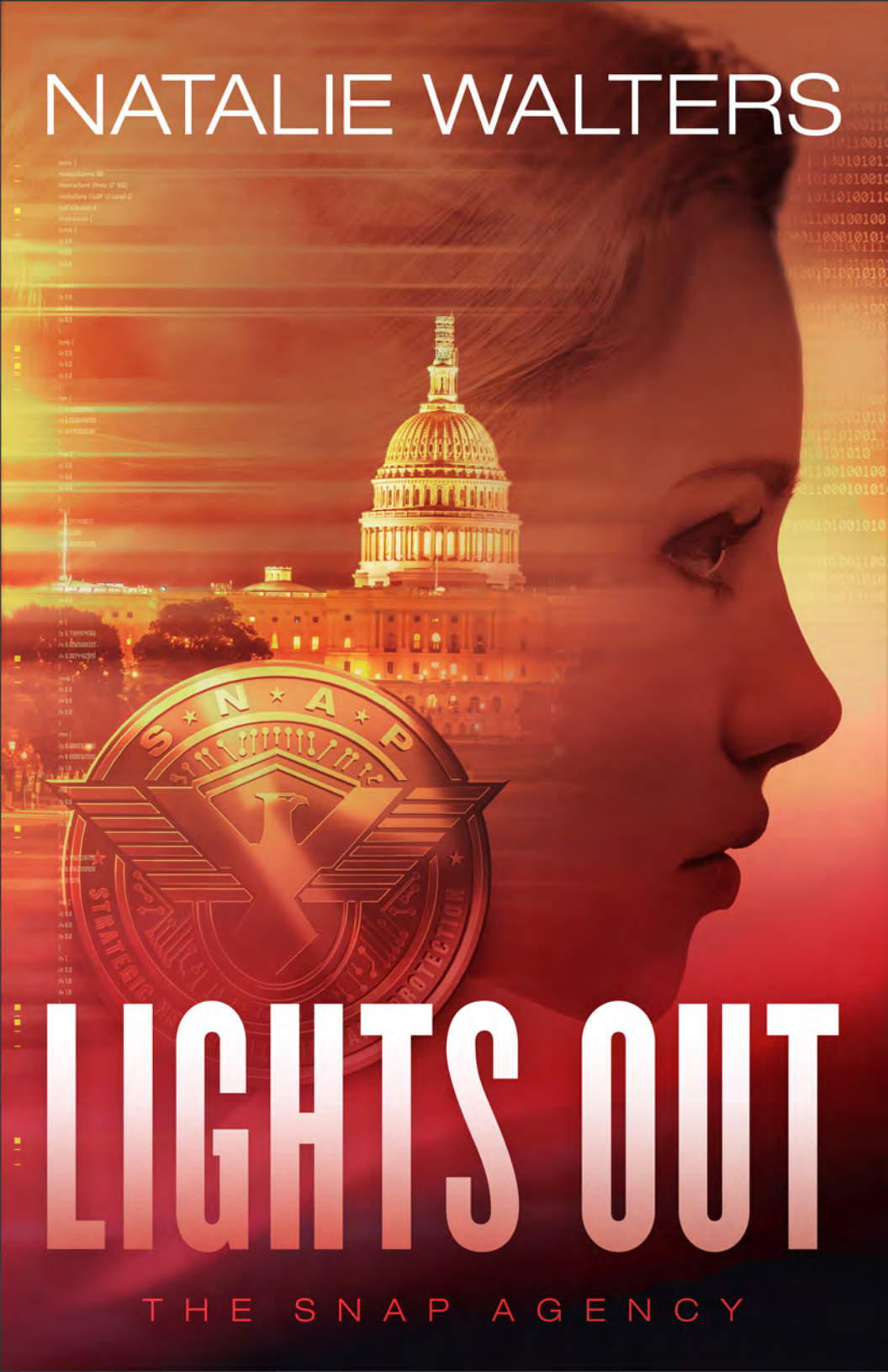


NATALIE WALTERS



LIGHTS OUT

THE SNAP AGENCY

“Natalie Walters is a fabulous new voice in inspirational romantic suspense!”

