



# CHILD'S PLAY

"IF JAMES PATTERSON WROTE  
FIFTY SHADES OF GREY"

**KIA ABDULLAH**

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# CHILD'S PLAY

KIA ABDULLAH

REVENGE INK



*For my sisters, five of the strongest, most beautiful  
women I know.*



## CHAPTER ONE

Everything about him reeked of perfection. From his precision Alexandre haircut to his polished Armani brogues. He sat, moodily nursing a Scotch, green eyes scanning the room once, twice, three times.

Allegra saw him first, eyes alighting on his solitary shape. She stood, watching the way he ran his fingers through his hair, the way he traced them along the serrated edge of his knife, the way he rested them on the dark wood of the grand Georgian table.

Every waitress had her eyes on him, lured by his film star face, dark hair, and athletic body in his expensive suit with his expensive smell. Allegra smoothed her long chestnut hair and strode towards him.

He stood, tall and confident, and offered his hand. She shook it firmly, the instant attraction jerking through her body. Taking a seat, she adjusted her posture so to appear sophisticated, elegant, nonchalant.

“Ms Ashe, thank you for joining me at such late

notice.” His smooth, rich voice was comforting; familiar somehow.

She shook her head. “Not at all. It’s my pleasure, sir.”

He held back an amused smile. “Please – call me Michael.”

She nodded, skin aflame under his gaze. She relaxed her shoulders and lifted her chin, exuding indifference.

A waitress flitted over, coyly glancing at Michael before turning to Allegra. “May I get you a drink?”

Allegra drew her eyes from his. “I’ll have a glass of white wine please.”

Deep lines creased across the waitress’s forehead, cracking her thick makeup. “A white wine?” she faltered. She glanced at Michael and then leaned in towards Allegra. “I’m sorry, Miss,” she said quietly, “but may I see some ID? We would lose our licence if we were to serve alcohol to an underage person.”

Allegra felt the blush spread across her cheeks, shattering her veneer of sophistication. Eyes downcast, she reached for her bag and pulled out her driver’s licence. The picture depicted her smooth olive skin, large hazel eyes and bee-stung lips – features frequently mistaken for those of a teen’s.

Satisfied, the waitress jovially announced, “One white wine coming up,” and sauntered off.

Allegra watched amusement dance in his eyes. She held his gaze and asked, “So, what can we do for you?” Silently, she wondered if he too felt the chemistry between them.

He examined her for a few seconds. “Do you enjoy your job, Ms Ashe?”

She sat back in her chair. “Please – call me Allegra.”

He smiled, revealing deep dimples. “Allegra.”

She took a moment to steady her voice. “Yes, I enjoy my job very much. ImageBox consists of a small but hardworking team. Each of our clients receives its own designer – I would be yours. We work with our clients in a synergetic way. We take *your* ideas on board and–” She stopped, mid-gesture, halted by Michael’s raised hand.

“You don’t have to give me the hard sell,” he said, eyes boring into hers. “Just talk to me.”

She nodded, caught off guard by his sudden informal manner.

“So tell me, Allegra, is what you do important?”

“Graphics design?” She paused. “It’s important to a lot of people.”

“Is it important to you? Not just because it provides an income, but the actual work you do.”

“Yes, of course.”

“But there are more important jobs you can think of?”

She bit the corner of her bottom lip, suddenly annoyed with her boss for sending her to this meeting with no information. How was she supposed to sell to a client she knew nothing about?

She shrugged, uncomfortable beneath his gaze. “Yes, there are doctors and teachers and policemen – they have important jobs.”

He nodded, pleased with her answer. “Allegra, I want you to come and work with me.”

She blinked in surprise. “We would be delighted.”

He held up his hand again. “No, you misunderstand. I don’t want ImageBox – I want you.”

She felt her cheeks redden. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

He glanced around the near-empty restaurant. “Allegra, I work for a small government unit which targets criminals – a very specific type. We do good work. You could say we’re like doctors and teachers and policemen all rolled into one.”

She looked at him blankly.

“Part of my role is recruiting new field agents. I’m a head-hunter of sorts. I would like to recruit you.”

She waited a few seconds. When he said nothing, she started to laugh. “Is this one of Jonathan’s tricks?”

Michael shook his head. “I apologise. I used ImageBox to set up a meeting with you. I know it was unethical but I needed to talk to you on mutual ground to explain my proposal.”

Allegra bristled. “I delayed a rare dinner with my family to come and meet you this evening. You’re telling me I’m wasting my time?”

Michael reached forward and touched her arm, sending sparks across the pit of her stomach. “Hey, listen, I’m sorry. Please just hear me out.” His eyes held hers.

Fragments of an old song ran through her mind:

*Your eyes are burning holes through me. I'm gasoline. I'm burning clean.* “I’m sorry, but I really am very happy in my job.” She stood to leave but he stepped in front of her. “I’ve given you my decision,” she said falteringly, unnerved by the magnetism between them. As she drew back, Michael took hold of her wrist in a grip so hard, it almost hurt.

“Don’t go.” His face was inches from hers.

Taken aback, Allegra struggled to free herself.

He tightened his grip on her wrist and pushed a card into her hand. “Take this,” he urged. “Please just think about it.” With this final plea, he released her.

Allegra looked to the card, cheeks burning with indignation. The name ‘VOKOBAN’ was written along the top with ‘Michael Stallone’ printed beneath it in small letters. *No wonder he thinks he’s Rambo*, she thought indignantly. By the time she looked back up, he was gone.

She blinked in his wake, still able to smell his smell and feel his fingers wrapped around her skin. Her body shook as the knot in her stomach crept down her body, inching past the navel, and settling in the tight curve between her legs. Gathering her thoughts, she slipped the card into her bag and stalked out of the restaurant.

“Baby sister, you’re late,” accused Sienna.

Allegra winced and crunched up her shoulders in mock shame. “I’m sorry. I texted you. Jonathan sent me to a last-minute meeting.”

“It’s okay, I’m used to you. Just don’t complain if the meat’s too tough.”

Allegra smiled. “I *never* complain about meat being too tough,” she replied with a dirty laugh.

“Incorrigible.” Sienna ushered her in with a hug and closed the door.

“Speaking of incorrigible, where’s the rugrat?”

With perfect timing, Reese poked her head into the hallway. “Who’re you calling ‘rugrat’? I’m already taller than you.” At 5’3”, she was an inch taller than her aunt.

“*Well, nobody’s perfect,*” replied Allegra, challenging her niece in the Movie Quote game they often played.

Reese raised a brow. “That’s *easy* – ‘Some Like It Hot’.”

Allegra sighed exasperatedly and bowed in defeat. “Alright kiddo, I’ll get you with the next one,” she threatened.

Sienna slung an arm over Reese’s shoulder. “Right, you two. Food’s ready so let’s eat. And Allegra, no hard meat jokes – not in front of the 13-year-old, however precocious she may be.”

Allegra laughed. “I promise.” She followed her sister to the dining room and took a seat at the grand oak table.

“Speaking of precocious, I’m gonna need to go up a bra size,” said Reese. At 13, she had her mother’s dark hair and hazel eyes, and was already beginning to echo her hourglass figure.

“Wish I could say the same.” Allegra glanced down at her size six frame with its non-existent curves. “This milkshake ain’t bringin’ no boys to the yard,” she said, adopting a heavy American accent.

Sienna and Reese laughed in unison. “Why would you need to bring any boys to the ‘yard’ when you have Andrew?” asked Sienna, referring to Allegra’s boyfriend of two years.

“Oh, Andrew. He’s my rock, but it doesn’t hurt to catch the eye of a handsome stranger now and again – maintains the ego.” She paused and gestured towards Reese. “I’m not being a bad influence on the rugrat, am I?”

Sienna laughed. “This rugrat has her life’s ideas, goals and principles already set in stone. I don’t think you, me *or* her father can sway those in any way!”

Reese smiled with wide-eyed innocence, making the two adults laugh.

“Anyway, enough about milkshakes,” said Allegra. “This wine is delicious and the roast – perfect.”

“Why, thank you, baby sister.” Sienna raised a glass. “To good times, handsome strangers and, er, potent milkshakes.” They laughed and clinked glasses.

The lights flickered on as Allegra walked into her apartment. “Andrew?” she called. “Are you here?” There was no reply.

