

Chapter 1

Nat was going methodically through John's post when, to his utter astonishment, he found a letter addressed to himself.

John was away on a sabbatical year in Italy. Nat had agreed to look after his flat in Edinburgh and forward any important letters. To the best of his knowledge, no one else knew about this arrangement, so finding a letter for himself on John's doormat was barely credible.

He opened it at once. It contained a single sheet of A4 paper, on which was written, in a clear cursive script:

The ball is in your court

Helen

He didn't know anyone called Helen.

The envelope was addressed to Nathaniel Lawrence, at John's address, in the same handwriting. The postmark was unreadable, but the postage stamp was British.

Nat dealt with the rest of John's post, collecting the letters which he judged needed attention and putting them into a large brown envelope addressed to the University of Florence.

That evening, on the long drive home to rural Perthshire through the autumn drizzle, he speculated who could have written the note and what it might mean. Thinking back, he tried to recall a Helen, but somehow he had reached his sixtieth year without knowingly meeting anyone of that name.

Even if this Helen knew him, how did she know that he could be reached at John's flat? Maybe it was a joke by John, or by one of John's colleagues who might know he was dealing with his post. But it didn't seem like a joke. What was the meaning of the message? He was clearly expected to do something. But what?

Nat forgot about the note for a week or two, while he focussed on finishing his new book. It was the latest in his Vince McLeod detective series. Eventually, he reached a point of completion - not completion, really, but a point in the process where he didn't feel too unhappy about showing it to his

publisher. He sent off the file.

Sue called a few days later.

"It's wonderful, Nat! Up there with your best. It still needs some revision, of course. Can I come and see you, or would you like to visit the office for a change?"

"Thanks, Sue. I've got to go to Edinburgh anyway soon, so I might as well come to the office. When would suit you?"

They arranged a date. It was about time for another visit to John's flat.

Driving down the M90 a couple of weeks later, Nat remembered the note. It was fruitless puzzling about it, he decided. He hoped there wouldn't be another one waiting on the doormat.

Sue was her usual helpful self. They had a good chat about the novel, and what still needed to be done. She introduced him to James, a new hire, who was to be his editor this time.

Sue took him for lunch. They chatted, and Nat mentioned the mysterious letter from an unknown "Helen" at an absent friend's flat.

"Nat, it's not quite true to say you don't know anyone called Helen," Sue told him. "You spent quite some time with her, probably thirty years ago. Don't you remember? 'The Moebius Affair' - your second book."

"Good grief!" Nat paused a moment.

'The Moebius Affair' was so long ago he had forgotten all about it. It took him a moment to recall the details. The main protagonist was called Helen something, and he had spent a lot of time fleshing out her character. The book had not been particularly successful.

"I suppose you're right, Sue. I did know that character quite well. But a fictional character can't write a real-world letter!"

"No. Hmmm. 'The ball's in your court.' Maybe it was written by a fan who wants you to write a sequel?"

"I suppose that's a possibility. Maybe this person saw me entering the flat and recognised me. After all, you insist on putting my mug shot at the back of every book."

"Well, it's a theory. Coffee?"

Nat suddenly wanted to see whether there was another letter.

"Sorry, Sue, I've got to go. It's been great. I'll be in touch with you and

James.”

He hurried off to John’s flat. There was not much post, and he dealt with it quickly. There was nothing addressed to him, and Nat felt a barely sensed tension in his shoulders dissipate.

The next few weeks were busy, with emails and drafts flying back and forth between James, Sue and Nat. Christmas came and went. Eventually, his part of the job was done, and he left Sue with the marketing, design and production side of things, which bored him stupid.

Nat felt he deserved a holiday somewhere warm, and he booked a cheap last-minute flight to Tenerife. It was 25 degrees when he arrived at a small hotel near Santa Cruz. The cheerful receptionist gave him a room key.

“Señor Lawrence, a letter came for you this morning.” She handed him an envelope.

It was the same handwriting.

Sitting on the bed, Nat tore it open. A single sheet of A4, just like before. It said:

Now is always the best time to begin
Helen

It took a conscious effort to keep calm. Nat tried to think how the sender could possibly have known he was going to stay at this hotel. Nothing seemed to make sense. What was he supposed to begin? Who was Helen? Who sends letters in this day and age anyway? Why not harass him on social media, if that was the intention? Goodness knows he got plenty of weird emails and online comments from fans and haters.

He checked the envelope. The stamp was British, but the postcode was unreadable. The hotel’s address was neatly written, preceded by “*A esperar la llegada del señor Nathaniel Lawrence*”. He didn’t know Spanish, but it probably meant the letter should be held pending his arrival. He briefly wondered if it had been posted before he’d even booked this hotel. No. That was madness. But it felt like somebody was spying on his every move. Stalking him.