Susan May Warren, *USA Today* bestselling author

“Natalie has crafted an addictive cast of characters dropped into a national security nightmare. Expect to keep turning the pages long into the night. I loved every minute.”

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“Natalie Walters nails it with *Lights Out*—heart-pounding suspense and details so real you have to wonder who she’s really working for.”

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“*Lights Out* delivers on all the things I want to see in romantic suspense. The stakes are as high as they can be with an international terrorist threat that has the potential to kill thousands and impact millions. The simmering romance is complicated by past betrayal and present doubts. And the secondary characters—a diverse group with intriguing quirks and exceptional abilities—bring both humor and depth to this thrilling first installment of The SNAP Agency series from Natalie Walters. I can’t wait to read more!”

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“Readers who pick up *Lights Out* should prepare for a book that will keep them turning pages long past their personal lights out. It is a compelling story of international intrigue and implications. It’s also a story of second chances if the hero and heroine are willing to embrace them. Romantic suspense readers will fall in love with Brynn and Jack as they race against time and the terrorists to figure out who’s killing Egyptian nationals and has painted a target on Brynn’s back. A compelling must-read from one of my always reads, Natalie Walters.”

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THE SNAP AGENCY

Lights Out

THE SNAP AGENCY



BOOK ONE

LIGHTS OUT

NATALIE WALTERS



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They always say be careful what you say around an
author because it could be used in a story.
This book and series are dedicated to my friends in those
three-letter agencies who were less than careful.



Ma'adi, Suburb of Cairo, Egypt
3:17 PM Tuesday, January 13

Seif El-Deeb watched the noisy trio of American boys cross the street away from Cairo American College. The international school had just let out for the afternoon, and the sound of privileged children laughing about their day mingled with the horns of waiting drivers and taxis trying to navigate the afternoon congestion.

“Seif, you will send your child to this school?”

The old man behind the wooden counter of the koshk laughed at his own question, causing the cigarette at his lips to bounce. Seif ignored the vendor as the man continued chuckling while he straightened the rows of chips and snacks.

Toying with the metal band around his finger, Seif shook his head. Mostly to himself. The vendor already knew the answer, which was why he was laughing. CAC was a private school with a tuition rate only the wealthiest Egyptians could afford. And foreigners. Especially Americans. Or the grandchildren of the former president.

Seif eyed the twelve-foot cement wall surrounding the school. Iron paling embedded at the top gave the impression of a fortress, as did the private security officers positioned at the front and rear entrances to monitor every student, parent, and visitor entering

or leaving. Their presence had doubled since the protests against President Talaat began more than a year ago. A promise by both the school and the president that these children would be kept safe at all costs.

A fortress of education and protection Seif's son or daughter would never know.

Lighting his own cigarette, Seif stepped aside as the three American boys walked up to the street kiosk and purchased candy. One of them, a blond, set the Egyptian bill on the worn and splintered counter just as a breeze came through, lifting the money into the air. The boys laughed as the old man scrambled for it, none of them helping as they took their candy and walked away.

Seif hurried, following the money as it floated in the air over the busy intersection. Ignoring the blaring horns and shouts, he stepped into the street and caught the bill before it flew farther away.

"Shukraan." The vendor thanked him before tucking the money into a box. "These kids do not know how fortunate they are. Allah has blessed them, and they forget it can be taken away."

Taking a long drag from his cigarette, Seif continued to watch the boys make their way to a large, white Toyota Sequoia. The heavy *thunk* of the door closing after they crawled in told Seif the vehicle was weighed down with armor.

Allah has blessed them. What about him? Or his wife, Heba? Or his child she was currently carrying? Where was Allah's blessing for them? He'd been good. Memorized the tenets of the Quran, fasted for Ramadan, never missed a call to prayer, and yet here he was working two jobs just to provide for his family.

A business card burned inside his pocket. Fishing it out, he rolled the curled edges back and studied it.

Mahmoud Farag
+20 010 1251 175

Just a name and a number. The card left on the seat of his work van three weeks ago. Seif assumed it was job related, someone wanting zabbato. A favor. Street deal. As a technician for Nile Telecom, Seif had discovered that while he did not possess the kind of education protected by a fortified wall, he possessed a job that gave him favor. Those zabbatos were what kept Heba happy, safe, and out of the squalor he grew up in.