She surveyed the empty sofa in the empty living room and looked wryly at the red wine stain on an

armrest. Andrew had warned her against choosing the cream corner suite but she hadn't listened. Walking in, she noticed that the haphazard pile of books on her coffee table had been straightened. She walked over and knocked a few off the top. *Better.* Her apartment, while neat, was distinctively lived in. Her bookcase was crammed with books, her kitchen table was littered with newspapers, and her walls were adorned with conflicting pieces of art, flown over the oceans by her best friend, Sahar. She *chose* to live with discord and passion. Andrew's place, on the other hand, was an exercise in minimalism; everything was clean, neat and sterile. Everything was *too safe*.

Shrugging off her coat, she switched on her answering machine.

"Hi Allegra. You have two new messages. One is from Andrew and the other is from Sahar. Would you like to listen to them?"

"Yes."

"The message from Andrew was sent today at 5.30 p.m."

"Hey sweets. Listen, I'm still caught up with the Carter case. I doubt I'll make it out at an earthly hour so I'll crash at mine tonight. You can call me at the office if you want. Talk to you soon. Love you." The machine clicked through to the next message.

"A Leg Rash, how's it going?" Sahar's smooth voice filled the room. "Listen, I'm in New York but I'm

flying back tomorrow for three days. I haven't seen you in ages. We have to meet up, okay? Call me."

Allegra glanced at the clock. 11 p.m. It was too late to bother Andrew and she could call Sahar the next day. She showered, changed into a slip, and lay back in bed, stretching luxuriously. As the satin sheets caressed her skin, she began to think about Andrew. She missed his bulk and shape next to her in bed. She pictured him kissing her, his dark hair brushing against her neck, his full lips on her skin, his weight crushing hers. She missed his arms and his body and his forceful touch. As she drifted off to sleep, her thoughts faded and curled away but not before whispering, *Andrew doesn't have dark hair.*

## CHAPTER TWO

Allegra walked up the corridor towards the ImageBox offices. As the double doors slid open, she nearly crashed into Christian, the youngest member of their small team.

“Oh, gosh, sorry Allegra. I, uh, I wasn’t looking where I was going,” he stammered.

“That’s okay.” Allegra smiled. “You haven’t seen Jonathan, have you?”

“Jonathan?” He looked at her blankly.

“Yes, Jonathan. You know, 6’2”, massive mop of curly black hair, Director of our company? Sits opposite you every day?”

Christian blushed and pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. “Okay, no need to take the piss. Yes, he’s in already.”

“Is he in a good mood?”

“Seems to be,” he said unsurely.

“Okay, great. Thanks, Christian.”

Allegra walked into the office and greeted Jonathan brightly. Barking orders into the phone, he waved in response. As she tossed her bag onto her desk, the last member of the team, Luka Karev, walked in. He looked Allegra up and down.

“Ha ha, Andrew must have done something right last night,” he said with a dirty smile.

Allegra scowled. “Must you be so vulgar first thing in the morning?”

“I’m just saying. You’re looking good, babe. Like some kind of glow.”

“And that kind of stuff usually works, does it?”

“Come now, I’m being genuine.”

“Genuine? Surely there isn’t a solar eclipse outside. That *is* the only time you can be genuine, right?”

“Ouch. You break my heart every morning,” he said with a grin.

Jonathan stood and interrupted their exchange. “Listen kids, can I have a few minutes?”

Allegra smiled at the way his head almost touched the ceiling.

“What’s up, Chief?” asked Luka.

“Christian, come over here and sit yourself down next to Allegra.” Jonathan waited. “Okay, I need you all to just relax for a minute because I’ve got something important to tell you.”

Allegra bit her lip nervously. *The Panacea decision must be in.*

“Okay. So you all know how much ImageBox

means to me and you are all like family. You have amazing qualities and between you, you have taught me more than you know. I like to act like the big boss around here but the truth is, without you all, I'm nothing and ImageBox would be nothing and that's why I'm so indebted to you.

"In the five years since its birth, ImageBox has grown from a twinkle in my eye to a real business serving hundreds of people all because you guys work like dogs to make it happen. I know you are dedicated to it one hundred percent and that's why it's heartbreaking for me to tell you this." He paused.

"Tell us what?" Allegra prompted.

"I've had an offer from BNAB," replied Jonathan, referring to the second largest advertising company in the UK.

"For ImageBox?" asked Luka. "Are you kidding me?" When Jonathan said nothing, he shot up out of his chair. "This is a joke, right? You're not serious. You want to sell ImageBox to those corporate, sterile, impotent bureaucrats?"

Jonathan grimaced. "They heard that we landed the Panacea account and were really impressed."

"We landed Panacea?" Allegra's eyes grew wide with surprise. She had worked day and night to perfect the Panacea pitch.

Jonathan nodded. "BNAB were considering a takeover for a while. Panacea was the decider. I resisted for a while but as you know, my father's really ill. This

way, I get to be with him in Paris.” He paused. “Listen, I know this is messed up. Believe me, if I thought I could do this any other way, I would, but I need to wrap up all loose ends. I’ve got to get my priorities straight.”

Allegra felt light headed. *Is this really happening?*

Jonathan continued: “As I’m sure you’ve figured out, BNAB will streamline our processes, meaning that your jobs will be assimilated into their existing structure. I wanted to tell you about this earlier but, to be honest, I wasn’t even sure I was going to go through with it – not until it came down to signing on the dotted line.”

“Jonathan, have you thought of maybe appointing a new director that can take care of things while you’re in Paris? Someone who wants to keep ImageBox instead of...” her voice trailed off.

“Instead of bastardising it,” Luka finished bitterly.

Hurt fled across Jonathan’s face. “Listen guys, I need you to understand. I didn’t want to do this but I had to. Family is important. You’re all fantastically talented. You’ll easily find other jobs.”

“How long do we have?” asked Allegra.

“Each of you will get three months’ gardening leave and substantial severance pay. I need you to know that I really, truly appreciate all the hard work you have put in.”

“Yes, but how long do we have together?”

He coughed. “They want us to halt everything.

They have representatives coming down today to secure all the data.”

“Which means?”

“Which means this is it. I didn’t think they would be so heavy handed about the takeover but they want to wrap it all up.”

“So we’re out of a job, as of today?” asked Luka.

Jonathan nodded, eyes downcast.

Allegra was torn between sympathy and disbelief. She willed herself to say something kind, to show him that she respected the decision. Instead, she said, “I’ll back up my personal emails and be gone in an hour.”

He looked at her in dismay. “Allegra, please.”

“Jonathan, it’s *fine*. People let each other down – it happens every day. I’m a big girl. I can deal.” She turned to her screen. Despite her words of nonchalance, her cheeks burned with anger. *Not you too*, she wanted to say. *The one man I’ve relied on these past four years. Now you too?*

Steaming water boiled over the top of the pan, landing with an angry hiss on the stainless steel of the cooker. Allegra yelped and turned down the heat. As she stirred in some salt, she heard the apartment door open. Andrew walked in and greeted her with a kiss.

“What’s cooking?” he asked with a warm smile. Even after a long day at his City law firm, he seemed fresh and happy, blue eyes bright and alert, blonde hair still glossy from his morning shower.

“Just making some pasta. Sit down. It’s almost ready.”

He sighed contentedly. “This is the life – a beautiful woman cooking a homemade meal. What more could I ask for?”

She smiled faintly. Andrew really was a man of simple desires. It was what attracted her to him when a mutual friend introduced them two years ago. She was typically drawn to men who were dark, mysterious and edgy, but found her barriers breaking down in the face of Andrew’s warmth, honesty and sincerity.

“How was your day?” he asked, forking in a mouthful of pasta.

Allegra sighed and shook her head.

Andrew’s face clouded over as he immediately realised that something was wrong. He reached forward and gently placed a hand on hers. “What’s happened?”

She sighed. “Jonathan. He’s selling ImageBox. I’ve lost my job.”

Andrew’s eyes grew wide with shock. “He’s selling up? But how can that be? He loves that place.”

“Evidently not.” Allegra took him through the morning’s events; a rambling account punctuated by Andrew’s frequent murmurs of consolation and assurance. “It was such a perfect job,” she finished resignedly. “I’ll never find something like it again.”

Andrew shook his head. “Crazy girl, of course you will. You’re young, unbelievably beautiful and scarily smart. The world is at your feet.”

She met his eyes. “You think I’m perfect, Andrew, but I’m not.”

He smiled and squeezed her hand. “Well, you’re as perfect as it gets. It’s going to be okay.”

She bit her lip, annoyed by his assurances. His unwavering belief in her left no room for self-doubt. As soon as she questioned herself, he swooped in, sealing the leak, ignoring the fact that sometimes, she needed the outlet.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay,” he repeated, mistaking her solemnity for anxiety.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “It is.” She drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. Her pyjama bottoms were torn at the knee so she pulled her loose black T-shirt over her legs, masking the hole.

