

## Call Time

### Chapter 1

She was about thirty metres ahead, turning into a side street, tottering slightly on her high heels. The rain had eased off, but the wind was cold after the crowded pub and she pulled her red coat tight around her. Above, a quarter-moon sailed between shreds of black clouds. Below, no one was around except her.

And him.

“Rosie,” he muttered. “Rosie, Rosie. Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to walk home alone?”

He followed carefully, keeping to the shadows, fighting the impulse to get close. Of all of them, Rosie was his favourite. Rosie of the M&S knickers and Abba collection, of chocolate digestives dunked in tea. Rosie of the soft curves and gentle smile who slept on her back with her arms spread wide. Did she know he watched her while she was sleeping? Did she know he was following her now? Was this solitary walk of hers another way of inviting him in?

At the junction she hesitated and he hung back, understanding her dilemma. Cut through the alley to the ring road, with home just beyond the overpass? Or take the long way round through well-lit streets?

“Long way round, Rosie,” he told her. “Always play it safe.”

Ignoring him, she leant against the wall and took off first one shoe then the other, massaging her feet as she made up her mind. Then she looked around, squinting drunkenly in all directions, missing him as he pulled back round the corner. Satisfied, she fixed her buckles, caught her balance, and headed for the

alley.

“Bad move, Rosie,” he said. “You don’t know who might be in the neighbourhood.”

The alley was dim even in daytime: narrow, with high brick walls covered in moss and graffiti, the ground an uneven mix of broken concrete and dirt. A street lamp lit each end, but the middle section was layered with shadows and as he hurried forward to keep her in sight a pebble spun away from his shoe and hit the wall, its echo reverberating.

She stopped. He stopped too and held his breath, watching her head tilt as she listened. After a few moments she started again and he followed, trying to time his footsteps to hers. But she was too drunk to walk evenly and when she staggered, breaking the rhythm, his shoe crunched alone, loud in the darkness.

“Who’s there?” she called, her voice tight and high.

He didn’t answer and after a second she moved off again, walking quickly through the shadows. He sped up, but she broke into a run, her breath catching in her throat with fear, and suddenly he felt a need to stop this farce. With some it didn’t matter. Some were prick teases – luring him in with their badly-drawn curtains, their open windows, their unlocked doors – then acting as though he were a total stranger. But not Rosie. Rosie was kind, easy-going ... lonely. Rosie would understand.

“Rosie,” he called.

She looked back. She was near the end of the alley now and a car from the highway beyond raked light across her as it passed, a splash of red in the darkness.

“Rosie.”

---

But instead of stopping she ran faster, a moan escaping from her mouth, her coat flapping open, arms flailing for balance. She was almost at the main road, busy even at this time of night, the roar of traffic promising safety. Grabbing the handrail to keep her balance she swung herself out onto the cycle path, glancing back at him as she curved round – and tripped on the uneven ground. Her hand tightened round the rail, but her fingers slipped on the damp metal, momentum pulling her forward. More car lights slid over her, revealing her eyes fixed on his, her mouth open in an O of surprise. There was a screech of brakes, a soft thump, and a car skidded to a halt.

Jon stared, frozen, as the driver's door opened and footsteps came round to the bonnet. A woman started screaming. Then he was caught in the headlamps of another car, blinded as they stopped on his face. Coming to his senses, he turned and ran away.

---

## Chapter 2

Katie stirred the orange gloop that simmered on the stove then ran her finger along the spoon and licked it. Hmm. Perhaps this hadn't been such a good idea after all. Still, it was too late to start again now, and it was the thought that counted. David would arrive starving after a long journey and his favourite meal would be ready for him to tuck into. She smiled, remembering what he called her: OK then, both his favourite meals. Talking of which, it was time she put the gloop in the oven and herself in the bath.

She looked round the kitchen cum dining room, checking everything was ready. It was certainly much tidier than usual, the windowsills dusted and cleared of all but plants, her students' papers pushed to one end of the large wooden table, her mum's old Royal Doulton set out ready. She turned her gaze back to the papers: fine for a casual meal with Stef, perhaps, but hardly right for tonight. Stepping forward to move them she saw her handbag, previously hidden by the pile. So that was where she'd left it. The clasp was open and she reached automatically to shut it, then stopped. She hadn't touched it since she'd come back from the bank. And then the clasp had been firmly closed.

Suspicion stirring, she left the bag where it was, opened the back door and looked out into the fading afternoon light. Kids were beginning to stalk the pavements, little witches in pointed black hats jostling for position with spidermen and ghosts in flapping white sheets. But there was no sign of Stef's car. She shut the door again, belatedly thinking to lock it, and went slowly back to the table. Then she reached into the bag.

