

When someone inside your house wants you dead
And no one believes you...

DON'T LET HER STAY

NICOLA SANDERS

An unputdownable psychological thriller with a breathtaking twist

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Contents

[Prologue](#)
[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

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Prologue

‘Don’t wake up, please don’t wake up.’

Begging my four-month-old baby to sleep -- or stay asleep -- has never worked before. God knows I’ve tried. So I don’t know why I think this time will be any different.

But begging is all I have.

I’m holding her so close to my chest I have to keep checking that I’m not hurting her. But I can feel her stir, a sure indication that she’s about to wake up. If she wakes up, she will cry because she always does.

And if she cries, we will die.

I’m doing everything I can to get us out of here alive. I am so close. I’m at the front door. I open it and slip out as quietly and quickly as possible.

It’s dark out here. So quiet that even the sound of gravel crunching under my feet gives me away. But I can’t slow down now. We only have seconds. I run to the Range Rover and crouch beside the back wheel, my fingers feeling for the spare key I keep up there. When I press the button, the car flashes with a beep that may as well be the blare of a trumpet. I stop, my heart pounding, and listen. Nothing. The interior light comes on when I open the door and my hand shoots out to turn it off. I fumble to put Evie down in the baby car seat. Her eyes flick open like a doll.

Then her mouth opens. Wide.

‘Please don’t cry, Evie, please, baby, please don’t cry.’ I hold my breath.

Evie yawns.

I close the door gently but I'm shaking so much that the key slips from my hand. I drop to the ground and feel around for it in the dark.

Please don't cry. Please don't cry. I feel the plastic square under my fingers.

Thank god. I've got it. I stand up just as light blasts out of an upstairs window, illuminating the car.

I can't help it. I turn around and look up at the house even though it costs me a second I can't spare. It's coming from the nursery. It's the only light on in the house.

My hand flies to my mouth when she appears at the window, slamming both palms flat against the glass, dark smoke rising behind her.

Our eyes meet.

I turn away, lock myself in the car and drive.

Chapter One

Three weeks earlier.

Oscar gives a lazy bark just as I hear a van drive onto the gravel. The bark is only for show. We both know that he'd let an intruder walk right in, wag his tail at the thief and put his paws on his chest. He's an old caramel Labrador who loves everybody and everything, even the neighbour's cat.

I step away from the cot to the window. It's the postman. He walks up the steps to the front door and seconds later I hear the clank of the door flap. There's a letterbox at the gate, but when it's just me in the house — which is the case most days — I like to leave the gate wide open. It feels less lonely that way, knowing anyone could drive right up to the house without having to ring the intercom. Richard disagrees. He says it's not safe, which invariably makes me roll my eyes. This is a charming but rather sleepy village, and this gorgeous country home is like a fortress. When we first moved in, Richard was so concerned about Evie and me being isolated that he had locks installed on every window.

I look down at Evie asleep in her cot, her limbs out like a starfish, and I pull the blanket over her and kiss her soft pink cheek. She doesn't even stir. If someone had told me even a year ago that the arrival of the post would be the most exciting thing to happen to me *all day*, I would have laughed. But now, as I walk quickly down the stairs, I feel a little thrill of anticipation that there might be something for me among all the letters and bills addressed to Richard. A magazine maybe? The latest issue of Homes &

Gardens? Now that's another one I would have laughed at a year ago. Not anymore. I could spend a good hour, maybe even two if I paced myself, in the rocking chair in the nursery, flicking through on-trend bathrooms, country conservatories — perhaps we should do that next, after the kitchen makeover. Except that I've done nothing about the kitchen makeover. The pictures I cut out are still there, their corners curling on the magnetic board I set up for the project in a spare room I've claimed as my office. Richard has his own study downstairs, a large room with an oversized oak desk, shelves that take up the entire back wall, and French doors that open onto a patio. He rarely uses his study. He doesn't like to bring work home.

My office is less grand, just a room with a desk and a filing cabinet where I keep my private documents. I decorated it with pretty wallpaper and got Simon, our gardener, to hang the large magnetic board on the wall since Richard wouldn't know which end of the hammer to hit a nail with.

I had big plans for this house back then. I was pregnant, past the nausea stage and deliriously happy from whatever hormones were coursing through me. I still believed, foolishly, that I'd have the energy to do it all and that having a baby would be a walk in the park, except that my beautiful baby doesn't sleep. I mean, she does. She takes about fifty million naps a night, and in between she wakes up and cries until she gets her feed. These days the brutal reality is that some mornings I'm too tired to wash my hair.