Andrew watched her with concern. Her cheekbones, normally structured and defined, seemed to protrude, giving her a gaunt appearance. With her long hair tied up in a messy bun and a face free of makeup, she looked like a scared young child.

“I have an idea,” said Andrew, eyes suddenly bright. “Let’s move in together.”

Allegra stiffened. “Move in together?” she echoed.

“Yes. It’s perfect. I practically live here anyway. We’ll share the mortgage so there’s less pressure on you to find work and we’ll get to spend more time together. What do you think?”

The idea filled her with fear. She was absurdly territorial about her space and time. The thought of

owing half of it to Andrew terrified her. “I’m not sure,” she faltered. “We shouldn’t move in together just because I lost my job.”

“No, that’s not it,” he said eagerly. “I’ve been thinking of asking you anyway. We’ve been together for two years – it’s not like we’re rushing into this.”

She hesitated. “Can I think about it?”

Hurt flashed in his eyes. “You don’t want to?”

“I do but I just...” She shrugged. “I just need some time to think about it.” She loved Andrew but this was too much too soon.

He nodded. “Okay. That’s okay,” he said as understandingly as he could.

“Go take your shower. I’ll clean up in here,” she urged.

Andrew stood and left the room in silence. As she heard his footsteps on the stairs, she thought back to the early days of their relationship. Taking showers separately had been a ridiculous notion. *People settle into each other*, she thought wistfully.

Feeling guilty and conflicted, she decided she knew how to make him feel better. She padded over to the bathroom and stripped out of her clothes. Reaching up, she loosened her waist-length hair and shook it out. She stepped into the bathroom and was hit by a cloud of steam. It created a soft film on her skin, making it glisten with moisture. As she stepped into the shower, Andrew turned in surprise.

“Hey—” he started.

“Sssh,” Allegra stopped him. “Don’t talk. Just fuck me.”

He blinked in surprise. After a momentary silence, he reached forward and drew her close.

“Andrew,” she murmured, pulling him against her as her back hit the wall. “Fuck me.” She could feel the steam on her shoulders, on her hips, between her legs.

She gripped him hard, willing him to do the same, but his touch remained soft; frustratingly gentle. She burrowed into his chest. It made her forget that while there was love and warmth, she felt no excitement, no butterflies in her stomach, no spark ripping her in half. With a wilting sigh, she let him melt into her.

*Allegra Ashe cleaning on a Saturday night*, she thought wryly. The date was originally set aside for Jonathan’s birthday drinks but after the sell-out disaster, Allegra had decided to give it a miss. It was too late to organise anything else so she had resigned herself to an evening of cleaning.

She picked up the armful of paper she had put to one side and opened her front door to dump it in the recycling bin. As she struggled with the pile, half of it slipped out from under her arm.

“Dammit.” She bent down to gather the loose bits of paper. As she piled everything into the bin, she noticed a small card. ‘VOKOBAN’ was printed in bold letters along the top. Beneath it in smaller letters was the name ‘Michael Stallone’. She flashed back onto deep green

eyes and a disarming smile. She remembered the exact tone of his voice and the exact shade of his stunning eyes. She remembered every ridge of his beautiful face and the way he had made her feel – overpowered, overwhelmed.

She shook herself free of his memory and studied the small print on the card. There was a phone number but no address. Back in the apartment, she switched on her PC and opened a browser. She typed in the letters V-O-K-O-B-A-N and pressed ‘Search’. Small letters across the screen read, *Your search - VOKOBAN - did not match any documents.*

She frowned. How could Google not find anything about this supposedly wonderful company which comprised doctors, teachers and policemen all rolled into one? She then searched for ‘Michael Stallone’. This time there were 3,400,000 results. After skimming through the first few pages, she decided there was nothing useful there. She tried a few different search terms and even searched for his telephone number, but found nothing.

“Weird.” She glanced at the time – 7 p.m. She debated with herself for a few minutes before curiosity got the better of her. Grabbing her phone, she dialled 141 followed by the number on the card. *I’ll hang up. I’ll just see who picks up and then I’ll hang up.*

The phone rang precisely two times before a smooth, rich voice answered “hello”.

Allegra froze.

“Hello?” the voice repeated.

Flustered, she hit the ‘End Call’ button and backed away from the phone. *I’m such an idiot.* As soon as the thought left her mind, the phone began to ring. Her heartbeat quickened. *It can’t be him. It won’t be him.* She grabbed the phone. “Yes?” she asked, sounding curter than she had intended.

“Allegra?”

She breathed in deeply but her voice still shook. “Yes?”

“It’s Michael Stallone. You called me a minute ago.”

“I did? Erm, I did.” She paused. “How did you know it was me?”

“Caller ID,” he said simply.

“Caller ID? But you don’t have my number and I...” a pause, “I dialled it from a private number.”

He laughed. “Sorry, I should have explained when I gave you my card. Our phone technology overrides the masking function on incoming calls. It’s important because we need to know who’s calling us.”

“But...” her voice trailed off, thick with embarrassment.

“You called for a reason?”

“Yes. Well, no. I...” She paused. *Who the hell is this guy? What technology?*

“I take it you have reconsidered my offer?”

She shook her head. “No, no, I haven’t.”

He waited.

“I called because, well, because I was curious. I Googled Vokoban and I couldn’t find anything and I

was just curious. I didn't know you had some voodoo scheme going on over there where you could find out who's calling you and where they're calling from and everything down to the colour of their underwear."

"So you're not interested in working for Vokoban?"

"I..." She sighed. "I lost my job recently and I was thinking about your offer but I don't even know anything about the role so I'm not quite sure where I stand."

"Tell you what. If you come down to HQ, I'll run you through everything – the job description, the benefits, the conditions and pay."

"Why me though? You said you head-hunted me."

"I can't really explain unless I explain everything. If you come to HQ, I can give you a full briefing."

Allegra thought it over. Maybe this was a real opportunity.

"It won't take more than 30 minutes of your time. If you like what you hear, great. If not, then you don't lose anything."

She tried to focus on the words he was saying rather than the sound of his voice. "Okay," she agreed without further thought.

"Great." The smile was evident in his voice. "When is good for you?"

Allegra had all the free time in the world. "How is Monday morning? Maybe about 11?"

"Perfect. I'll arrange a pickup."

"Okay," she said breathlessly. "I'll see you then."

“Okay.” He paused. “Oh, and Allegra?”

“Yes?”

“Black and cream.”

“Excuse me?”

“The colour of your underwear. Black and cream.”

Her eyes grew wide.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said with a hint of amusement in his voice. With that, he ended the call.

Allegra closed her gaping mouth. She looked around her apartment nervously and shook her head. “Bloody lucky guess.” She switched off her PC and mulled over what she had done. Part of her was excited about the prospect of getting a new job. Part of her was apprehensive. And part of her just wanted to see Michael Stallone one more time.

On Monday morning, Allegra woke to an empty space next to her in bed, exactly the same as the day before. Only this time, there was a small post-it-note on the nightstand. She picked it up and read, “Hello my pretty, off to work. Just wanted to say that you look beautiful when you sleep. Love you lots. Cradle Snatcher x.”

She smiled. Andrew had given himself the moniker after Allegra had been asked for identification on the way in to an 18-certified film. “Do they think I’m dating a 17-year-old?” he had asked indignantly.

She got out of bed and padded over to her closet. Reaching to the top, she pulled out a shoebox and picked

out a bundle of post-it-notes. During the early days of their relationship, Andrew would leave notes for her in the strangest of places. She would take something out of the freezer and notice a note stuck in there, probably left for weeks before discovery. Or she would put the lid down on the toilet and find a note stuck on the top, telling her how much she was loved and adored.

As she added the new note to the pile, her fingers brushed the corner of an old photograph. She took it out carefully and stared at the image beneath the white cracks of age. It was one of her favourites but she couldn't bear to leave it on display. It pictured her mother in a long skirt and loose top, long dark hair flowing to her waist. In her arms was a four-year-old Allegra. A seven-year-old Rafael had his arms wrapped around her legs and an 11-year-old Sienna had one arm hung loosely around her, smiling brightly into the camera. They all looked so happy, eyes shining with youth and hope.

When their mother died of breast cancer at 39, the children suffered a crushing blow. At 15, Rafael became withdrawn and rebellious beyond the adolescent norm. Their father had walked out on them a long time ago so Sienna had been given legal status as her siblings' guardian, and though she did her best to fill the void left by their mother, it was simply impossible. The love and warmth that was once so abundant gave way to quiet grief and silent sorrow.

