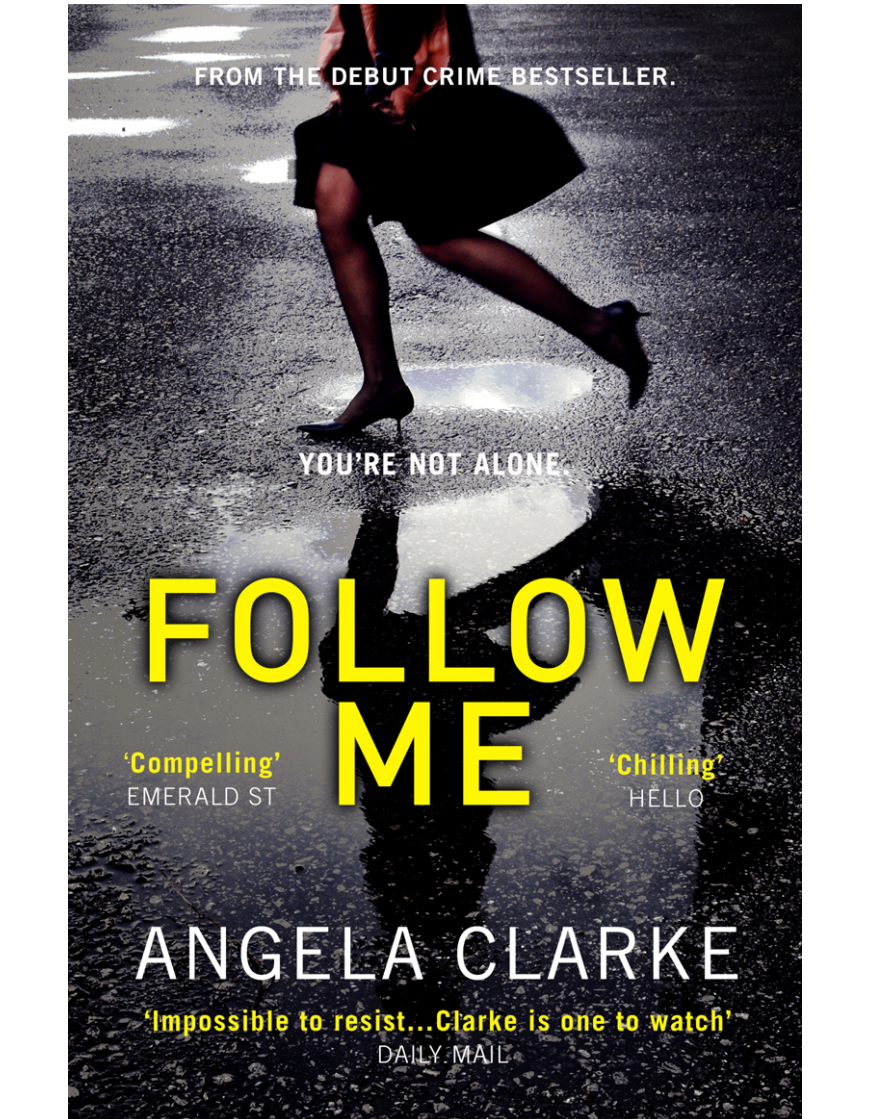




FROM THE DEBUT CRIME BESTSELLER.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE.

FOLLOW ME

'Compelling'
EMERALD ST

'Chilling'
HELLO

ANGELA CLARKE

'Impossible to resist...Clarke is one to watch'

DAILY MAIL

Angela Clarke

Follow Me: The bestselling crime novel terrifying everyone this year

Аннотация

****'We've been waiting for a novel that shows just how creepy and scary social media actually is and this is it. Angela Clarke knows exactly which buttons to press. #creepedmeout' TANIA CARVER**LIKE. SHARE. FOLLOW . . . DI**The 'Hashtag Murderer' posts chilling cryptic clues online, pointing to their next target. Taunting the police. Enthralling the press. Capturing the public's imagination. But this is no virtual threat. As the number of his followers rises, so does the body count. Eight years ago two young girls did something unforgivable. Now ambitious police officer Nasreen and investigative journalist Freddie are thrown together again in a desperate struggle to catch this cunning, fame-crazed killer. But can they stay one step ahead of him? And can they escape their own past? Time's running out. Everyone is following the #Murderer. But what if he is following you? **ONLINE, NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM ...**Amazon RISING STAR Debut of the Month in January 2016!****Readers everywhere can't stop talking about FOLLOW ME: 'Written in the sharpest style, the story races along ... there's a verve to it that's impossible to resist. Clarke is certainly someone to watch!' **DAILY MAIL** 'A disturbing