I bend down to pick up the post, Oscar by my side, and let out a sigh as I flick through the pile. I guess I'll have to find something else to pass the time because there's no mail for me today.

I put the bundle of mail on the console table, all neatly in order of size — Investors' Chronicle at the bottom, bills and smaller items at the top. There's a large letter from Amsterdam which I assume is related to the conference Richard is attending in three weeks. I stick that at the bottom of the pile. A letter slips to the floor. I pick it up and turn it over in my hand. Like all the others, it's addressed to Richard, but this one is handwritten and it's pretty clear from the handwriting that it's from a woman. I flick it over but there's no return address, no indication of who it's from. I immediately think it's from Isabella, beautiful Isabella, Richard's ex-fiancée. I know they're in touch, although why she would send him a handwritten letter is a mystery. Maybe it's an invitation to an event. A special invitation. To a special event. Just for him. No plus one, please.

Suddenly I'm dying to know. I turn it over between my fingers. I consider using the old steam trick to open it, although I suspect it doesn't work anymore.

A gust of cold air makes me jump.

'Hi, Mrs A.'

'Roxanne!' I laugh, clutching the envelope to my chest. 'You gave me a fright. Is that the time already?'

She leans her bicycle against the wall outside and walks in, closing the front door.

'Sorry for scaring you,' she says, pulling back the hood of her coat. 'I should have rung the doorbell. I thought you'd be upstairs with Evie.'

I wave a dismissive hand in the air. 'Evie is fast asleep. It's been at least fifteen minutes. I think it's a record. I was checking the post.'

'Okay, well, I'll get started then, Mrs A.'

I've asked Roxanne fifty times to call me Joanne but she never does. I'm always Mrs A even though she must be around twenty-five, twenty-eight maybe, which makes me only five or so years older than her.

She hangs her coat in the coat room, which is a small room off the hall where we keep umbrellas, raincoats, wellies... She strides straight through the double doors that lead to the large kitchen to get the trolley of cleaning products from the pantry slash utility room. I am right behind her.

'Do you want some tea before you start?' I ask this every time and more often than not, she says no. She must think I've got memory problems. Or that I'm hard of hearing.

'No, thank you,' she says. 'I'll get on with it.'

'I'm thinking of getting a bicycle,' I blurt before she has time to walk away. It's not true. What would I do with one? Stick the cot on the back wheel? But I'm dying to talk to someone. I feel like I haven't spoken to anyone in days, although that's not strictly true. I talk to Simon, although we're still in winter so he doesn't spend much time here at the moment. He only comes once or twice a week, mostly to tidy the grounds and get things ready for spring. I speak to Richard of course, every evening, but Richard works long hours and lately doesn't even come home in time for dinner. He owns a boutique investment bank and along with his managing partner, they are working on a new product, some big new finance portfolio thing. He tried to explain it to me but I didn't understand a word of it. I blamed it on baby brain.

‘What do you think I should get?’ I ask Roxanne.

She shrugs. ‘There’s a bike shop in Chertsey. You could ask them.’

I nod. ‘Yes. Good idea.’ I listen for Evie and satisfied that all is quiet, I pick up the kettle and raise it in Roxanne’s direction. ‘You’re sure?’

‘I’m sure,’ she says.

‘Okay!’ I pop a peppermint tea bag in my mug and lean back against the counter. I watch as she gets her cleaning things together. I try to think of something else to say, but my brain is like mashed potato.

Sometimes I wonder what on earth we were thinking, moving to such a big house miles away from town. I know how lucky I am, living in this beautiful home. It has six bedrooms, five bathrooms, a drawing room *and* a morning room, views for days, a basement where Richard keeps his most precious wines and that he’s threatening to turn into a home cinema or something, an enormous kitchen and a pantry larger than the flat I used to live in back in London. All I ever want to do is to sit in the kitchen with Evie on my lap, drink tea and chat to Roxanne. Some days I find myself following her around the house as she works, me with Evie in my arms, just to have someone to talk to.

Roxanne pops her earbuds in her ears and taps the screen on her phone. I swallow a sigh. I get the message. ‘I’ll leave you to get on then,’ I say, even though she can’t hear me. I pour the boiling water on the tea bag and walk with my mug back into the hall.