Rafael moved out as soon as he hit 16, burying his

pain in a field of distance. Sienna and Allegra regularly tried to draw him back into their small family unit but their mother's death had built a wall around his heart that neither of them could break.

Allegra stared at the little boy in the picture and realised that she missed her brother deeply. She resolved to call him, maybe even try a Sienna-style dinner and beg him to attend. She carefully put the photograph back into the box and placed it at the top of her closet. With a deep breath, she shut the door and readied herself for the day ahead.

As she finished dressing, the shrill ring of the doorbell interrupted her thoughts. She walked to the intercom, balancing a booted foot with a bare one.

"Ms Ashe?" a man questioned. "I believe you have an appointment."

"I'll be right down." Pulling on her other boot, she grabbed her coat and allowed herself one last look in the mirror. She was wearing a short-sleeved black top teamed with tight jeans, which accentuated what little curves she had. She didn't want to admit that she had made extra effort but her glossy hair was pinned up in an intricate style, her sparkling hazel eyes were highlighted with dark eyeliner and her full lips looked luscious in a light shade of rose she had never worn before. Satisfied, she left her apartment and greeted the gentleman at the door with a handshake.

"I believe you're expecting me?" he asked in a mild Scottish accent.

*Shaken, not stirred.* “Yes, I am. Thank you.” Settling into the luxurious seat, she tried to calm the butterflies in her stomach. She hadn’t told Andrew about the meeting, certain he would disapprove of meeting a potential employer without thoroughly researching the company first. She didn’t know what to expect but either way, she had nothing to lose.

When they reached their destination, the driver brought the car to a smooth stop and opened her door. “I will walk you in, Ms Ashe.”

“That’s okay. I’m sure I can find my way.”

“I insist,” he replied.

Allegra followed his long strides to the daunting double doors of an impressively grand building; a cross between the Old Bailey and the Bank of England. As they approached, the doors swung open slowly. The entrance hall was wide and grand but deceptively modern; all glass, chrome and black leather.

The driver led Allegra to a large bank of security desks. “Ms Ashe, this is Leo. I’m going to leave you with him. Leo, this is the 11 o’clock inductee. If you give me a call when she’s back out, I’ll come and pick her up.”

Leo was a 6’4” Samoan, built like stone. He asked for her driver’s licence, which he stared at intently for a full minute. “They’re definitely onto something with you,” he said, nodding approvingly.

“How so?”

Leo didn’t elaborate. Instead, he ran her through a

number of security checks and then told her to “turn left and head on through the double doors. You will be escorted by the gentleman waiting there.”

Past the doors, she walked through a second metal detector and was thoroughly frisked by a stern silver-haired woman. A guard came forward and led her by the arm towards a bank of lifts. She shrugged her arm out of his grip and waited with him in silence. The lift arrived and they began their ride up, stopping at the 15th floor.

“Your stop.” He pointed at the opening doors.

“Thank you.” Allegra swallowed nervously and stepped out. There, she froze, struck by the vision of Michael Stallone. Dressed in a sharp black suit and a crisp white shirt, he was more gorgeous than she remembered. His luscious hair was freshly cut and his smile revealed his deep dimples. Allegra suddenly felt completely underdressed. She held his gaze and shook his proffered hand.

“Thank you for coming. Was the ride in okay?”

His voice reminded her of warm honey. “Yes it was, thank you.” She thought of a statistic she had read somewhere – that 93 percent of communication is non-verbal. Their words seemed so banal compared with what she was feeling. It was strange and heady – completely intoxicating.

He led her down the bright corridor in long, powerful strides. She followed him, boots too loud on the hardwood floor. The stark white walls were

adorned with several paintings, offsetting the sterile feel of the place. Stopping at a large set of double doors, Michael entered a seven-digit code into a keypad. He then moved into position in front of a small black box mounted on the wall and had his retina scanned, finally gaining entry.

“Sorry about all the security,” he commented. “The powers-that-be are a little over-zealous about their privacy.”

Allegra raised a brow, but said nothing. She let him lead her through the building’s twists and turns. “This place is like a labyrinth.”

“Yes, it can be confusing for visitors. Only people who know their way around can work out where they need to go.”

“Huh. And where is it that *we* need to go?”

“We’re going to a training room.” He stopped abruptly at an unmarked door and went through another set of security checks before leading her into a large meeting room. Carpeted in cream, it was flooded with light from its floor-to-ceiling windows.

*So much for security*, thought Allegra. Just then, Michael pressed a button, bringing down shutters over every window. Artificial light filled the room, turning Allegra’s skin a pallid hue.

“I apologise for the lack of sun in here. Unfortunately, we will be spending a lot of time in this room. It is what we call the ‘Hub’”.

There were 20 black high-back chairs around a solid

oak table, each with a laptop, paper pad and pen set out in front of it. The distance between the pads and pens was identical. *Does someone go around with a ruler?* Allegra wondered.

“Please sit,” said Michael, more a command than an offer.

“Thank you.” Allegra chose a seat opposite him. “So when does the fun start?”

Michael hid the grimace on his face. “First, I need you to sign a few confidentiality agreements.” He waited as she signed the forms, and then sat next to her, swerving his chair to face her. She did the same until they were directly facing each other. “Allegra, I have made you sign all those forms but what I really need is for you to make a promise to me. I need you to look me in the eye and promise that you will not tell anyone what you learn here today.”

“I won’t.”

“You promise?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” she replied, smiling.

“Allegra, I’m serious,” he said, green eyes dark and sombre.

“Yes, I promise.”

He stared at her for a few moments and then nodded. “You remember the Madison McCall case a few years back?”

She nodded. “Of course. It was splashed all over the tabloids for a whole year.”

“You remember how they caught Jason Carr, her killer?”

Allegra thought back. “He molested another girl. Annie or Anna somebody.”

Michael nodded. “Anna Taylor. 12-year-old girl from Hammersmith.”

“Yes, that’s right. What about it?”

“My unit, my operation, caught Jason Carr. Here’s the crux: Anna Taylor was not Anna Taylor, 12-year-old girl from Hammersmith; she was 24-year-old Sara Kunis, a field agent from my unit.”

Allegra’s brow furrowed in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“Okay, here’s the complicated part. Two years ago, new clauses were added to the Sexual Offences Act 2003. You may remember some press about the major changes to the statutory rape laws?”

Allegra nodded.

“Okay, with these changes, there were a number of smaller amendments which passed through largely unnoticed. We refer to one such amendment as Clause 160. Are you okay so far?”

“Yes,” she said unsurely.

“Before Clause 160, an adult male could be convicted for having intercourse with a minor even if he wasn’t aware of her age. So, for example, if a 30-year-old man had sex with a 12-year-old girl even though he thought she was 18, we would have a case against him. Clause 160 allows us to do the opposite.”

“The opposite?”

“Clause 160 allows us to convict a man for having sex with a woman who is over 16 but one who he *thought* was a minor.”

She frowned. “I don’t follow.”

“Picture this. An adult male meets a 17- or 18-year-old. He likes her because she looks young. She tells him that she is 14 or maybe 15, he gets all hot and heavy over this and initiates a sexual relationship. Technically, it isn’t a crime because the girl is legal, but in his mind, this girl is 14. In his mind, he knows he is committing a crime but doing it regardless. These are the men we pursue.”

“But,” Allegra paused, trying to process what he was saying. “The girl is over 16. Why would she tell him she’s 14?”

“Well, she doesn’t. This law wasn’t designed for the general public. It was made specifically for us, to allow my unit to target suspected paedophiles, gather concrete evidence and convict them based on our investigations.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Well, that’s where the field agents come in. My job is to recruit women that can pass for young teens. Women like you.”

Allegra’s eyes grew wide. “You want to use me as *bait*?”

“I wouldn’t—”

“But... that’s entrapment. You’re dangling something in front of someone and enticing them into crime.”

Michael shook his head. “Clause 160 is exempt. It cannot be subject to the laws of entrapment since the sole reason for its existence is to allow investigations like the ones we conduct.”

“How is it that I’ve never heard about this Clause 160?”

“If you do some research you will see that these laws exist. They’re not at the forefront of public knowledge because we do our utmost to keep it that way, implementing the new DA-notices and media blackouts if and when necessary.”

Allegra pushed her chair away from the table. “I’m sorry. You– this is crazy.”