She knew as soon as she touched her purse. This morning it had been fat

with ten and twenty pound notes, now the leather sagged, loose and empty. Running her fingers inside the wallet she pulled out a single tenner and a thin strip of paper, torn from one of her student's essays.

"IOU," it said in Stef's handwriting. "Next *Café Tierra* on me."

"Jesus, Stef." Katie said quietly. "Jesus Christ Almighty."

She pulled out a dining chair, knees suddenly weak, and sat down. Putting the note on the table she stared at it with unfocused eyes and let out a long sigh. She'd known things were bad – known Stef was digging herself ever deeper into trouble – but to steal..? From her sister..? Did she really think she could take over a hundred quid and pretend an IOU slip made it OK?

A blur behind the note materialised into a bottle of red wine, standing ready for the evening, and Katie poured herself a large glass. Holding it with both hands she took a large gulp followed by a slower sip which she worked around her mouth as she thought about what to do. Finally she swallowed and reached for her mobile.

*I've just seen what you've done, she texted, and it's the last straw. Come round on Monday night for that Talk or I'm going to the police.*

Her finger hovered over the letters. She wanted to put more. She wanted to rant, rave, blame. She wanted to fill the screen with *HOW COULD YOU* in six foot high capitals. But she knew Stef. The more she said, the more Stef would think she could win her round. And this time Stef had to know she was serious; had to know she would follow through. She pressed send. Then she took another slurp of wine. Then, after a moment's thought, she turned off her mobile. David would call on her landline and Stef had spoilt things quite enough already.

#

Drying herself as she walked from the bathroom to bedroom, Katie threw her towel on the bed then examined herself in the long mirror on the wall. Her suntan had faded, but she was still a good colour, while a trip to the hairdresser's had topped up the copper streaks South Africa had put in her hair. She'd do. Moving to the dressing table, she sipped at her wine as she looked over David's gifts, hesitated, then picked up a green bead necklace. Stringing it around her neck, she examined herself once more. Actually, it looked pretty good like that, uncluttered by clothes. Maybe she'd keep it on when they –

The phone rang. Thoughts full of David, she moved quickly to the extension on her bedside table. He was due at Heathrow about now, probably calling to touch base before he got the train. But as her hand touched the receiver, she paused. What if it were the weirdo? The phone rang again as she wavered. One more and the answerphone would cut in. David wouldn't leave a message – he never did – and suddenly the idea of missing out on him now, after so long, when he was so close, made answering worth the risk. Quickly, she picked up.

“Hello?”

Silence. For a gut-sinking second she tried to kid herself it was a bad connection. Then the breathing started.

Reaching for her dressing gown she pulled it on, tempted to hang up. She didn't need this, not tonight. But then she remembered her argument with Stef and hesitated. Heavy breathers weren't all twisted baddies, she'd insisted, any more than arrogant principals and over-sexed students – or alcoholic step-sisters, come to that. She faced up to them, so why should this be any

different? Squaring her shoulders, she took the plunge.

“The breathing is all very well,” she said, “but rather boring. Why don’t you talk to me instead?”

Her voice was almost normal. Perhaps a little thin, but not bad considering. It was convincing at least, because the breathing stopped and after a pause he said in a mildly distorted, but almost timid voice:

“Hey.”

Well, that was manageable. “Hey yourself.”

“How ...” he cleared his throat. “How’re you doing?”

“Good.” She waited. He waited back and she was surprised at how strongly etiquette pushed her to ask the same question. Instead she made a noise, coming out with a little grunt of impatience. Immediately he said:

“I, er, thought I’d catch you before you went out.”

“I’m not going –” she stopped. Damn.

“Oh. Well. That’s good.” He carried on quickly before she could disagree. “I’m sorry about the other day.”

“The other day?” She was bewildered. All these phone calls yet he was sorry about a specific day?

“Early morning, on your mobile. Bad time.”

“Yes.” He hadn’t done it since, but it had worried her. What if he phoned when she was with the students? “Please don’t. Not again. Not on my mobile.”

“OK.” It came out chirpy and immediately she understood her blunder. She’d just given him implicit permission to phone her landline. Jesus, what an idiot. “So,” he continued, “You’re staying in tonight?”

There was no tone to it, nothing menacing, yet his very mildness seemed

to imply a threat. A shiver wriggled around her spine and she pulled her gown close.