He dropped the finished cigarette to the ground and smashed it with the toe of his shoe. “Mas salāma.”

“En shallah,” the old man responded.

God willing. Yes, that was the hope, but the funny thing about hope was that it seemed to be selective—blessing those with the wealth to afford it, the power to control it, or the will to fight for it.

Seif’s mobile rang. The number matched that on the card. Did he have the will to fight for it? For himself, he’d grown up suffering. For Heba, she was not his first choice when it came to their arrangement, but he was slowly coming to love her. But for his child, the ever-present ache in his chest pulsed. For his child, he’d do whatever it took.

Spitting the taste of tobacco from his mouth, Seif answered.

“Al salamo aalaykom.”

“Wa aalaykom al salam,” the male voice responded to the greeting. “White car, to your left. Pink dice in the mirror. Get in and say nothing.”

The Arabic came out low and raspy, and Seif had to press his mobile phone to his ear to hear over the din of the growing traffic around him. “White car?”

“White car. On your left. Pink dice. Say nothing.”

The clipped response sent a chill across Seif’s shoulders despite the rare twenty-one-degree temps keeping the city balmy this early in the year. Searching to his left, Seif panicked. There were nearly a dozen white cars parked or moving in and around the school’s barriers. Shading his eyes, he searched for pink dice, but the glare of the sun was too much, forcing him to cross into the chaotic traffic.

A black car screeched to a halt, nearly clipping him, and the driver stuck his head out of the car, cursing. Seif pressed the fingers of his right hand together, a gesture asking for the impatient driver to wait. The irate man inched forward, horn honking until Seif moved far enough over that he could steer around him, leaving a string of curses in his wake.

“You have one minute,” the voice said.

“Wait. Please.” Seif moved quicker, eyes scanning every car for pink dice. His heart pounded in his chest with each passing second. A ticking time bomb threatening to erase the hope he had allowed to enter his heart.

Seif thought he saw a flicker of something pink. He pushed aside a woman in a burka, no apology on his lips—only a prayer to Allah that this was it. In a near jog, Seif worked his way around a large SUV, ignoring the driver eyeing him with suspicion. He searched every white vehicle around him, until finally—he saw them. Pink dice.

He yanked the back door open and dropped inside, a breath of relief spoiled only by the thick cloud of cigarette smoke filling the vehicle.

“I am here.” The words were meant for the man on the phone, but the phone remained silent against his ear. “Hallo? Hallo?” Seif pulled the phone away to look at the screen just as the driver jerked the car forward and into traffic.

Say nothing.

Leaning back in his seat, Seif replayed the instructions in his mind. He glanced at the rearview mirror and caught the driver eyeing him. Redirecting his attention out the window, Seif watched as the driver efficiently maneuvered around traffic, taking him out of Ma’adi.

Where was he going?

His mobile vibrated in his hand. Turning it over, he saw Heba’s face smiling up at him. He brushed his thumb, fingernail dirty from his last job, across her cheek. He was doing this for her. For their child.

The car hit a pothole, hard, sending Seif bouncing in the back seat. He grabbed the overhead handle and braced himself as he monitored the changing scenery outside the car. They were no longer traveling in the city, crammed with high-rise apartments, shops, and markets. The landscape outside his window had shifted from overcrowded city to arid wilderness.

The wadi. He was being taken to the desert.

Fear sent his heart pounding in an erratic rhythm. He bit down on his lip, holding back the urge to ask questions, find out where he was being taken. The road turned rougher. Large ruts cut into the dirt road sent the car jostling so much that Seif feared he was going to be sick.

Thankfully, the car began to slow as another vehicle approached in a cloud of dirt. When it drew nearer, Seif saw that it was an old pickup truck. The road was narrow, and Seif expected his driver to pull to the side, but he continued going forward much faster than was necessary.

Bracing himself, Seif tightened his grip on the handle when the car lurched to a stop directly in front of the truck. Dust swirled around the vehicles, both drivers remaining where they were, but it was not an impasse.