narrative ... a very contemporary nightmare, delivered with panache' INDEPENDENT'An original idea...Freddie is a magnificently monstrous character' SATURDAY REVIEW, BBC Radio 4'Slick and clever' SUN'A chilling debut' HELLO!'Compelling, a proper page-turner' EMERALD STREET'Smart, snappy and addictive: Angela Clarke is #killingit' Holly Williams, INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY'An appealing flawed female lead readers who enjoyed THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN ... with a dark and filthy wit.' CRIME SCENE MAGAZINE'Pacey, gripping, and so up-to-the-minute you better read it quick!' CLAIRE McGOWAN'Follow Me is literally gripping – the tension levels were forcing me to clutch the book so hard that my hands hurt!' Daisy Buchanan, GRAZIA'Clarke brings dazzling wit and a sharp sense of contemporary life to a fast-paced serial killer novel with serious style' JANE CASEY

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ANGELA CLARKE

Follow Me

The Social Media Murders



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Published by Avon

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd

The News Building

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins 2015

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A catalogue copy of this book is available from the British Library.

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Source ISBN: 9780008165437

Ebook Edition © December 2015 ISBN: 9780008160838

Version: 2017-01-10

Praise for FOLLOW ME by Angela Clarke

'Follow Me doesn't just throw in token references to the internet – its gripping plot hinges on modern technology at every breathless turn. Smart, snappy and addictive: Angela Clarke is #killingit'

Holly Williams, *The Independent on Sunday*.

'Clarke turns social media into a terrifyingly dark place. You won't look at your accounts the same way again. I was hooked and couldn't stop turning the pages. With a memorable and unique protagonist, Clarke explores the phenomenon of (social media) celebrity while tapping into your fears.'

Rebecca Bradley, author of *Shallow Waters*

'Smart, fast paced, fresh and frightening. *Follow Me* is a gripping debut.'

Rowan Coleman, author of *The Memory Book*

'In *Follow Me*, Clarke creates a completely compelling world, and a complex heroine. Freddie is refreshing and fascinating – a credible addition to the crime canon and a great alternative for anyone who has grown frustrated with the male dominated world of the whodunnit. *Follow Me* is literally gripping – the tension levels were forcing me to clutch the book so hard that my hands hurt!'

Daisy Buchanan, *Grazia*

'Follow Me is a well written, taut, absolutely fascinating and scarily good crime novel that is too true to life...It will certainly make you look at social media and Twitter in particular with the utmost scepticism and horror. Outstanding! Clearly the start of a wonderful series, superbly written. I definitely want more.'

Ayo Onatade, *Shots* magazine

'Original, inventive & gripping'

Danny Smith, *West Herts Drivetime*

'We've been waiting for a novel that shows just how creepy and scary social media actually is and this is it. Angela Clarke knows exactly which buttons to press. #creepedmeout'

Tania Carver, author of the *Brennan and Esposito* series

'A fascinating murder mystery and a dark, ironic commentary on modern social media. Very about today.'

Paul Finch, author of *Stalkers*

'Pacey, gripping, and so up-to-the-minute you better read it quick!'

Claire McGowan, author of *The Fall, The Lost* and *The Dead Ground*

'Angela Clarke brings dazzling wit and a sharp sense of contemporary life to a fast-paced serial killer novel with serious style.'

Jane Casey, author of the *Maeve Kerrigan* series

'Fast-paced, tense and playfully witty...A chillingly satirical take on a classic mystery formula. #ReadIt'

Graeme Cameron, author of *Normal*

For the authentically badass Amy Jones

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Chapter 1

FML – Fuck My Life

05:35

Saturday 31 October

From where she stood in the doorway of the bedroom of 39 Blackbird Road, London, E14, Freddie could see blood. A lot of blood. The plastic overall she was wearing rustled in time with her clipped, panicked breaths. The blue walls were splattered with red, as if a food fight had taken place with thin, runny Lidl ketchup. But it wasn't tomato sauce. She could taste it: metallic. It was coating her tongue. Sweat stuck clumps of her thick frizzy hair to her forehead, loosened her glasses on her nose, and opened her pores to the gore. She was absorbing it.