Trying to relax by the hotel pool, Nat couldn’t take his mind off the

stalking. His thoughts went round and round. There were half a dozen other guests at the hotel, but he didn't feel like talking to any of them.

The next day a new guest arrived - a Scottish woman on her own. She was probably in her late forties, Nat guessed. Slim and attractive. He established that her name was Rose (not Helen, thank goodness!).

She seemed friendly, and the following evening they had a few drinks together in the bar. She was an IT manager in a legal firm in Edinburgh, he discovered. She'd heard of him but hadn't read any of his books. Laughter and conversation flowed easily, and somehow, the next morning they both woke up in Nat's bed.

Later that day, as they walked along the beach together, Nat felt comfortable enough to tell her about the mysterious notes.

"And you've no idea why anyone would want to stalk you like this?"

"Absolutely none. But people are weird. My publisher thought it might be a fan who wants a sequel to one of my early novels."

"Perhaps that's it. Do you want to write a sequel?"

"I don't know. It's so long since I wrote the original one that I don't remember much about it. But what worries me is how the stalker knows my every move."

"I think that might be the easy part, Nat."

"Huh?"

"Have you heard of a key logger? It's a bit of software which stealthily monitors your computer keystrokes, and perhaps even your screen, and transmits it to someone. That would explain how they knew where to post the letters."

"Wow. I use my laptop the whole time. That might explain it. How do you know about this stuff?"

"IT is my job, remember? It's a constant battle to keep out malicious software like this."

"Well, it's a relief to know someone isn't physically stalking me."

"Virtual stalking is almost certainly how they know your movements. But they might still be physically stalking you, Nat."

The remainder of the holiday passed happily enough. Rose was good company, and they were both at ease with their holiday romance. He was able to put Helen and her letters to the back of his mind. Before he left Tenerife, he

and Rose exchanged contact details and vague promises to keep in touch.

Back home in his cottage, Nat worked out how to run a virus checker on his laptop. Worryingly, it didn't report any infection. A bit of googling told him that key loggers would often delete themselves after a time to avoid detection, so perhaps it wasn't surprising the virus checker hadn't picked anything up. He still felt a bit concerned and wondered if he should call Rose to ask what to do. On balance, perhaps not. She had a busy enough time in her legal firm without being called on to fix other people's computer problems.

The puzzle remained: who on earth was Helen? There seemed to be no way of finding out.

Just for fun, he started searching for 'The Moebius Affair' - the book Sue had remembered, which featured Helen someone as the main character. After a bit of a hunt along the bookshelves, he found a hardback copy hidden behind his Crime Writers Association award. He blew off the dust and sat down to remind himself about it.

It was mortifyingly poor, he thought, after a few pages. The main character, Helen Smart, seemed anything but. As he flicked through the rest of the pages, a piece of folded-up paper fell to the floor. He opened it out. Suddenly his heart was hammering, and he could hardly breathe. It said:

You don't have a lot of time
Helen

Nat looked around wildly. Could there be someone in the house? Adrenaline kicked in, and he jumped up and raced through the cottage, looking for he didn't know what. Outside he scrambled around the building, heart thumping. Nothing! He paused outside the front door, looking across the field to the river and the woods beyond, trying to get his breath back. Think! What was going on? Above all, HOW did that piece of paper get there? Someone had been in his house. He should call the police!

He went back inside and picked up his mobile phone, then put it down again. This was going to be embarrassing. A well-known crime writer, faced with a mystery criminal, calls in the local cops at the first opportunity. How

would that go down with his readers? Maybe he should wait.

This Helen person (he couldn't avoid thinking of her as Helen Smart) had secretly entered his home, searched for and found that specific book, then, without disturbing the dust, had inserted her note. He picked up the paper again, looking for clues, but it was just the same as the others. He wondered if the police would check it for fingerprints. He'd destroyed the earlier notes, so they couldn't be checked.

He needed to compose himself. Take time to think. Putting on some Bach and pouring himself a beer, he sat down to consider what to do, but his mind refused to cooperate. Instead, he found himself thinking about the Moebius Affair and its protagonist, the fictional Helen Smart, who somehow personified his persecutor. She was his own creation, yet she had turned on him.

Suddenly, he knew what he had to do. Intuition was the key. That's how his fictional detective Vince McLeod operated, and that's how Nat wrote his best work - intuitively, unplanned. He needed to write Helen Smart's story. Not really a sequel to the Moebius Affair. Or maybe it would be, he wasn't sure. But it might unlock her mystery.

He took his beer, sat down at his laptop, and started typing.

Chapter 1

Helen Smart got up from her computer and moved slowly to the window. She thought, I wonder what Nat will do now? He's scared. How can I exploit his fear?

