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# FORGET ME NOT

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*Day One*

## Chapter 1

'Darren, I'm begging you ...'

The words tumbled from her, choked, heartfelt, desperate.

'Don't do this, *please* ...'

Naomi's fingers were wrapped around her boyfriend's trailing arm, praying that he would stop, listen to her, change his mind. But her words had no impact, the muscular young man ripping his arm away and marching purposefully on. Marlands Shopping Centre was crammed with late-night shoppers, many of whom were casting sidelong glances at the couple, but Naomi ignored them, hurrying after her lover. Darren's blood was up, however, his pace relentless. Computer Exchange flashed by, then the pawnbrokers, then Rock Bottom Toys. The exit to Portland Terrace was only fifty yards away and Darren was making good progress in that direction. If Naomi was going to stop him, she had to do it *now*.

Lunging towards him, Naomi gripped Darren's shoulder, arresting his progress, spinning him around. Immediately, his features convulsed with fury, his mouth opening in a snarling curse, but the desperate fifteen-year-old got in first.

'Please, just tell me what you want from me. If I've done something wro—'

'There's nothing I could possibly want from *you*,' the junkie sneered, extracting his arm.

'But you *loved* me,' Naomi insisted. 'You said so a hundred times. I don't understand what's changed.'

'That was then, this is now.'

Angered, the twenty-two-year-old tried to turn away, but Naomi held fast to his arm.

'No, no,' she insisted, fighting tears. 'You *can't* just walk out on me. I've given up everything for you. My family, my friends. You *owe* me.'

'I owe you nothing,' he hissed in response. 'You knew full well what you were getting into.'

'So what was this all about? This whole bloody thing?'

Naomi's voice was piercing, shrill, tears staining her cheeks now, but she didn't care. It was as if the rest of the world didn't exist, her misery blocking out everything else. 'If you didn't care for me, why did you tell me you *did*?'

Darren said nothing, shaking his head witheringly, as if bored by her questions. With each passing second, Naomi felt more ashamed, more humiliated, but still she couldn't give up on him. He was all she had in the world.

'Please, Daz, it's *me*...' she pleaded, softening her tone.

Naomi chanced a step forward, then another. Taking encouragement from his silence, she slipped her slender hands inside his jacket, bringing them to rest on his hips.

'Your best girl.'

Standing on her tiptoes, Naomi raised her lips to his, kissing him.

'I'll be good to you, babes, I promise I will,' she whispered. 'You're everything to me, have been since the moment I first saw you...'

Her boyfriend stared at her for a moment, surprised by this

heartfelt confession. Then slowly the twenty-two-year-old lowered his face to Naomi's and whispered, 'You mean *nothing* to me, bitch. Get that into your thick skull.'

Naomi stared at him, lost for words. Then, before she could react, Darren placed a meaty hand on her chest and pushed with all his might. Taken off guard, Naomi tumbled backwards, tripping over her feet and crashing onto the polished floor. Pain ripped through her elbow as the wind was punched from her lungs, but before she could recover, Darren was in her face again.

'You were useful to me for a while, now you aren't. Got it?'

'Is that *all* I was to you?' Naomi cried, enraged. 'Some mug who'd steal for you, lie for you, just so you could get a fix...'

'Now you're getting it,' Darren smirked.

'But all those things you said to me, all those *promises* you made...' she moaned.

A broad grin spread across Darren's face, amused by her naivety.

'Jesus, you really *are* far gone. Do you think anyone could mean those things about *you*?'

He was laughing, cruel and self-congratulatory, his arrogance, his cynicism clear. How had Naomi not seen this? How had she fallen for this parasite? She wanted to rail at him, to vomit out her fury and disappointment, but no words came, her desolation total.

'Good luck, *babes*,' her ex-lover teased, rising. 'You're gonna need it...'

And with that, he was gone, sauntering out of the shopping centre and out of her life. Scrambling up onto her knees, Naomi watched him go, forlorn, disbelieving. All her hopes, all her dreams had suddenly gone up in smoke and she watched on in horror as her former boyfriend disappeared from view, before tipping her head back and howling out her agony.

*Chapter 2*

The sound that came from him was almost inhuman; an anguished, animalistic scream.

Detective Inspector Helen Grace crouched over the injured teenager, her hands clamped to the bloody hole in his stomach. She was working hard to convince the young man that he was going to be OK, but he was obviously terrified. Despite Helen's words of reassurance, the injured man cried out again, wild and desperate, appealing to his mother, God, *anyone* to end his torment, a thick belch of blood spurting out over Helen's hands as he did so.

'Jason, I need you to look at me. Can you look at me?'

'It hurts so bad,' the teenager moaned, his eyes scanning the heavens.

'I know, but I'm right here with you and I'm going to make sure you're OK. I'm a police officer, I know what I'm doing. You'll be fine...'

To her surprise, the teenager started to weep. Whether this was provoked by the pain racking his body or the realization that the best he could hope for tonight was to be arrested and charged, Helen wasn't sure, but it made no difference. Either way he was a pitiful sight. This boy, no more than seventeen years

old, had wanted to play at being a gangster, but now faced the prospect of bleeding out in a cold, dark street.

'The paramedics are coming,' Helen added soothingly. 'Any minute now, you'll be on your way to South Hants Hospital. They'll have you patched up and back on your feet in no time.'

And then what? Helen knew that the teenager would be surplus to requirements in the criminal fraternity now, even if he *did* somehow manage to avoid prison. He had messed up big time, ambushed whilst ferrying a holdall of cash across town, and would surely pay for his failure, via exile or death. Helen sincerely hoped it would be the former.