A man jumped out of the back of the truck and started toward their car. The door at Seif's side was yanked open.

"Come," the man in the cream galabeya commanded. The turban on his head extended over part of his face, exposing only his dark eyes.

Seif got out of the car and wiped his sweaty palms down the back of his jeans. He noticed the man eyeing his choice of clothing with contempt. In the city, Seif blended in, but out here his modern appearance made him stand out. The white car reversed, turning around before barreling back in the direction they had come from.

"Come."

Seif looked around. The wadi stretched out before him, no sign of life or a way to cry for help should he need it. Heba's pregnant

form filled his mind, and Seif quieted his nerves. This was for his child.

He followed the man and was directed to climb into the bed of the truck with him. Seif did as told and hung on for his life as the truck sped toward an unknown destination. He quickly realized why the man had his face covered as dirt and rocks flew into the air. Lifting the collar of his shirt over his nose and mouth, Seif prayed once again that he had not misplaced his hope.

Unsure how much time had passed, Seif saw a village dotting the landscape in front of him. The truck slowed to a stop and everyone got out, leaving him to follow. A herd of camels chewed their cud near the small, corrugated metal homes. A trio of stray dogs barked at him while kids played a game of fútbol.

“Seif El-Deeb?”

“Naam.” Seif nodded at an older man with a long gray beard and a cane coming toward him. “Farag?”

He shook his head. “Your wife is pregnant? The baby is not well, yes?”

“Yes.”

Heba hadn’t been feeling well, and her mother took her to the hospital. The doctor did a sonogram and saw the deformity and suggested aborting the child. Heba was inconsolable. Seif promised her he would work harder to pay for the doctors. Whatever his child needed, he would provide . . . except. Except Seif was already working hard to afford the lifestyle Heba was accustomed to. How could he add more work? Her family would look down on him, convinced they had been right about him the entire time.

The man’s eyes were cloudy, but the wrinkled skin around them seemed to sag in sadness as he reached into his robe and pulled out an envelope.

“It is good what you are doing for your child. Inshallah, all will be well.”

Taking the envelope, Seif nodded. He let the contents fall into

his hand, and his knees went wobbly. An Egyptian passport. A mobile phone. And an airline ticket to Washington, DC.

I am going to America?

Seif glanced up, trying to make sense of what was happening—what was being asked of him.

“I don’t understand. Heba, my wife, will she not go with me?”

Another shake of the head. “You will travel to America. You will be contacted when you land”—a gnarled finger tapped the cell phone in Seif’s hand—“by a man who will give you further instructions.”

“La’a.” Seif nearly shouted, the act drawing concerned glares from a pair of men standing nearby whom Seif hadn’t noticed. Each carried an automatic rifle over his shoulder. “No.” In a previous phone call with Mahmoud Farag, he promised he would get Heba the right doctors to help her, to help our child. He looked down at the airline ticket. “She should go to America with me. They have the best doc—”

The man held up a hand, silencing Seif. “Your wife and child will have the best doctors here in Egypt, but first you must do your part.”

A car pulled around from the back of the village, exhaust darkening the air behind it.

“You want to help your family, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Then go. Inshallah, all will be well.”

The idling car’s engine rumbled behind Seif like a sinister growl. Dropping the passport and phone back into the envelope, he climbed into the passenger seat. As the village grew smaller with every mile, Seif studied the airline ticket he held in his hand.

Passports, like the education at Cairo American College, were a privilege. Obtaining one took money, connections, and luck. But the ticket to America . . . that was a blessing. Was Allah blessing him? Finally?

Seif’s eyes caught the date on the ticket. *Today!* He swiveled in

his seat to look over his shoulder at the specks in the distance. In the back seat was a black backpack.

“The bag?”

The driver slid an unfriendly glance his direction. “Yours.”

Seif pulled the backpack across the seat and opened it. Inside were a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, a map of Washington, DC, and a roll of American dollars. He zipped the bag and pushed it to the floor between his feet.

Seif had no idea why he was going to America or what his part was, but if this was Allah’s blessing, he would accept it—and ignore the feeling he had made a deal with the devil.