The night-time view from the window of her small basement flat was not inspiring. It was raining heavily, and the orange glow from a distant street light barely illuminated the tiny concrete yard and the staircase up to the decrepit iron street-level gate. Looking at the growing puddles, she wished that she could jet off to Tenerife like Nat. Warmth and sun, in February. Somehow it didn't seem right that she couldn't afford it. Her role at the office was minor, yes, but vital. Maybe she should ask for more money.

But what I actually want, she said to herself for the umpteenth time, is to be a proper writer. Someone like Nat. A thriller writer! My name in big letters

on the cover, not buried away in the Acknowledgements section at the back, among a million others.

She wandered over to the kitchen counter, made herself a cup of herbal tea, picked up a chocolate biscuit and flopped down on the sofa. I don't like Nat, she thought. Why should he be so successful? I want him to know what rejection feels like. At the office, she often had to send rejection emails to aspiring authors whose treasured novels had gone firstly into the slush pile and then got binned. "We feel that your interesting work is not quite the right fit for our publishing brand. I wish you well in finding a home for it somewhere else." Hah! Maybe she should arrange for Nat to get a rejection.

The letters had been a good idea, she thought. I'm not quite sure about the third one, though. Have I gone too far?

It was late, and tomorrow was Saturday. She was hoping to meet Ruairaidh for coffee in the morning. Finishing her tea and biscuits, she yawned and heaved herself off the sofa, dislodging the big cushion. There was a scrap of crumpled paper underneath. She picked it up and realised it was Rose's strange Moebius strip thing.

It had been early autumn when her sister Rose came to stay for a couple of nights while her own flat was being redecorated. They'd had an enjoyable time chatting about all kinds of things. Rose was worried about malicious software and how to keep her law firm's computer network safe. Her description of keyloggers had given Helen an idea for the Nat venture. But, Helen remembered now, they'd also talked about Moebius strips. Rose had demonstrated how you could glue together a strip of paper with a half-twist so it only had one continuous side. Now, Helen uncrumpled the strip and ran her finger around it twice until she came back to where she'd started. It was very curious.

Ruairaidh had been a fellow student on the writing course at the University last summer. They'd kept in touch afterwards and occasionally met up to talk about their writing ambitions. A year or two younger than Helen, he was a store assistant at Waterstones on Princes Street and knew a lot about books. He was also quite attractive, she mused.

Helen found Ruairaidh sipping his coffee in a small café on Hanover Street. I suppose it's not a date as such, Helen admitted to herself, but perhaps it's a

friendship which might blossom into something more. They exchanged pleasantries.

"What are you writing at the moment, Ruairaidh?"

"So, I've been working on short stories. I can't remember when I saw you last? Maybe I already told you?"

Their previous encounter had been about two months ago. We had talked about his short stories, she remembered, and I did enjoy our meeting.

"No, I don't think so. What kind of stories?"

"They're difficult to put into definite categories. A couple are influenced by Edgar Allan Poe, one is more like Borges, and one is a kind of Poe/Borges/Asimov hybrid, I suppose." Ruairaidh relished talking about his stories and droned on at some length. Helen smiled and made supportive noises.

"Sounds really interesting. Can I read anything?"

"Well... nothing's actually finished yet. Sorry. But when I'm ready for someone else to read them, you'll be the first. One of the first."

There was a pause.

"Uh, what about you? Are you writing anything at the moment?"

How much should I tell him, she wondered. "I've started on something. I think it's going to be a novel. A thriller. Or perhaps more of a mystery, I'm not sure. I've not planned it out."

"Cool. How far have you got?"

"Chapter one is finished, more or less. But I feel a bit stuck. I don't know quite where to go next."

"Writer's block, huh? Have you tried anything to get past it?"

Their writing course had offered various strategies for making progress, and together they tried to remember the details.

"Just write" advised Ruairaidh. "Write anything. Doesn't matter what. Gets the creativity flowing again."

"Yeah, maybe. What else?"

"Reading aloud what you've written. I think that was one of the hints." He checked his phone. "Oh wow. Really sorry, I need to go. It's been fun! See you soon!"

"Maybe we could..." but Ruairaidh was already halfway to the door. "... have a proper drink next time" she finished to no-one.

That evening, alone again, Helen sat down at her computer to work on the next chapter of her novel. Writing was hard. Looking at the last few paragraphs of her first chapter, she felt uneasy. Have I written myself into a corner, she wondered. I can't move forward until I've worked out how the note gets into that book, and of course why Nat is receiving the notes in the first place.

Sighing, she scrolled back to the start of the document and, as Ruairaidh suggested, started to read aloud:

"Chapter One. Nat was going methodically through John's post when, to his utter astonishment, he found a letter addressed to himself."