Turning, Helen craned round, trying to see past the crowd of onlookers. Despite her comforting words, the teenager was dying in front of her, so it was to her immense relief that she now heard the squeal of brakes, the sound of doors slamming, then two paramedics hurrying into view, pushing through the crowds. Racing over, they crouched down next to the injured teenager, the lead medic slipping on a pair of latex gloves as he relieved Helen of her charge.

'His name's Jason Matthews and he's seventeen years old,' Helen reported, wiping the gore from her hands as she straightened up. 'Significant blood loss caused by two pistol shots to the abdomen. No other signs of injury. The shooters are long gone, so you're safe to move him whenever you like.'

'Let's get cracking then,' the paramedic breathed, nodding his thanks to Helen.

As he spoke, a third paramedic approached, pushing a stretcher, so Helen retreated, giving the emergency team the space they needed to work. Turning, she directed her steps towards the teenager's dented moped, which remained on its side, its engine purring. Slipping on her gloves, Helen reached down to switch it off, before turning her attention to the ripped

holdall that lay close by, now devoid of its precious contents. A few twenty-pound notes had been lost in the struggle, fluttering around the hushed street as the wind picked up. Methodically, Helen chased them down, gathering and bagging the notes in the hope of shedding some light on the hidden faces behind tonight's bloodshed. As she did so, however, she noticed a young boy, no more than eleven, attempting to steal one of the missing notes, which had blown across to the other side of the street.

'I wouldn't if I were you ...' Helen growled.

Startled, the child retreated swiftly, disappearing into the shadows, leaving the abandoned note behind. Helen scooped it up quickly, sealed the bag, and then turned once more to take in the scene. It was a sight that was depressingly familiar, the escalating feud between rival drugs gangs in the city becoming ever more blatant, ever bolder. This was the third such incident in as many weeks, all of them played out in heavily residential areas, all of them involving deadly weapons, be they zombie knives, machetes or pistols. People in the city were desperate, ground down by spiralling living costs, rising crime and family breakdown, and when people were desperate, the dealers thrived. Drugs were *big* business in Southampton right now and competition was rife, which meant only one thing – bloodshed. Helen had the sickening feeling that the gangs in the city were gearing up for all-out war, a development that would have serious consequences for everyone, not least her own unit, which often found itself chasing thugs who shot first and asked questions later. Helen had been quickly on the scene tonight, hearing gunfire as she drove home, the shooters vanishing moments before she arrived. What would have happened if she'd arrived seconds earlier? Would *she* have found herself in the firing line?

Pushing these thoughts away, Helen returned to the paramedics, who were gently lifting the injured teenager onto a

stretcher. This was the human cost of people's desperation, the price of their addiction. Two years ago, this kid would have been at school, messing around with his mates, flirting with girls, behaving like an ordinary teenager. Now he was fighting for his life, blood seeping from his wounds, even as he screamed for his mother.

Would he live to see her again? Or would he die before he made it to the hospital? Helen couldn't be sure. She had done all she could for him, might even have saved his life, but was it enough? Was it *ever* enough? With the situation worsening day by day, with each new outrage presaging further bloodshed, Helen felt increasingly helpless and despairing, as the city she knew and loved prepared to plunge headlong into the abyss.

## Chapter 3

'I'd love to help you, but we just *can't*.'

Naomi stared at the woman, unable to process what she was hearing.

'But this is a homeless shelter, right?' Naomi insisted, trying to keep her fear at bay.

'Yes, but—'

'And I've nowhere else to go. You've *got* to let me in.'

The manager, who called herself Tara, looked concerned, clearly affected by Naomi's distress. For a moment, Naomi allowed herself to believe that the gatekeeper would now soften and relent, ushering her inside, but as Tara looked Naomi in the eye, her expression crestfallen and guilty, the teenager felt the hope die within her.

'I want to, of course I do, but we don't have any beds available. We're completely full.'

Naomi stared at her dumbly. None of this made any sense. How many homeless people *were* there in Southampton? Yeah, you saw plenty of them on the street during the day, but surely there weren't enough to fill this *entire* building?

'There are another couple of hostels you could try,' the woman continued earnestly. 'One on Bridge Street, one on Thurlam Road.'

'I've *tried* those,' Naomi countered, her voice shaking. 'They told me to come here, they said you'd sort me out.'

'Do you have any family who can help?'

Naomi shook her head.

'Friends?'

Naomi dropped her head to her chest. She really didn't want to cry in front of this stranger, but she felt utterly desperate, as if the entire world had turned its back on her.

'Look, perhaps you could come back later?' the hostel manager continued. 'It may be that someone vacates their bed, decides they're better off elsewhere. These things *do* happen occasionally...'

It was a lie and they both knew it. Which is probably why she now reached out and squeezed Naomi's hand, whispering, 'Look after yourself, eh?'

Ten minutes later, Naomi found herself in Hoglands Park, trudging along the faded concrete paths. The skateboarders were out in force tonight, laughing and joking, as their boards clattered up and down the ramps. Their joy, their banter, seemed to mock Naomi, for whom every step was a struggle. The teenager felt robbed of energy, of resolve, of hope, as if nothing she did now would come to any good or make the slightest difference to her situation. Night was falling and she was alone in the city, with nowhere to go. Her misery was all-consuming, her fear palpable, yet the people who passed by seemed oblivious, hurrying to get back to their nice warm homes, as the rain clouds gathered above.

How had it come to this? Six months ago, Naomi had had a roof over her head, three square meals a day and someone to take care of her. It was just her and her mum, had been for years now, and even though they argued like hell, they'd been OK, or at least no worse than anyone else. Then *he* had come along – handsome, charming, manipulative Darren Haines. They'd met