Dread pinpricked her skin. The source was to her right, shielded by the open room door. There was still time to leave. To turn back. To run. She could be home in thirty; pretend none of this had happened. Heavy footsteps fell on the stairs behind her. More people were coming. She had to decide.

Seize the story. It was now or never. Opportunity follows struggle. Fear makes you braver. Despite deriding the inspirational quotes that appear over photos of sunsets and the ocean on Facebook, Freddie was disappointed to discover that when she reached her own life crossroads her brain filled with

nothing but clichés.

To shut herself up, she stepped forward. Reassuring herself: *it was just like the movies. You've seen it all before.* (The time she'd had to lie down after watching a beheading video online didn't count. This was different. She was prepared.) She turned.

The floor undulated under Freddie's feet. The body of what had once been a man was slumped over a desk, his neck cut like deli salami, blood pooling round his bare feet. A computer, its wormhole screensaver winding over the monitor seemed to propel blood toward her. The last thing she heard before the dark red obliterated everything was her childhood friend Nasreen Cudmore's voice.

'Freddie Venton, what the hell are you doing here?'

Fifteen hours earlier

14:32

Friday 30 October

Sat on the windowsill, trying to block out the late lunch drinkers in the Queen Elizabeth pub below, Freddie pressed her phone to her ear. How, in Dalston, in the middle of the country's capital, could this be the only place to get signal in her room? Her new flatmate – what was his name, short guy, wore glasses, worked in ad sales, always out drinking after work. Pete? P – something. Edged into her room, en route to the kitchen, mouthing, 'Sorry'. Must be his day off.

She nodded. Three people in one pokey two-bed flat had seemed a great money-saving plan. But that was five flatmates

ago, when she'd actually known the two girls she shared with. Now she slept in the lounge, the sofa claimed as a bed, and all and sundry crossed her room to get their breakfast cereal. Privacy and mobile reception were for other people.

Freddie gurned at her reflection in the seventies mirror above the faux thirties fireplace opposite. Her brown hair, cut by a mate with kitchen scissors, sprang away from her shoulders like she'd been shocked. Flashes of red hair chalk zigzagged toward her DIY fringe. Her legs, stubbornly plump despite working on her feet and taking more than the recommended 10,000 steps a day, poked out from beneath her nightshirt (a T-shirt that had belonged to a long-forgotten one-night stand). Unless she squished herself in with her hands or a belt, she never looked like she had a waist. Her torso, like her mum's, was square, with the addition of breasts that practically needed scaffolding to restrain them. She wiggled her black plastic rectangular-framed glasses. *Not traditionally beautiful.*

The line in her ear clicked, and the noise of the busy newsroom came through. 'Freddie.' Sandra, the deputy editor of *The Family Paper* online, sounded tense and tired. Business as usual. 'Is there a problem with this week's copy?'

'No. No problem.' Freddie pushed her back into the cold glass, willing the signal to hold. 'It's just I've been writing the Typical Student column for three years now...'

'Time flies when you're having fun.'

Freddie thought of the two years she'd spent on the dole,

clawing her way into glass collecting jobs, churning out pitches, unpaid articles and free features during the day – a blur of coffee, cigarettes and unpaid bills since she graduated. ‘Yes, it is fun. And popular. Didn’t I get over 90,000 hits last week?’

Sandra didn’t deign to confirm or deny this figure.

‘Well I was wondering if, given the column’s popularity, I might get paid for writing it?’

There was silence on the other end. Only the sound of the UK’s busiest and most hated newsroom could be heard. The clamorous grind and grunt as the newspaper was conceived in a hail of profanities all journalists told you was the best-paid gig. The one that Freddie had written one hundred and fifty-six eight-hundred-word columns for, and been paid precisely nothing by.

‘Sandra?’

‘We don’t have the budget. If you could get the column into the print edition then you’d be paid,’ Sandra sighed. Freddie noticed it was more from annoyance than shame.

‘How do I do that?’ *Surely you could do that for me, you lazy cow.*

‘I’ll think about it. I’ll send you some emails.’

Unlikely.

‘Didn’t we try this before?’ Sandra sounded on the verge of dozing off.

We? There’s no we in this, Sandra. You go off with your monthly pay packet, and I sit in my lounge bedroom trying to work out how I’m going to afford to eat this month. ‘Yes.’

‘What did they say?’

‘The student focus was too young for the main paper.’ *Snotty baby-boomers.*

‘The online readers enjoy your stories of debauched students, Freddie. They really go for it.’

