



## NATALIA MARKLAND

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**N**atalia Markland grew up in Soviet Russia, studied English at Moscow State University and now lives in London with her husband and three children. A lifelong fan of science fiction, she always dreamed of writing her own sci-fi novel.

### *About **Tomorrow Starts Yesterday***

*Kill or be killed. Is there no other way?*

For years, humans have searched space for alien life. Instead, we could have pieced together clues of its existence right here. By looking closer, we would realise that three hundred and fifty years ago we shared our planet with another race, the Azori, before they were forced to leave. Where are they now? Why can't we remember them?

Seven teenagers, each representing a different continent, are told the truth. Together they must decide how to deal with the Azori fleet now headed for us, wanting revenge. But every plan the group can devise has been tried on alternate versions of Earth. Each one has failed.

Matt Payne is used to beating impossible odds. Can we put our faith in a wild card with his own agenda?

*Tomorrow Starts Yesterday* is an eighty-thousand-word sci-fi adventure aimed at young adult readers.

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# TOMORROW STARTS YESTERDAY

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## *Chapter One*

It's Friday night and the pub is heaving, full of City traders and brokers. They drink and laugh and drink loads more, no doubt celebrating another smashing week of getting richer. Their words start to slur, their eyes get cloudy from too much booze, but the air around them still reeks of success and superiority. It must be nice to care about nothing else in the world but your own precious self. Wiping sweat off my forehead, I glance around the dark, noisy room. It's almost time.

'Excuse me.' A young guy in a crumpled pinstriped suit bumps into my chair. He's got an open champagne bottle in one hand and three glasses in the other. The champagne fizzes, spitting foam all over the jacket I borrowed from Ludo's dad.

'Watch it.' I try to move out of his way, but there's no space.

Me, Ludo and Johnny are sitting at the tiny table right opposite the counter, where everybody has to squeeze past us to buy more drinks. That's the best place to watch the City's finest as they stumble to the bar to settle their tabs.

'Matt?' Johnny's elbow sinks into my ribs. 'Is it time yet?'

I check my watch. 'Soon.'

'Another round?' he asks.

I shake my head. We need to stay focused.

This has to be perfect. Exactly seven years ago Dad brought me and Sam to a pub like this one. It was Sam's birthday, and Dad's idea of a perfect celebration was to run a family con to pay for our meal.

'The younger you start,' he told us then, 'the longer you get to practise. By the time the police can punish you, they shouldn't be able to catch you.'

Today my brother would've turned sixteen, so here I am, ready to *pay my respects*. But Johnny has no idea what's really going on; only Ludo knows why tonight is so important. He nods at the half-empty glasses on our table and grins. Three pints each and no money to pay for them. Not yet anyway.

'Cheers.' Ludo raises his glass.

To our right, three loud suits finish their drinks.

'Come on,' I mutter. 'Don't be shy, get your wallets out.' They order another round and put it on their tab.

Twenty more minutes go by, but still nobody is flashing cash. It's getting late, so I quickly check my phone. Tonight is the worst night of the year for Mum and I ought to be home making sure she doesn't do something stupid. But I owe it to Sam to prove that I remember him.

'See Arsenal win last night?' Johnny asks.

I ignore him. Ludo frowns and shakes his head. He knows better than to distract me while I'm choosing a mark. The clock reaches quarter past midnight before the same pinstriped trader who splashed champagne over me staggers towards the bar. He waves his wallet and I glimpse the twenties peeping out of the shiny leather.

'We're on,' I whisper to Ludo. Following my glance, Ludo picks up the remainder of his drink and stumbles after the guy, bumping into as many chairs as he can find along the way.

I watch him make his way to the counter and, for a moment, instead of Johnny, there's Sam sitting in the chair next to mine and it's Dad in the distance waiting for me, but I'm too nervous to move ...

'Sorry!' Ludo booms when the next pissed-off customer looks up. I shake off the memory.

'Where're you going?' I rush after him. 'Come back.'

Ludo reaches the pinstriped trader just as he rests his wallet on the counter and clicks his fingers at the bartender. Right then Ludo trips, splashing his drink into the guy's face. By instinct the trader lets go of the wallet to rub his eyes. Immediately, Ludo grabs hold of the guy's jacket and hugs him tight. 'Sorry, man. Really sorry. I'll clean this up for you.'