“Allegra, I know it sounds crazy but this is a real opportunity to make a difference. The pay is probably over twice what you make now. It’s intense but we do good work. We need you.”

“You need me?” she questioned. “Why me?”

“Because, Allegra, you’re 25 but you look 15. With the right clothes and makeup, you could look as young as 13.”

She grimaced. “But how did you find me?”

He sighed. “I was in the queue behind you in Waitrose a few weeks back. They asked you for ID when you tried to buy some wine. When I saw your face, I knew I had to have you.”

His choice of words made her stomach seize up. Mad as he sounded, he was the most beautiful man she had ever spoken to.

He continued: "Since Vokoban's inception two years ago, we have convicted 84 offenders. We failed to secure convictions in 13 cases. In general, that counts for a massive success rate. Sexual abuse cases are notoriously difficult to prove. We have 527 targets but only 72 field agents. The men that don't have an agent on their trail are out there chasing young children and feeding on the vulnerable. We are in a position to create 'pseudo-victims' who won't fall apart because they are specially trained to deal with this."

"There are 72 girls who have agreed to do this?" Allegra asked with disbelief.

"63 of those are female. The remaining nine are male field agents. Male recruitment has proved to be far more difficult as there is a huge paucity of adult males who look pre-pubescent."

Allegra shook her head. "I'm sorry. This is," she paused. "This isn't right."

"You're right – it isn't. It isn't right that men groom, rape and destroy defenceless young women, but we are in a position to stop them. Our field agents are supported one hundred percent of the way. We offer round-the-clock surveillance, high-level security, intense training, and therapy sessions to help you adjust. Our field agents have a failsafe system in place that will do everything possible to accommodate you. Field agents can take advantage of a huge range of benefits and have six-figure starting salaries."

Allegra stared at him, shocked that he could discuss

salaries in the same breath as these atrocities. “Where does this money come from? And if you have so much of it, why don’t you just put a tail on each of your suspects?”

“We receive funding from a number of different sources. We can’t passively trail these men. The only way we could convict them is if they go out and actually molest a young girl and we’re not going to wait for that to happen.”

“So you let them molest an agent instead?”

Michael grimaced. “Allegra, our agents have a support system in place. They are trained to deal with it – actual victims are not.”

She met his eyes. “And what exactly do agents have to do for their *six-figure salary*?” she asked mockingly.

His eyes flashed regret or sorrow or maybe anger. “The more you can do, the better.”

“‘More’?”

“We can’t convict a man just because he has a few conversations with a girl who he thinks is underage. It doesn’t matter how sexually charged those conversations are – we can’t touch him. There has to be... physical evidence.”

Allegra grew cold. “Physical evidence?”

“Yes. Field agents are under surveillance at all times during their contact with the target in question. If we are able to witness or record a sexual act between the two, we can secure a conviction.”

“A sexual act? What is specified as a sexual act?”

Allegra felt goosebumps rise on her skin. “A kiss? A touch?”

“No. That’s not enough. Clause 160 sets very specific criteria on what will qualify.”

She waited in expectation.

Michael rubbed his temple. “Oral sex, either given to or administered by the field agent; vaginal or anal penetration either penile, digital or using a foreign object; and in cases where we have a good grounding, kissing and fondling.”

Allegra was stunned. *What kind of organisation is this?* She ran Michael’s words through her head. “So, in other words, ‘field agent’ is a glorified way of saying ‘prostitute’?”

Michael winced at her sharp tone. “Allegra, I can understand your reservations. Many of our agents have the exact same reaction you are having right now. It is a bizarre and crazy project but we are effective. It *works*. We have uncovered more of these bastards than the normal justice system has in the past five years put together.”

Allegra felt horrified by what she was being asked to do. She stood. “I’m sorry, I can’t do this.”

“Allegra, let me finish the session.”

“I can’t.” She headed towards the door, but he blocked her path, shadowing her small frame.

“Before you run away and think we’re a bunch of madmen, let me finish, okay?”

“No.” She had heard enough.

His eyes bore into her. “Think about what you’re doing. You are in a real position to help the victims of crimes you can’t even imagine.”

She shook her head. “That’s not my responsibility.”

“Whose responsibility is it, Allegra?” Michael’s voice rose. “The government’s? We *are* the government. It is *our* responsibility, but we can’t do it without you.”

“I’m sorry, it is not my responsibility,” she repeated calmly.

He stared at her in angry silence. Then, quick as a light switch, his eyes grew cold. “I see – I’m sorry I wasted your time.” He gathered the papers on the table. “I’ll have Leo send a guard up to collect you.”

“Michael,” she started.

“Thank you for coming and letting me have your time. Have a safe journey home.” With that, he walked out.

Allegra sat, drained and, strangely, rejected. She looked at the massive clock on one side of the room. It was only 11.30. It felt like she had been there for hours. What were they asking her to do? What was going through the minds of the 72 agents that were already working for Vokoban? *Mad place. This is a mad place and I need to get out.* Allegra headed towards the exit. Just as she grabbed the handle, the door flew open.

“Mr Stallone tells me he’s done with you, Ms Ashe,” said the security guard.

Allegra nodded. “I believe he is.”

“Godamn it!” Michael slammed his door shut. It swung back open which only aggravated him further. His assistant, Lyla, stuck her head in the doorway with a questioning look. Michael shook his head.

“What happened?”

“Stone cold wall. Impenetrable.”

“Well, it’s a lot for a girl to take,” said Lyla soothingly. “And she’s not the first to go running from this place.”

“But she’s different. She has what it takes.” Michael slumped into his chair. He swivelled in it from left to right as he contemplated the thought of losing Allegra. “You’ve seen the surveillance pictures of her, Lyla. She looks like a kid. With the right clothes, she would look even younger. Girls like her don’t come around every day.” He paused. “She could be the one for Drake.”

Lyla’s eyes widened. “This girl went running and you’re thinking of assigning her to *Drake*? Are you kidding me? We need to put a seasoned agent on his trail – it’s not going to work otherwise.”

Michael shook his head. “No, that’s the completely wrong thing to do. Drake likes his girls young and fresh. You can’t say to me that some of our long-timers have that freshness. You can *see* the cynicism in their eyes, Lyla. You can see what lies beneath, the ice that has formed. Allegra has a quality that no amount of training can produce.”

Lyla leaned against the doorframe. “Perhaps you’re right. He *has* proved to be a difficult bastard to nail.”

“And Allegra could be the one that reels him in. I know she can do it. You’ve seen the profile of Drake’s victim – brunette hair with pretty hazel eyes.”

Lyla tapped her pen against her thigh, thinking it over. Finally she nodded. “Then pull out the stops.”

He looked up in surprise. “Really? So you see it too?”

Lyla nodded. “She could be the one.”

Michael sat back in his chair, a slow smile spreading on his lips.

## CHAPTER THREE

Allegra ran into the small restaurant on the Southbank. Shaking off the rain, she spotted Sahar straight away. Dressed in a figure-hugging black T-shirt and black slacks, her best friend looked like a movie star.

“Goddess.” Allegra hugged her tightly and slipped into the booth. It had been months since they had seen each other.

“What’s up, Leg? You seem washed out.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“No, I’m being serious, babe. What’s going on?” Sahar took a sip of wine, drawing the attention of every man in the restaurant.

“I’m okay, just had a rough few weeks.”

“Andrew?”

Allegra shook her head. She had barely seen him since he suggested moving in together, two weeks ago.

“The job? It’s being out of work, isn’t it? Idleness always did drive you mad.”

Allegra shrugged. “Maybe. I’ve been job hunting desperately but there seems to be absolutely nothing.”

“Why don’t you go travelling? Go somewhere nice with lawyer-boy and if he’s too busy, go on your own.”

Allegra sighed. “I don’t know, Sahar. It’s a nice idea but I’ve grown up a bit and have responsibilities – a mortgage for starters.”

“Leg, if that’s what you’re worried about, fuck it. I’ll buy that hole of yours for you.”

“Don’t be crazy. You know I wouldn’t let you do that.” With regular modelling work on top of the lavish gifts various men insisted on forcing upon her, Sahar could very well buy Allegra’s apartment a few times over.

Sahar scoffed. “You and that stupid chip.”

“Chip?”

“That chip on your shoulder that proclaims, ‘Stand back for I am Allegra the Brave. I shall wander the Earth and all Creation on my Own and gather my means on my Own and live my life on my Own and need no one for I am happiest on my Own’.”

Allegra shook her head. “It’s not like that.”

“It is *so* like that,” Sahar insisted. “You don’t let anybody help you.”