They really go for hating on it. Last week she’d written about getting wasted the night before an exam. Total fabrication. Her and her mates had sat in night after night working in fear, as they watched the collapsing economy swallow everything around it like a dead star: paid internships, graduate schemes, jobs, benefits. She might as well have spent her time downing pints of vodka. ‘I graduated two summers ago, I’m not even at university anymore.’

‘It’s up to you, it’s all good experience.’

Experience. Everything was good experience: writing articles for free for a national newspaper, landing a job in Espresso’s coffee chain to pay her bills, pitching, publishing, pumping out all her words for no reward. When was this experience supposed to pay off? When would she have *enough* experience? ‘I’ll send the copy over now.’

‘Let’s do drinks soon.’

They wouldn’t. That was what people with paid jobs said to get rid of you. They didn’t need contacts. They didn’t need any more drags on their time. When they were done, they wanted to go home and wank off in front of their latest box set. Drinks were for those who needed a way in. Drinks were fucking fictional.

Freddie left the phone on the windowsill. She should sleep. What had she managed? Her shift finished at 6.00am. She'd brainstormed ideas on the way home on the Ginger Line. 9.30am first commission came in. There were three in total today, all wanted them filed within a couple of hours, all under a thousand words, only one of them was paid. Thirty pounds from a privately funded online satire site. Gotta love the rich kids. Awash with their parents' money, they didn't have enough business sense to demand that their contributors work for *experience*.

She clicked refresh on her Mac mail. No new emails. Then she clicked refresh again. Then she did the same on Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and Snapchat. Round and round. Waiting. For what? Something. Something big.

She placed her glasses on the coffee table, closed her eyes, and pulled her duvet up. She'd been awake for nineteen, nearly twenty hours. Her flatmate, Pete, whatever, moved quietly through the room, only ruining it when he spilt hot tea on his thumb and swore. She liked him. Good egg. The tug of sleep came easily.

Her head was shaking. No, vibrating. Her hand had the phone and she was answering before her brain caught up.

'Freddie, it's Neil here. Neil Sanderson.'

Neil Sanderson. *The Post*. Broadsheet. She'd met him at the industry awards she'd blagged a ticket to. Built the relationship on Twitter.

'Neil, hi,' she gulped from a cold coffee as she climbed up onto the windowsill. Work brain, work.

‘I’ve taken a look at the stuff you’ve sent me and it’s great.’

Fuck!

‘The writing is sound, the points salient and well argued,’ he continued.

Fuck, fuck!

‘But I can’t use it.’

Fuck. ‘Why?’

‘The thing is, Freddie, you’re a great writer, but that’s not enough these days. The world’s full of great writers and the Internet’s only made it easier to find them. You need that extra something to stand out.’

‘Like what?’ She wasn’t sure she had much left to give.

‘Did you see Olivia Williams’ piece on being kidnapped by Somali pirates? Laura McBethan’s blog on surviving the Air Asiana plane crash? Or Gaz Wagon’s real-time microblogging from the London riots? All excellent reporting. All game changers. All propelled to stardom now.’

‘So I need to get kidnapped, or embroil myself in a riot? I’ll get right onto it.’

Neil laughed. ‘Are you working class?’

She thought of her parents, her mum a dedicated junior school teacher, and her dad a local council worker (retired early, following one too many dazed and confused moments at work), in their leafy suburban home. ‘Er, no.’

‘Shame, that’s quite in at the moment. Not landed gentry?’

What was this, an UsVsTh3m online game – What Social Class

Are You?

Neil continued, 'Because of Made in Chelsea, people are obsessed with the posh.'

'I'm middle class.'

'Middle class like Kate Middleton?'

'Nobody is middle class like Kate Middleton.' My career's over at the age of twenty-three, condemned by my parents' traditional jobs and the good fortune not to have been caught in a natural disaster, thought Freddie.

'And you're not black...'

Did he even remember meeting her? 'I don't see how that's relevant.'

'Just looking for a unique angle.'

'Being black is a unique angle?'

'Pieces written about the ethnic experience are very popular with readers.'

'I'll tell my Asian mates who lived in the same street as me, went to the same school, studied at the same university, and get paid the same as me, to give you a call to share their *ethnic experience*.'

Neil laughed. 'Okay, then you'll have to try the old-fashioned way. Keep getting your name in print, and with a bit of luck you'll land a contract.'

She felt all the air go out of her. 'How'd you do it?'

'Wrote small pieces for a local newspaper and worked my way up till I was on the nationals. I was an apprenticeship lad.'