'I'm fine,' protests the suit. 'Let go.' Only, instead of looking at Ludo, he glances at me. Is he on to us? I freeze, my heart twisting. But the guy is back to struggling to free himself from Ludo's rugby tackle. False alarm.

'It's all right, I'm taking him home.' I slot myself between Ludo and the bar, hiding the wallet. My left hand is on Ludo's shoulder for everyone to see. At the same time, I slide my right hand towards the cash. One beat. My fingers grip the spines of three crunchy notes and pluck them out. Two beats. I wrap them around my thumb, crumpling them inside my fist, then stick them into the pocket of my trousers. Done. Just like Dad.

'Happy Birthday, Sam,' I whisper under my breath.

'Let go.' The trader sounds angry.

'Enough.' I grab both of Ludo's shoulders and give them a shake. 'Wait outside while I pay.' That's his cue I've got the money.

'No hard feelings, right?' Ludo releases the guy and struggles towards the exit, where Johnny has already opened the door for him.

'You OK?' I ask the red-faced trader.

'Yeah.' He picks up his wallet and sticks it into his back trouser pocket while he tucks in his shirt.

In the meantime, I get our bill together with the fake credit card we used for our tab, pull out the nicked sixty quid and tell the bartender to keep the change. A few seconds later I'm back with Johnny and Ludo, walking down the street towards Bank station.

'That was brilliant!' Johnny beams, looking up at Ludo and then even further up at me. 'I watched but still couldn't see how Matt did it.'

'That's the whole point,' Ludo says. 'Nobody seeing. Cos Matt's a pro.'

Johnny looks at me the way I used to look at Dad. 'I'd like to be that good one day,' he says.

'Then you need to practise.'

'Sure.' Johnny nods like he understands. 'What I don't get is, why not take more?'

The last thing I want to do right now is to explain why tonight wasn't about the money, so I let Ludo come up with an excuse. 'Why risk it?' he says. 'This way the guy won't even realise he's sixty quid lighter. Too drunk to remember how much he spent.'

Johnny grins. 'Still can't believe we got served in a pub.'

'Have to be confident, that's all.' Ludo pulls his wise man face. 'It's a stupid rule anyway. We're almost eighteen, so why do they even care?'

Johnny sighs. 'I'm always asked for ID. You guys are lucky to be so tall.'

Ludo laughs and we jump down the steps of the Royal Exchange towards the tube entrance.

Johnny grabs my sleeve. 'We aren't going home yet, are we?'

'It's late,' I say.

'Pubs are still open. And it's not like there's school tomorrow ...'

I cut him off. 'Free riders don't make the rules.'

The sparks in Johnny's eyes die. Ludo raises an eyebrow. That was harsh, and it's not Johnny's fault I have to rush back home.

'Next time we're running *The Good Samaritan*, you can have a go.' I offer as an apology.

'Thanks, man.' He beams. That's what I like about Johnny – he doesn't hold a grudge. I check my phone again. Still no messages or missed calls. We get inside the station.

The Central line train takes ages to arrive. We race to change to the Piccadilly and manage to pile into the train to Arsenal just before the doors close. When we emerge at the other end, the clock shows 1am.

'See you tomorrow?' Johnny asks.

'Maybe,' says Ludo. 'Matt?'

I wish I could just make plans like that, but I have to check what things are like at home first. 'Not sure. I'll text you.'

'Later.'

'Want the jacket back?' I ask Ludo.

'Nah, keep it just in case.'

Ludo and Johnny turn left. I have to walk up the hill and through the park to get home. The night is warm and muggy and I wish I'd given back the jacket. Too late. I jog, sweating, trying to be as quick as I can. At the top of the hill I stop to catch my breath and feel my phone vibrate. There are seven missed calls from Mum since we got into the tube. Crap. There's no time to walk around the fields, so I head for the alleyway instead. It's a bad idea to use the shortcut at night, but I don't have a choice. It'll be fine. Just a short walk between the back wall of the school and the metal fence surrounding the football pitches and I'll be on our street.

Most of the streetlamps along the way don't work, but luckily there's plenty of moonlight for me to enjoy the view of graffiti covering the entire school wall. I'm halfway through when a sudden muffled noise makes the

hairs on the back of my neck shiver. I stop. The alleyway ahead of me bends and I can't see what's going on.

'H-h-h-h-m-m-m!'