“Of course I do.”

“Oh, yeah? When? I mean, jeez, you couldn’t even ask Andrew to put up that cheap-ass monstrosity from Ikea – you had to do it yourself. You remember that?”

Allegra grew silent.

Sahar's expression grew soft. "Listen, I don't mean to be so hard on you. You know I love you, right?"

Allegra nodded.

"Even though you *are* an obstinate little heifer."

"And I love you even though you're a bitch."

"Who knew a dog and a cow could get along so well?" mused Sahar in seriousness.

Allegra laughed. She always felt at ease in Sahar's company. She thought back to their days at university. On first meeting, Allegra, short and awkwardly thin, had felt painfully inferior to Sahar, statuesque and stunning with her Kenyan exoticism. Through their first few months as roommates, however, they became close friends, helping each other through the trials of university and then life in the real world. Allegra knew she could always rely on her friend, but also that she never would.

"So how *is* lawyer-boy?" Sahar interrupted her thoughts.

She shrugged. "He's well. He's just been busy with work."

Sahar studied her for a second. "Tell me."

Allegra sighed in acquiescence. "He asked me to move in together."

Sahar's eyes grew wide. "He asked *you* – child of darkness, misanthrope extraordinaire – to move in together? Is he crazy?"

Allegra shook her head. "It's not that I don't want to. It's just that..."

“You don’t want to,” finished Sahar. “Leg, don’t feel guilty about it. We all have issues – he should know what yours are.”

“I don’t–”

“Hey, this is *me* you’re talking to,” Sahar said before her friend could voice denial.

Allegra sighed and nodded. “You’re right. I don’t know what he was thinking.”

“Listen, I’ll kill you if you ever tell anyone I quoted Marilyn Monroe, but she said this thing once, which made a lot of sense: ‘I make mistakes, I am out of control and at times hard to handle. But if you can’t handle me at my worst, then you sure as hell don’t deserve me at my best.’ That’s you. And, in some ways, that’s me. That’s all the people who are a little bit screwed up, but who are also interesting and passionate and engaged. But it’s not Andrew. I’ve always thought he was good for you but I sometimes wonder if you don’t need someone who *does* make mistakes, who *is* hard to handle, someone who’s hard to figure out, who’s passionate and wild and hard to tame.” She paused. “You *do* want to be with him, right?”

Allegra frowned and nodded. She lifted her empty glass. “I think it’s time for a top up,” she said, not quite ready to acknowledge the truth in her friend’s words.

Sahar nodded and sat back. She knew what Allegra was like. She knew she needed space and time to move at her own pace. She lifted and peered into her own empty glass. “I think so too,” she agreed quietly.

Lyla Stannard hated workaholics. She hated people who carried the office around 24/7. After a failed marriage to an A&E doctor she knew how overworking could infest and destroy one's personal life. That is why she made her best efforts to switch off from Vokoban when she went home and that is why her shoulders drooped when she saw who was calling her mobile.

"Michael. Do *not* tell me that you're still in the office."

"Lyla, I just wanted to run my plan past you."

She groaned but Michael ignored it.

"As you know, I've been going over all the recon and the surveillance on the Ashe case. I couldn't find anything usable in her history or Crawford's history so I took it all to a few of our psychs. They think the niece angle could work."

Lyla rolled her eyes. "Michael, you have other agents to look after. Allegra is monopolising your time."

"Lyla, this will work. I just need to execute it properly."

"It won't be enough. She practically went screaming from the place."

"Yes, but this is our way in. Personalising the problem always works."

Lyla sighed exaggeratedly.

"Okay, okay, I get the picture. I'm going. I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to be in the office over the weekend so if anything comes up, let me know, okay?"

"Yes Michael," she said in monotone. She had no

idea what could possibly come up that would make her call him in the office on a Saturday but she argued no further.

“Thanks Lyla.”

“Michael, take it easy, okay?”

“You too,” he said, knowing full well that she said it as a warning rather than a parting. He hung up the phone and sat back in his chair, satisfied.

Allegra awoke with a hangover. Sahar had persuaded her to venture away from the usual choice of mocktail – a decision she was now paying for with a throbbing headache. She had had a restless night and felt groggy and lethargic. Yawning, she stepped out of bed and tried to shake the feeling of uselessness from her veins. She didn’t want to spend another Saturday alone so she called Sienna and arranged dinner.

Fixing a cup of coffee, she switched on all the heaters in an effort to warm her apartment. She picked up her mail and sifted through it. Among the junk was a plain white envelope with no postmark. Inside was a newspaper clipping. ‘Girl of 14 commits suicide after years of molestation’, read the headline. Allegra felt her stomach knot. *Michael.*

She skimmed through the article. Melissa Hart, a 14-year-old girl in Norfolk, had slit her wrists in her bedroom. A simple note was found with the words “Ask Dick” written on it. The article went on to describe how Melissa had been molested from the age

of five to 14 by her neighbour Richard Jones. Police had found 84 pictures of a naked or near-naked Melissa at varying ages in Jones's house. He had been arrested and was currently in custody.

Allegra felt compelled to read on. Thirty-seven of the pictures reportedly showed full and graphic penetration while five depicted 'sadistic sexual acts'. Allegra felt her stomach churn. This was obviously Michael's sick attempt at changing her mind. She screwed the envelope into a ball and flung it into the kitchen bin. She thought of practical things – emptying the garbage, buying groceries, paying her bills – and slowly pushed Melissa Hart out of her mind.

Allegra washed her hands and surveyed her reflection next to Reese. They were both wearing black jumpers and both had their hair tied up in a ponytail. To the casual observer, they looked like school friends.

"Are you okay?" asked Reese. "I mean, I know you're beautiful and all, but staring at yourself like that is pretty egotistical."

Allegra smiled. "No, I was just thinking."

"Bout what?"

She shook her head. "Nothing important." She slung an arm over Reese's shoulder. "C'mon. Let's go. You know how your mum likes to order as soon as we sit down." They headed out of the bathroom and joined Sienna at a corner booth.

Tassili's, a small Italian restaurant in Soho, served

the best calzone in the city. All the waiters could speak Italian and would flirt amorously with customers and celebrate boisterously whenever a rookie dropped and smashed a plate or glass. It was a warm, inviting place that served up good food with excellent service.

Visits were bittersweet for Allegra and Sienna. The smells and sounds reminded them of their mother who often spoke to them in Italian, determined that her children should learn their mother tongue. Anything they had managed to learn was now diluted into fragmented words and phrases.

Sienna gave their order to a particularly handsome waiter and rolled up her sleeves, ready for a hearty meal.

Munching on some bruschetta, Allegra turned to Reese. “How’s the violin going? How long ’til the concert?”

“Three months. It’s okay. I’m playing the Devil’s Trill Sonata, which is giving me a permanent headache. I’m practising for hours every day. It’s slow but I’m getting there.”

“Am I gonna get a preview?”

“*Patience Iago.*”

Allegra laughed. “That’s easy. You’re quoting ‘Aladdin’. Jafar says it to Iago when they’re talking about getting rid of Princess Jasmine.”

Reese huffed. “Okay, smarty pants. Next time it’ll be some pretentious French film that’ll completely catch you out.”

“Bring it on.” Allegra grabbed Reese in a mock headlock and messed up her hair. “So how are you

finding time to practise what with your French classes and karate classes and ballet classes?”

“I do *not* do ballet!” said Reese indignantly. “You make us sound like some terribly clichéd middle-class family.”

Allegra laughed. “You *are* a terribly clichéd middle-class family!”

“Hey, *you’re* the one who’s dating a lawyer.”

“Ouch,” conceded Allegra.

“Speaking of Andrewnicus, how come he didn’t come out tonight? I haven’t seen him in ages.”

Allegra shrugged. “Busy as usual. What about Stephen? Where’s he?”

“In Bruges on business,” answered Sienna. “Be careful,” she threw at Reese who was on her way to the lobster tank, part of her Tassili’s ritual.

“When’s he back?”

“Tonight. You know he doesn’t like to be away too long. I’m lucky that way.” She glanced at Reese. “*She’s* lucky. What I wouldn’t do to have had dad around when we were growing up.”

Allegra snorted. “We did just fine without him.”

Sienna nodded. “No, I know but,” she sighed, “it just would have been easier on all of us, you know? To have him here to help us figure things out.”

Allegra said nothing.

Sienna folded and refolded her napkin until it was a tiny triangle in her hand. “I know we’ve gone over this but do you ever think about finding him?”