An apprenticeship: so scarce it'd be easier to book onto a plane that was going to crash. There was silence for a moment.

'You could always consider another career, I pay my accountant a fortune?' Neil sounded like he was only half joking.

'Thanks. I mean, for the advice and that.'

'Anytime, good luck.' He sounded sad. Or guilty. 'You've just got to seize the story, Freddie. Push yourself into uncomfortable situations. Keep your eyes and ears open.' He was trying to be encouraging.

'Sure,' she tried to sound upbeat. 'Something'll turn up.'

After the phone call, Freddie lay looking at the nicotine-stained ceiling. Replaying Neil's words over in her head. *You've just got to seize the story.* If she called her mum she'd only have to fend off her soft pleading to give up this 'London madness' and return to Pendrick, the commuter market town she'd left behind. Her mum didn't understand she wanted to do more than try for a job at Pendrick's local council. She wanted to make a difference. Bear witness. Maybe one day be a war correspondent. She sighed. It was half past four and already getting dark. The night was winning the fight.

Chapter 2

YOLO – You Only Live Once

20:05

Friday 30 October

No tattoos or unnatural piercings are to be visible. Freddie rolled the sleeves of her black shirt up, stopping just below the feet of her Jane and the Dragon tattoo. *Partners are free to wear any black collared shirt and pants they choose, with many proud employees purchasing those bearing Express-oh's logo from the company store.* She tucked the ends of her H&M shirt into her trousers. *All partners are supplied with Express-oh's world-famous apron and hat to wear with pride.* Freddie tightened the yellow apron strings round her waist. As if dealing with douches who wanted extra caramel syrup wasn't enough, they made you dress like a freaking banana.

'Turn that frown upside down!' Dan, the manager of Express-oh's St Pancras branch, appeared in the hallway they called the staffroom. His fake-tanned skin an alarming orange next to his yellow Express-oh's uniform. He resembled a Picasso fruit bowl.

Freddie punched down the overstuffed bin bags that were shoved under the tiny kitchen surface. *Ten Signs You Hate Your Boss (mental note: look for amusing gifts to accompany pitch).* She lifted the bag she knew contained the expired best-before-date

produce. 'Bin's full, Dan,' she said. 'I'll just pop this one in the wheelie outside.'

'Quick, quick, customers to bring joy to,' Dan said without looking up from his stocktake clipboard.

All Espress-oh's food waste is to be incinerated. Clutching the bag, Freddie left through the staff-only station exit and stood in the underground area that housed the bins and a healthy population of rats. She let her eyes adapt to the dim light and whistled. There was slight movement from the far corner. 'Kath, that you?' she called.

An elderly woman in the remains of a tattered skirt and layered jumpers, her hair matted and grey down her shoulders, edged into the light. She smiled a yellowing grin at Freddie. 'Nice evening for it.'

'Bit colder than when we met in July, hey? Do you remember?' Kathy was getting increasingly confused, and Freddie had read with senility cases it was important to reiterate reality.

'Course I do,' said Kathy. 'Me and Pat asked for one of your cigarettes.'

'That's right,' said Freddie. 'I was on my break. And what did you tell me about the old days?' She glanced over her shoulder to check no one was following her out.

'Oh! All the fun we used to have! The girls and I. This was our patch,' Kathy smiled.

'That's right' said Freddie. *Until the regeneration tidied up the safe spots where you and the other ex-sex workers slept rough, and*

turned them into crowdfunded hipster coffee shops. She couldn't write about Kath and the others and risk alerting the private security guards to their whereabouts, but she could *recycle* food that was destined for the bin. 'Here you go.' She held the bag out. There was a nasty cut on Kathy's hand. 'What's that?'

'Just some drunk kids. They took my sleeping bag.' Kathy rooted through the packets. 'Any of those funny cheese and grape ones today? They're my favourites.'

'Did you get the sleeping bag back?' Freddie tried to get her to concentrate.

'Nah,' she hooked out a sandwich and put it in her pocket.

It was bitterly cold out: what was Kathy sleeping under? 'Did you report it to the police?'

Kathy laughed. 'They don't care 'bout likes of me, dearie. No bother, though. I'm just A-okay.' She squeezed Freddie's arm, and Freddie felt how thin her fingers were. 'I'll make sure the other girls get their share.' She bundled the bag up.