“No,” she said on instinct, then, “maybe.” Perhaps she should tell him about David. He’d asked her to keep his visit quiet, what with skiving off work, but he could never have pictured something like this. “That is, I haven’t made up my mind.”

“But it’s Halloween.”

Oh God. She sat down on the bed, knees weak, horror movies flooding in to haunt her. What the hell was that supposed to mean? Her breath quickened, light with fear, and she moved the phone away from her mouth, worried she’d give herself away. Before she could decide what to do next, the doorbell rang.

“Oh.” Apart from David she was expecting no one.

“Oh?”

“Someone at the door.” It would be good for him to know she had company. “I’ll just ...” She trailed off as a thought struck her. What if it were him? If this were a horror movie, it would be him, out there, waiting. Unconsciously she put her hand to her throat, fingering the necklace for comfort.

“You’ll just ...?”

“Nothing.” It came out tight with nerves. Shit.

“You’re not expecting anyone?”

What the hell did he mean by that? She felt the first prick of sweat hit her armpits as her fear grew. Stef was right, she should never have started this. But she could stop it, she realised, right now – and he’d just told her how.

‘I am actually.’ She seized on David’s arrival and brought it forward. “My boyfriend. Hang on – I’ll go and let him in.”

She put the phone down on the bedside table before he could reply. With nothing on but her dressing gown and the necklace she didn't plan on opening the front door, but at least it gave her a breathing space. Perhaps she'd do as Stef had suggested after all: leave the phone off the hook and shut the door. *Make him pay for nothing, Stef had said, and he'll soon stop calling.*

The bell rang again, a little more insistent this time, and she stuck her head out into the hall. It wouldn't be Stef, not before she'd spent all the money, but it might be trick or treaters. Then they rang a third time, holding the bell down and she sighed, annoyed and relieved in equal measure. It must be kids. Pulling the bedroom door to behind her and flipping off the hall light to avoid being silhouetted through the frosted glass, she walked forward to check – just as a hand shot through the letter box.

She shrieked. The hand disappeared. She froze, breath in rags, heart pumping, and watched as the letter box opened again, revealing a rectangular gash of black night. Two eyes peered inside.

“Katie? Is that you?”

She knew that voice. Sagging in relief, a little sob forced itself out of her mouth.

“Katie?” He must have heard. “Are you all right?”

“David.” Pulling open the door, she threw herself into his arms. “David, you're early. I'm so glad.”

“Well I'm pleased to hear it.” His familiar face smiled down at her, just as it had three weeks and two thousand miles ago. For a long moment it absorbed all her attention, her eyes feasting on every feature, checking her memories hadn't played her false, then she fixed her mouth hungrily onto his.

“Well,” he said again when they broke off. “That’s my kind of welcome. Maybe we could do it again inside? Behind closed doors?”

Katie disentangled herself and shut the front door, wondering if she should mention the weird caller. It was hardly a great way to start the weekend. She’d just hang up for now, she decided. After all, he may never ring again. Turning around, she switched the light back on and saw David clearly for the first time. He was covered from head to toe in a black cloak, only the hood pushed back to show his head.

“My,” she said. “That’s... unusual. I thought the Vai’s traditional dress was a little more colourful.”

“When in Rome...” He showed her the Halloween devil’s mask he held in his hand and put it over his face. “Trick or treat? What do you reckon?”

“Treat, always.” But something about it made her recoil and she pulled the mask away to kiss him again. “In fact, I might be able to come up with more than one.”

“Ah-ha,” he drew away, smiling. “Yes, I think you might.” His eyes lowered to her neck. “I see you’re wearing the beads.”

Good, he hadn’t clocked the difference.

“And not much else.” She smiled back. “Tonight, my kipenzi, I’m going to treat you to *both* your favourite meals.”

“Country Chop?” There was an edge to his voice that wasn’t quite pleasure. “I told you not to bother.”

“Oh, but I wanted to. I found some Club beer too, down at the market. Come on in, you can unwind over one in the lounge while I get dressed.” And hang up the phone. She wished now she’d done it before answering the door.

“It’s no bother.”

“Oh, but it is.” Putting his mask back on, he pulled the hood up over his head and walked towards her. Katie took a step back, uncomfortable.

“Don’t David,” she said. “That’s not my kind of joke.”

David stopped and she smiled uncertainly, waiting for him to take off the mask. Instead he reached into the folds of his cloak.

“No joke,” he said. “Just my way of doing things. No one must know I was here, you see – or that you were expecting someone. Now I shall have to clean it all up, you stupid bitch. As if you hadn’t been enough work already.”

And raising his right arm, he pulled out a gun and shot her twice.

---