Allegra scowled. “He *chose* to abandon us. He had a wife and three children and he decided that it wasn’t the life for him. We haven’t changed our names or locations. If he *wanted* to find us, he would have.”

“But, it’s not so easy.”

“Open your eyes, Sienna. It’s the twenty-first century. We’re on the electoral roll for God’s sake! It doesn’t take a brain surgeon to figure out where we are.”

Chastened by Allegra’s outburst, Sienna grew pensive. Their father may have been low on responsibility but he was still their father. She resented herself for admitting it but they *had* needed him. They had needed someone to guide them, someone to lead them and discipline them, someone to take control.

Reese bounded back, oblivious to the sudden tension at the table.

Allegra plastered on a smile. “Here’s one for you,” she said brightly. “*Not another word – and I am never, never to hear of you going to the surface again. Is that clear?*”

Reese laughed. “I see what you did there – clever but not subtle.”

Allegra raised a brow.

“I was playing with the lobsters which led you to Sebastian in ‘The Little Mermaid’.”

Allegra groaned in defeat. “Okay, you little freak, who says the quote?”

Reese smiled triumphantly. “Triton. Ariel’s mighty, all-powerful father.”

Allegra nervously tapped her fingers on the counter as she eyed the white envelope. It had no address and no postmark, just like the one she had received yesterday. She didn't want to play this game with Michael. Opening the envelope would be like rolling the dice. She traced her fingers along the edges. A stray thought wondered if he had used his tongue to moisten the seal. Visions of his green eyes and powerful arms flashed in her mind.

Making a quick decision, she tore open the envelope and reached inside. She took out a Polaroid and winced at the image. It was of a young girl spread-eagled on a bed. Her arms were tied to the bedpost above her head and she was completely naked. Her breasts were mere buds in her chest and her crotch only had a light smattering of hair. She was looking straight at the camera with vacant, unfeeling eyes. Along the bottom of the picture, a handwritten caption read, 'Melissa Hart: Picture 68'.

"He—" Allegra caught her breath as anger flooded her veins. She stormed to her bedroom and pulled her purse out of her bag. Rifling through it, she took out Michael's business card and punched his number into her mobile.

"Michael Stallone." He sounded breathless. Panting, he audibly steadied his breathing.

*Was he? Could he be?* The thought that Michael Stallone could have a girlfriend hadn't even crossed Allegra's mind. He seemed so focused on his work.

“Is— is this a bad time?” she faltered. *It’s a weekday morning.*

He breathed in deeply. “No, I just ran up the stairs to get to my phone.”

The relief usurped her anger.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She tried to form the words she wanted to say but was still thrown by the sound of his voice. “The things you’ve been sending me – I want you to stop.”

He coughed. “Allegra, I want you to see the kind of thing we’re up against.”

“There is no *we*, Michael. It’s what *you’re* up against.”

He sighed. “Vokoban needs you. You can help us stop men like Richard Jones.”

“It’s not my responsibility.”

“Is that the attitude you take to everything, Allegra?” Anger grew in his voice. “Global warming? Nothing to do with me. War crimes? Nothing to do with me. Man raping a child on the street? Nothing to do with me.”

“You are *out* of line.”

“It exists, Allegra. I didn’t send you that picture to get a rise out of you. I sent it to show you that it exists.”

“I’m not stupid, Michael. I *know* it exists but I can choose not to be a part of that world.”

“Exactly! You have a *choice* – girls like Melissa Hart don’t,” he countered.

“I am ending this conversation.” Allegra fought to control her rising voice.

“Allegra—”

“Do *not* send me anything else, Michael,” she said coldly. “If you continue to harass me, I will tell the world about Vokoban.” With that, she hung up and flung the phone onto her bed. It wasn’t so much the words he said that shook her defences, but the anger and intensity in his voice. She lay back on her bed and covered her eyes with the palms of her hand, shielding out the morning sun. A film quote wandered into her mind: *The flame that burns twice as bright burns half as long*. She closed her eyes. “Screw him,” she said quietly.

A week went by and Allegra settled into a routine. Andrew, if he was staying over, would kiss her goodbye. She would then spend the day job hunting, watching television and creating errands to keep busy before eating a lonely dinner and heading to bed.

On a few occasions, she walked to Crossharbour to clear her head. She would stare into the water and question why she wasn’t happy. She knew that unemployment was making her increasingly lugubrious, but she had a lot more going for her. She had a man who loved her, a best friend who would kill for her and a family that cared for her, so why did she feel so empty?

She needed something to do. She needed excitement, pace and passion. She hated these days that seemed to stretch for weeks.

At 4 p.m., Andrew's phone rang for the 27th time that day.

"Andrew Crawford," he answered, suppressing a yawn.

"Andrewnicus, it's Reese."

"Hey, what's up?" he said brightly.

"I wanted to remind you that it's Allegra's birthday on May 14th. I know how useless men can be with these things."

He laughed. "Thanks kiddo, but I have it covered."

"Oh yeah, what are we getting her?"

"I can't say."

"Come oooooon."

"Sorry kiddo. I can't say."

"A clue?"

"No."

"Something big? Something small?"

"I can't say."

Reese gasped. "Oh my God. It's a ring, isn't it? You're going to propose!"

Andrew's shoulders drooped. *Damn these women and their intuition.*

Reese waited, patient in the face of Andrew's silence.

Finally, he sighed. "Do you think she'll say yes?"

Reese screeched on the other end of the line.

"Reese. Reese, ssh. Someone might hear you."

"Don't worry, mum's out in the garden." A whoop of delight. "Man, it's about time someone tied her down!"

Andrew flinched at her choice of words. “Reese,” he said, deadly serious. “Do you think she’ll say yes?”

She paused. “Why wouldn’t she? You guys are totally in love.”

“Yeah,” he replied wistfully. He loved Allegra deeply but sometimes he felt like a stranger, locked out of the rawest parts of her.

“Can I tell mum?” Reese interrupted his thoughts.

“No! You can’t say anything to anyone – promise me.”

She groaned. “Okay, but it’s gonna be hard keeping this to myself.”

“Reese, promise me.”

“Okay, okay, I promise. Let me know what happens as soon as.”

“I will.”

After hanging up, Andrew thought over the conversation. He was so caught up in Allegra. Growing up, he had never had to fight for female attention. His easy charm mixed with his affable character allowed him to make friends, both female and male, easily. When he had started dating Allegra he knew she had barriers but he was also confident that he could break them down. After two years, he was still trying. It wasn’t that she was cold or emotionless but rather that you never really knew what she was thinking. There was a part of her that rejected emotional intimacy and shielded her innermost thoughts. Wasn’t love all about removing the masks we put on for strangers? Andrew still felt shut out. He hoped that asking her to marry

him would finally break through and make her his, permanently and completely.

Allegra blew on her hot coffee and curled up on the sofa. It was when she placed her cup on the table that she spotted the DVD case neatly placed next to the morning paper. She frowned, trying to remember if she had seen it there this morning. She reached over and opened the case. Inside was an unlabelled DVD. Perhaps Andrew had put it there without telling her? She debated whether to watch it or not. Maybe it was one of Andrew's quirky little surprises he used to spring on her; some cheesy message telling her how much he loved her.

She slipped the DVD into the player and pressed play. A young man with sandy blonde hair and blue eyes appeared on screen. He was dressed in a white cotton T-shirt and khaki trousers, and stood in a kitchen holding a cup of coffee.

Allegra frowned and looked over the DVD case again. There was no indication of what it was.

Suddenly, a baby's cry emanated from the screen. The young man set down his coffee cup and ran upstairs. The point of view changed to the top of the stairs and showed him running up, concern etched onto his face. He walked into a nursery and up to a bed on which the baby was placed. He began to coo at his daughter soothingly. Like magic, she stopped crying. Allegra smiled.

The scene cut abruptly to a young woman in a darkened living room curled up on a sofa, uncannily reflecting Allegra's own position. The woman looked at the baby monitor and listened to her husband coo to their baby. After a short moment of silence there was the distinct sound of bedsprings creaking. The baby started to shriek. The creaking became louder and louder but the camera remained on the woman's face. The baby's screams were drowned out by the animalistic grunts of adult pleasure. A single tear fell from the woman's eyes.

Two simple words appeared on screen: *Stop rape.*

Allegra drew back as if hit physically. 'NSPCC' appeared in small green letters across the screen. A moan of disgust escaped her mouth as her mind traitorously repeated the scenes on the DVD. Deep moans of guttural male pleasure rang in her ears.