Kathy shuffled back toward the fire escape door Freddie propped open on her way into work. Freddie resolved to find a sleeping bag on Amazon and bring it in for her. She'd roped in her sympathetic work colleague, Milena, and they took it in turns to make these illicit drops. 'Me or Milena will see you tomorrow,' Freddie said. 'If Dan's out the way, I'll try and get you some hot drinks, yeah?'

The old lady held up her hand to signal goodbye.

'Here, Kathy, hang on,' she jogged over to press the last of her

fags into the old lady's hand.

'Pat'll be pleased,' she said.

'Yes,' nodded Freddie, though she knew Pat had been found dead of exposure at the end of September. The authorities weren't interested: the NHS and homeless charities she'd spoken to were too stretched to come here and hunt out one elderly, senile woman. Kathy had far outlived the average age a homeless person was expected to reach. She was a tough old bird. 'Try and keep warm, yeah?' Freddie turned and headed back toward work. *A Terrible Waste: how food destined for the bin could save lives.*

Out on the floor she nodded at Milena, whose pony-tailed long dark hair and high Bulgarian cheekbones incredulously worked with Espress-oh's uniform. Would she agree to an interview? *An Immigrant Truth: two jobs, business school, and sharing a room with three others – how London betrayed its silent workforce.*

'Freddie?' Dan had fixed her in his sights. He hadn't seen anything had he?

She watched as he dug his hand into the dusty beans that formed an interactive display along the till.

'Never forget, these are magic beans.'

Nope. He just wanted to share some more inane motivational drivel. Behind him, as the customers inspected the soggy sandwiches, Milena smacked the palm of her hand repeatedly against her forehead.

20:19 Nine hours and forty-one minutes to go. How Childhood Fairy Tales Set Generation Y Up To Fail.

04:43

Saturday 31 October

Eight Times People Actually Died of Boredom. A WhatsApp chat alert flashed on Freddie's phone, which was under the till out of the sight of customers.

A white speech bubble from Milena, who was outside taking a fag break, read: 'Dan is', and then there was a series of smiling poo emojis.

Freddie typed back: 'Espress-woes.'

'Are you in charge?'

Shoving her phone into her pocket, she looked up to find a drunk in a pinstripe suit, swaying in front of her. His eyes pink.

'Look!' He prodded at the fruit toast he'd placed on the counter. 'This slice has no raisins. This one all the raisins.'

She waited...

'Is not right,' he stabbed again, catching the edge of the paper plate and flipping one of the half-eaten slices onto the Almond Biscottis they were pushing this month.

You've got to be kidding? As she reached out to retrieve the toast, his hand – cold and damp – grabbed hers and she was pulled across the counter toward him.

'Or you could give me your number?' His stale beer breath buffeted her face.

She scanned the cafe for help. A Japanese couple, heads down, earphones in, oblivious. The gossip women who'd been here for hours had left. Dan was in the stockroom. She was on her own.

‘Giz a kiss,’ the drunk lunged.

Shame burned up her body and then ignited into anger. Wrenching her hand free, she sent the fruit toast flying toward him. ‘Get lost!’

Alerted by the disturbing sound of an employee raising their voice, Dan hustled into the cafe, oozing toward the drunk. ‘Sir, I’m so sorry. There’s obviously been a misunderstanding. I’m sure Freddie here can help.’

What the... ‘Are you suggesting I prostitute myself for a piece of sodding fruit toast?’

Milena swung through the glass door – had she seen?

‘Our Freddie, ever the joker!’ Dan laughed like a screaming kettle.

‘Sir, I make you some new toast, please, have a seat. I bring it over.’ Milena’s megawatt smile blindsided the pink-eyed man.

‘Sure,’ he swayed.

‘The customer is always right,’ Dan glared at Freddie.

How the hell was this her fault? ‘But he...’

‘I don’t care, Freddie. You need to see the positives in all customers. Visualise them as your close personal friend.’

‘That’s what I was sodding worried about!’

‘Espress-oh partners don’t use language they wouldn’t feel comfortable saying in front of their mothers,’ Dan stage whispered.

Flinging her arm in the direction of the drunk who was now face down asleep on the counter, a puddle of drool spreading

toward the discarded fruit toast, Freddie screamed: 'If my mum was here she'd tell that dirty bastard to fuck off!'

'Enough! Take your break! Now!'

Furious, she smacked her palms hard against the glass door and powered toward the train platforms. A few hardy souls were bundled, with suitcases, on the cold metal benches, waiting for the first Eurostar. All this money regenerating the station and they forgot to put doors on? Yet another deterrent to Kathy and her homeless mates. Barely more appealing than metal spikes. She was heading to the taxi rank where she could bum a cigarette off a cabbie, when she saw her: Nasreen Cudmore.