I jolt. Maybe it's better to go around, just to be on the safe side. But that'll take at least ten minutes. Mum can do a lot of damage in ten minutes.

'Help!'

It's a girl. This changes things. I can't leave a girl to be mugged or ... worse. But what if Mum's in trouble?

'Please! Help!'

I charge forward. He won't see me coming. He? Or they? Shit! Why didn't I think of that? It's too late to stop. I skid around the corner and there they are: two men and a girl.

The first guy is holding her from behind. I can't see his face, only his hand plastered over the girl's mouth. His other arm is wrapped tight around her tiny waist. The second man is trying to wrestle her handbag from her, but she's holding on to it as if it's stuffed with gold.

'Leave her alone!' I shout as I aim my shoulder at the second guy, run and crash into his back. My bones jar like I've hit a concrete wall. He lets go of the bag and turns towards me, flexing his neck, his muscles bulging beneath his shirt. A sour taste fills my mouth. He's going to beat the life out of me. This is a mistake.

'Please!' The girl's lips tremble, her eyes are huge. For a moment that's all I can see. Then a fist flies into my face.

I stumble backwards, my arms flailing. The guy steps closer. He's young, my age. Pale skin, narrow lips, hooked nose. And his eyes. Cold and colourless. Fish eyes. I shudder and he punches me straight in the gut.

The blow knocks me off my feet. I lie on my side clutching my stomach, gasping for air. The girl drops her bag on the ground and the guy behind her lets her go. Instead of running away, she walks towards me. What the hell is she doing?

The girl leans forward, studying my face. She's so close, her long, blond curls almost touch my cheeks. I notice something odd about her expression. She doesn't look scared. At all. Suddenly she smiles and it hits me – I've just been conned.

'I don't have any money,' I manage to wheeze out.

‘Not a problem.’ The second guy towers over me. ‘I have enough for both of us, right?’

I look up and break into a cold sweat. It’s the pinstriped trader from the pub. Only the suit is gone. But how is he here?

‘Are you sure about this one?’ he asks the girl.

‘Who are you?’ I blurt. ‘The police?’

‘Quiet.’ He aims his boot at my face. I curl into a ball, covering my head. Shit, not the police. Shit. Shit. How am I going to get home?

‘Enough,’ the girl says. ‘He came to my rescue, so it’s my decision.’ The guys take a step back and she stares at me, frowning.

‘Look, if it’s the money you’re after,’ I hurry, ‘I can double it for you.’

Fish Eyes and Trader just stand there. Blank expressions. The girl keeps frowning.

‘OK, just tell me how much you need.’ I roll on to my knees.

‘It’s not about the money,’ she says.

‘I get it. You want something else.’ I try to crouch. ‘What is it?’

The girl sighs. ‘Deep down, you must be a good person, Matt.’

I flinch. ‘How do you know my name?’

‘We know everything about you.’

Bloody brilliant. They’ve been watching me. They might know where I live.

‘Just tell me what you want.’

‘I’m going to give you a chance,’ the girl says.

‘What chance?’

‘A chance to save your planet.’

I stare at her. Is she kidding me? She isn’t smiling. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I’ll tell you everything once you cross over.’

‘Cross over what? The road?’

She smiles. ‘You’ll see.’

Cross over. Save the planet. They *are* taking the piss. Or they’re nutters.

‘So what do you say?’ the girl asks.

‘Err ...’ I play for time as I shift my weight on to my toes. If I charge forward now, will I be able to get away?

She shakes her head like she knows what I’m about to do. ‘Are you with us or not? Choose.’

I glance at the two guys, at their stony faces. Some choice. If I'm going to run, I need them to trust me. 'Sure. I'm with you.'

'Hold him,' the girl says.

Fish Eyes grabs my shoulders and pushes me back on to the ground. I try to roll away, but Trader is faster. He flattens my legs and sits on top of my knees, pinning me to the ground. My head is banged on to the asphalt.

'Wait! What are you going to do?'

'Don't be scared.' The girl takes a deep breath and her face turns semi-transparent. I open and close my mouth, but can't say a word. What kind of trick is that? Her shoulders start to look glassy too. She's like a felt tip drawing on cling film. I can see the red brick wall right behind her.

'What the ...' I mumble as I watch her fade.

She's vanishing faster and faster until the only thing left is the outline of her body. One more blink and she's gone. I gasp for air. I've never seen anything like that in my life.

'How did she ... what's going on?'