves. Those guys never gave up.

*Don't panic. Get to the bus station.* She couldn't get caught. Swerving to her left, she reached the far side of the car park and saw a fence prevented an easy exit. She should have recce-ed her route better—a stupid beginner's mistake. Buses growled past on the far side. Keep calm. All she had to do was get over this, then she could slip on board a coach as it left. Still running along the boundary, she looked for something to use as a springboard to get past the barrier. No one had parked this far from the entrance so there was no handily positioned car. If she wasn't careful, she was going to get cornered.

'Kate, just stop for a second!' The boy was catching up.

Kate swung round and held up her hands in front of her. 'Stay where you are!'

The boy slowed, chest heaving after all that running. It was the one she had kneed. Dark hair, dark eyes, fit. Long and lean like the wolf his type were named after. 'Look, I'll stay where I am if you just listen for a moment.' He took another step forward.

'No! Don't move!' Kate glanced around, anticipating another trap. Were his friends circling her? 'You've got your pack after me.'

'They're not here yet, I promise. And I'm not going to bite.' He gave a self-deprecating shrug, hands spread to show they were empty. 'See: harmless.' He took another step.

Shaking with a poisonous mixture of exhaustion and fear, Kate retreated twice the distance he had moved, edging along the fence. 'I'm not stupid. You're not harmless.'

‘OK: *less harmful*, then, than the other guys after you. Isaac sent my team to bring you in.’

Isaac. She had failed their leader so badly. ‘He did?’ Her voice caught in her throat.

‘He’s been trying to find you.’

Kate knew she should recognize the boy but couldn’t place him. ‘Who are you?’

‘Nathan Hunter. Don’t you remember me?’ He seemed strangely deflated by her reaction, like she had insulted him by forgetting.

‘Nathan? What happened to you? You look really different.’ Few things surprised her any more but his appearance did. She remembered Nathan as a skinny boy in her year, a charming joker and clown, not this broad-chested athlete of a guy who was at least eight inches or so taller than her.

Nathan smiled sourly. ‘I grew. Late and in a hurry, but I got there.’

‘We teased you about that. I’m sorry.’ Kate registered a silver four-wheel-drive entering the car park. Excellent: nice and tall. She willed it to come to the far end so she could use it to get over the fence.

Alerted by Kate’s interest, Nathan glanced over at the car. ‘Look, that’s Raven with our ride.’ He took a step closer. She would let him make that gain but no further. ‘We just want you to get in and we’ll take you to Isaac. He’ll sort everything out.’

‘I don’t think even Isaac can do that.’ Kate flattened herself against the fence, baiting the driver to bring the car right up to her.

Nathan’s hands curled into fists at his side. ‘Were you involved in the murders then?’

‘What?’ Kate momentarily forgot her escape plan. ‘What murders?’

‘We didn’t think so.’ Nathan looked pleased by her reaction. ‘The Meosidos are dead—both of them.’

‘Oh God, no.’ Kate clutched at the fence, knees going weak. She had received so much bad news recently that she shouldn’t be shocked.

With a muttered oath, Nathan made towards her.

‘No! Stay back!’

He halted, like in some bizarre game of What’s the Time, Mr Wolf. ‘I’m sorry, Kate. I didn’t think: they were your friends.’

She shook her head. Neither had been her friend. She had been their tool. ‘How? When?’

‘Isaac will tell you when you see him.’ Nathan beckoned the car over.

Kate’s resolve hardened. If the Scorpions had started killing their own, there was no hope they would spare her. She wouldn’t be safe even with Isaac. The influence of the traffickers stretched far and wide, into the police and government. Isaac played by the rules; she couldn’t afford to if she wanted to live.

First she had to lay a false scent to confuse the Wolf. ‘Where’s my bag?’

‘It’s in the car.’

It was a wrench to leave her bag but she couldn’t think of a way of extracting it and still get away. She eyed the buses. The one heading for Heathrow was about to depart.

‘I’d like it back.’

‘No problem. We’ve not touched your things. Just get in the car.’ He looked over to the vehicle.

The girl at the wheel shifted it closer when Kate showed no sign of moving. Just another metre should do it.

‘Come on, Kate. It’s time you came home.’ Nathan opened the rear door, ready to usher her inside.

Kate sprang onto the bonnet and up to the roof. Jumping

off, she vaulted the fence and landed heavily on the far side. A shaft of pain shot up her leg. Ignoring that, she dodged into the crowd and bolted for the Heathrow bus. She scrambled in just as the door was closing.

'Sorry,' she gasped to the driver. 'Late for my flight.' She thrust money for the fare into his hand, grateful that she had enough in her pocket. She could hear shouting behind her. *Ignore it, everyone.*

'No luggage?'

'My friends put it on already.' Kate took her ticket and waved to a couple close to her age further down the bus who were so absorbed in each other they didn't see. 'Thanks for waiting.'

Muttering about schedules, the driver put the bus in reverse and backed out of the parking bay. Walking down the bus to take a seat behind the couple, Kate looked over at the spot where she had left Nathan. He was gone but she saw the car speeding to the exit. They would have to circle the one way system to catch up with the bus and they could hardly do anything as dramatic as pull it over. They weren't the police. Isaac wouldn't want the local constabulary involved in her recapture. Let the Yodas think they would corner her at the airport.