They'd played together virtually every day since they were six, until...she couldn't deal with thinking about that now. Eight years ago. Must be.

Nasreen looked the same. No, different. There was no puppy fat, and she was tall too, like her dad. Five foot eight, at least. She'd cut that ridiculous waist-length black hair. It now hung in a sleek curtain to her shoulders. Perfect against her milky coffee skin. With both pride and pain, Freddie acknowledged Nasreen Cudmore had grown into a beautiful woman.

What the hell was she doing here at this time in the morning? Wearing a hoodie and jeans, Nasreen was stood with a group. All dressed casually. Most looked to be in their twenties or thirties. One guy, slightly older, early forties, broad shoulders, Bruce Willis buzz cut, was wearing a blue down puffa jacket zipped up over a tight white T-shirt. Friends' night out? One of those

godawful-sounding corporate away-days?

Freddie remembered seeing Fiona Cogswell at a pop-up Shoreditch tequila bar. Among the inane drivel about what every Pendrick High alumnus was now doing – mostly out of work management consultants, or pursuing worthless PhDs until the economy recovered – there'd been one lime wedge of interest: Nasreen Cudmore had joined the police.

She looked again at Nasreen's group: men, all with regulation-neat haircuts. Police. Undercover? A bust? *Seize the story*. Neil's advice echoed in her head. Behind her, Dan was waiting for a grovelling apology. A plan formulated in Freddie's mind.

Thrusting her cap into her back pocket, she approached her old school friend. 'Nasreen! Oh my God! It is you!'

Nasreen startled, turned toward her, taking in the yellow apron and the red hair. 'F...Freddie?'

Feeling awkward and teenage again, Freddie kept smiling. Up close she could see a new hardness in Nasreen's face.

'Cudmore?' The older guy with the puffa body interrupted. He clearly didn't want Freddie here. She was onto something.

'Sorry, can't stop.' Nasreen looked embarrassed.

Oh no you don't. 'Are you on Facebook, or Twitter?'

'Er...no.'

Because you're a policewoman. 'Gmail? Google Plus – you on Google Plus?'

'Yes. I think.' Nasreen looked over her shoulder as the body-warmer guy grunted.

‘Awesome: what’s your email? Give me your phone so I can type mine in?’ She had one shot to get this right.

Nasreen, looking increasingly peeved, handed over her iPhone.

‘Here, you write yours in mine.’ Freddie pulled her phone from her back pocket, knocking her cap to the floor. Passing her phone to Nasreen, she turned to retrieve her baseball cap. At the same time, she opened up Nasreen’s Google+ app, clicking through: Menu > Settings > Location Sharing On. Years of following exes round the Internet was paying off. She clicked into contacts as she turned back: adding her name, number and email. She pressed call.

Her phone, which was in Nasreen’s hand, vibrated.

‘Now I’ve got your number.’ She beamed at Nas as she held the phone out to swap.

‘Great,’ Nasreen mustered a weak smile.

‘Who was that?’ the body warmer asked Nasreen as Freddie walked away.

‘No one. Just someone I used to know...’

Sorrow settled under Freddie’s hat as she pulled it on. She was nothing to Nasreen anymore. Perhaps that made it easier? Unlocking her own phone, she opened Google+. Little thumbnails of her friends appeared on the map. There was Milena, pinpointed in St Pancras station, and there, squashed up against her, was a new blank profile picture: Nasreen Cudmore.

Gotcha!

Chapter 3

#FF – Follow Friday

04:59

Saturday 31 October

Freddie slowed her pace and rubbed her eyes, hoping her mascara would smudge. Could you think yourself pale? One arm across her stomach, she half fell through Espress-oh's door.

Dan and Milena looked up.

'You okay?' Milena put down the hot panini tongs.

'I know why I lost my temper. Not feeling great.' In the corner of her eye she saw Nasreen and her colleagues exit the station and head to an arriving police van. Dan's face was a hesitant scowl. 'Pretty sure it's just my period, but I've been sick, everywhere...'

Three...two...

'Sick!' Dan bowed toward her.

'You don't think it's like that norovirus case you told us about from the Kuala Lumpur branch?' she slurred into his panicked face.

Dan was surprisingly efficient when under pressure. He had her, and her coat, out the cafe in under a minute.

'Not sure I can walk.' Freddie bent double, as Dan tried to stuff her apron under her jacket. He kept glancing round, as if a health and safety inspector might leap out from behind one of the

trees lining the station approach. Beads of sweat ran in orange rivulets over his forehead.

‘I’ll get you a taxi!’ he stage whispered.

‘I’m broke.’

‘Here!’ Dan pulled notes from his wallet and thrust them at her. ‘We have to get you away from here. I mean home.’ He stuck his arm out as a black cab drove toward them and scooped her into the back. ‘Dalston, she lives in Dalston.’

Dan, thankful disaster had been averted, watched as the taxi disappeared past the lights. Freddie saw him take his sanitizer bottle from his pocket and squirt his hands. *You could never be too safe.*

Inside the cab, Freddie pulled her phone from her pocket and followed the flashing Nasreen Cudmore as she leapfrogged across London. ‘Actually, mate, looks like we’re heading toward The City, no, past that, Canary Wharf. Can you take me there? Cheers.’

Bright coloured lights danced across the Thames, as the night sky airbrushed out the churning grey filth of the river. Freddie didn’t look up. She kept her eyes on the faceless silhouette that represented Nas. It had stopped. Had she lost connection? They wound past the glowing phallic towers of Canary Wharf. Cranes, anchors, and industrial cogs – ghostly reminders of the docks’ past – punctuated the new gated developments covering the area. They were almost upon the symbol. Freddie looked up as the flats gave way to rows of dockers’ cottages. ‘Think it’s the next

right, mate.'

She needn't have worried. The taxi turned into a street of Victorian houses ablaze with activity. A police van, that had presumably carried Nas and her team, was parked behind a police car blocking the road.

'Can't go any further than this, love,' said the cabbie.

'This is fine. Cheers.' She passed Dan's banknotes through the window. There was no sign of Nas, or any of her plain-clothes colleagues. 'What road's this, mate?' Freddie pocketed the change. That'd get her a drink in the pub later.

'Blackbird Road.' The cabbie turned to reverse back the way they'd come.

A white tarpaulin canopy was erected over the entrance of one of the houses. Incident tape flapped in the breeze. People were stood in dressing gowns, and in coats over pyjamas, phones up taking photos.

Residents of a quiet Docklands street were shocked to discover that... What was this? Break-in? Domestic? A uniformed policeman, early fifties, balding, guarded the door. A white van was parked opposite. Freddie watched as a man plucked a plastic boiler suit from the back and pulled it over his trousers and shirt. Forensics.

'What the...?' the door policeman shouted.

Freddie looked up to see a sandy-haired, skinny policeman, a few years older than her, stumble out of the property and spew all over the path.

‘Heavy night?’ shouted a voice.

The growing crowd of onlookers laughed. *Are Millennials Just Not Cut Out For Work?* The forensics guy tutted, before ducking under the police tape, sidestepping the puking copper, and walking into the house. No badge, no questions, no problem.

Seize the story. Push yourself into uncomfortable situations.

Freddie walked with purpose to the white van and peered inside. Voila! She took a plastic-wrapped boiler suit from a box in the back and pulled it over her clothes. *Disposable Jumpsuits: the Ideal Freelance Uniform?*

‘You stay out here and I’ll get something to clean this up,’ the older cop said as he hauled the pale young lad to his feet. He disappeared inside as Freddie reached the gate. She just needed to get past PC Spew.

His pale blue eyes focused on her as she ducked under the tape. She felt him take in the rustling plastic boiler suit and stop...on her dyed red hair. Shit. Bloody hair chalk. She kept going. Imagining she was walking into a nightclub, like she had for years as an underage teenager. *Behind The Incident Tape: Inside an Active Crime Scene.*

‘Evening, ma’am,’ PC Spew said.

‘Evening.’ She stopped in front of him. Nerves rippled through her body. ‘Cold night for it?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ He looked like he might be about to say something else, and then he nodded and stood aside. ‘You must be on the new computer team, ma’am. It’s upstairs.’

‘Thank you.’ She avoided his gaze. The door closed behind her and she was alone in a small laminated-floor hallway. In front of her a patterned glass door made a collage of the people behind it. The sound of a kettle boiling. The stir of a teaspoon in a cup. Someone crying? Must be the kitchen. Black coats hung on hooks at the bottom of the stairs. It was like the man said: what she wanted was upstairs. *In the early hours of Friday morning a dawn raid was carried out...*

There was movement above. She figured she didn’t have long. In and out. That was the plan.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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