Furious, she took out the DVD and tried to split it in two. When it refused to break she stormed to the kitchen and threw it in the bin. She lifted the bag, walked out of her apartment, and threw it into the communal bin outside. She didn't want it in her living room. She didn't want it in her apartment or under her skin or in her life.

She turned back towards her apartment door and did a double take. There, in all his righteous glory, stood Michael Stallone. Clad in a perfectly tailored wool overcoat, his powerful frame towered over Allegra.

"You bastard," she snarled, stunned into aggression.

“How dare you?” Lost in fury, she launched into him physically, forcing him away from her apartment, away from her body, away from her life.

Michael held her arms, containing her anger effortlessly. “Allegra, calm down.”

“Don’t you tell me to calm down!” she spat, struggling in his grip. “You sent me that disgusting tape. What the hell did you *think* my reaction would be?”

“Allegra, please just listen to me,” he said soothingly.

“No!” She freed her arms and backed away.

“Ten minutes of your time is all I want.”

“Nothing you say will make me change my mind so just leave me alone.”

“Hear me out Allegra, please.” He advanced on her slowly.

She shook her head angrily. “Just leave.”

“Listen, what if Melissa Hart was Reese?”

Her head snapped up as anger bubbled to her throat. Before she had a chance to respond, Michael continued.

“We go through life thinking, ‘that can never happen to me’ or ‘that would never happen to the people I love’, but it *does* happen, Allegra. Cancer happens. Road traffic accidents happen. Burglary and murder happen. *Rape* happens. We are trying to put these sick bastards away and we have finally found an effective way to do it. Why am I pursuing you? Because even though we have 72 field agents, it’s

nowhere near enough. We *need* you, Allegra. I'm just saying give us a chance. If you feel doubt at any point during an operation we will accommodate that."

She shook her head. "You expect me to agree to being *touched* by these disgusting men? Men like Richard Jones? Men who get off on tying up 14-year-old girls and acting out their sicknesses?"

"Allegra, we put away men like that. That's the whole point. For every target of yours we convict, that's one fewer victim out there in the world."

"And what about *me*? What about all your so-called 'field agents'? Are we not victims? What makes us different?"

"You're not helpless and alone. Allegra, I will be with you every step of the way. I will pull you out as soon as you start to feel uncomfortable. We can give you a repeat offender – you won't need to engage in proper physical contact." His green eyes implored her.

*I'm gasoline. I'm burning clean.*

He reached out and touched her chin, lifting it slightly. "Come on, what do you say?"

She stared back at him, suddenly wishing she could give him the answer he so desperately wanted. "I can't. I'm sorry."

He exhaled deeply and shook his head. "Just know that I'm not ready to let you go." With that, he turned and walked away.

Allegra watched him leave, both riled and comforted by his parting words.

“Hey, you okay? You seem a bit pale.” The whites of Andrew’s eyes shone in the darkness.

“I’m okay.” Allegra’s smile failed to reach her eyes.

Andrew propped himself up on his pillow. “Cabin fever?”

“Something like that.”

He smiled comfortingly. “Tell you what, how about we go away at the middle of the month? Just you and me. Maybe a weekend in Paris or Rome or Venice? What do you think?”

Allegra brightened. She loved Italy. The smells and sounds reminded her of childhood. She smiled up at Andrew and nodded happily.

“Oh, she smiles!” he joked.

“Thank you,” she whispered, curling up against his body beneath the duvet. He spoke to her gently about the sights they could see and the things they would do, and watched her slowly drift off to sleep. *I will wait forever if that’s what it takes to make her ready.* He kissed her forehead and wrapped her up in his arms before closing his eyes and succumbing to slumber.

She was in a dark place and could hear the slow drip drip of a leaking tap or pipe. There was a small light in the distance. She started towards it but felt her bare feet squelch into something warm and wet. She looked down to see dark liquid seep through her toes. It made her shiver in disgust. Her flimsy slip did nothing to shield her from the icy chill that curled around her

skin. She crossed her arms over her chest and continued towards the light.

As she got closer she heard the low murmur of voices. She hesitated for a moment before slowly pushing the door open. She froze as she took in the scene before her. A man, or what looked like a man, stood in the middle of the room. He was topless and had enormous bulging muscles. His head was bald, save two thick ropes of hair growing from the top. The nose ring hanging from his nostrils made him look like an angry bull, snarling at the corner of the room. Allegra's heartbeat quickened at the sound. She wanted to turn and run but a morbid fascination chained her there. Her gaze followed his and she gasped as she noticed the small white figure on top of a rock-like slab. It was a young girl chained at the wrists. She was lying back, naked, with her legs splayed open. *Melissa Hart.*

The man turned, revealing his fully engorged penis, red with angry, pulsating blood. He walked to the slab and stood behind Melissa, crotch level with the top of her head. He grabbed her face and clawed at her mouth, ripping it open with his powerful fists. Her screams only made him hungrier, made him want to hurt her more. Holding her nose and throat, he rammed himself into her mouth, making her writhe with pain and fear.

He pushed deeper and deeper, causing her to choke. Heaving himself onto the slab, he placed his knees on

either side of her face and ground himself against her tongue and throat. His actions grew violently frenzied until finally, he shook and juddered and exploded in her mouth. The girl twisted on the slab and spat, choking, gagging and crying. Her head rose and she made eye contact with the woman in the doorway.

Allegra screamed. The girl didn't resemble Melissa; she had Reese's face, Reese's hair and Reese's eyes.

The man's head snapped towards Allegra. He smiled manically, revealing bloody red teeth. As he ran towards her, she saw the whip in his hand. He drew it back and then whipped it forward. Allegra screamed in terror.

She shot up in bed, her nightgown soaked in sweat. Gasping for air, she frantically fumbled for her lamp and snapped it on. Andrew, breathing softly beside her, was still asleep. She could have sworn she had woken up screaming.

She stepped out of bed on shaky legs and walked to the bathroom. There, she paused, leaning against the sink to catch her breath.

"Dream. Just a dream." Splashing cold water on her face, she wiped away the stringy strands of hair stuck to her forehead. "Just a dream." The demonic face of the man in her dream flashed in her mind, his muscles bulging with frantic movement.

"Reese," Allegra's shaky whisper evaporated in the stark light. Reaching out, she lowered herself onto the cold porcelain edge of the bath. There she sat until the

shivers subsided and the images in her head blurred into incoherent greys. When her breathing finally steadied, she forced herself back into the bedroom.

Resting her head next to Andrew's, she breathed deeply and closed her eyes. *Just a dream.* Her heartbeat slowed but her mind refused to quieten. It whispered a thousand thoughts, each one fighting for space before drowning in a sea of voices. She opened her eyes and the clamour grew silent. Turning on her side, she stared at the slats of her closet, silently counting the white panels. *Sixty.* Tentatively, she closed her eyes and tried to focus on the number – *sixty, sixty, sixty* – but found it slipping away beneath wet sounds of gagging and vomiting. Familiar eyes, now shallow and vacant, looked up to meet hers.

Her eyes snapped open, pushing away images of bloody red teeth smiling at her demonically. She wasn't ready to face her thoughts. She couldn't. Turning on her back, she stared at the ceiling, tracing and retracing a huge 6-0 on its dark cream surface. The spindly arms of slumber curled around her chest and throat but she refused to succumb. Instead, she lay there until traces of dawn filtered through the blinds and Andrew stirred beside her. She hid her face as he rose from bed and went through the motions of his morning routine, only momentarily closing her eyes when he silently kissed her cheek. She heard the front door close and lay still for a while. After a long moment, she stepped out of bed and walked to the kitchen. She reached for the

phone and punched a set of numbers in quick succession. One ring, two, three.

“Yes?” asked a crisp, clear voice.

“Do you really think I can pass for 14?” Silence. “*Tell me.* Do you really think I can pass for 14?”

“Yes,” said Michael Stallone.

“Then I’m in.”

“I’ll have a car pick you up at 09.00,” he said without missing a beat.

“I’ll be ready.”

“Good.” A pause. “Allegra?”

“Yes?”

“You’re doing the right thing.”

“Of course,” she replied sardonically. Ending the call, she walked to her closet and slowly, methodically, laid out her clothes. Undressing in silence, she stepped into the shower and set the water just below scalding.

The lift’s swift ascension made Allegra giddy. Smoothing her black skirt, she raised her chin and swallowed hard. She was determined to get through the day unscathed. The silver doors opened to reveal Michael standing alone, every pore of his skin exuding ease and confidence. Dressed in a slate grey suit with a salmon coloured shirt, he looked like one of those Ralph Lauren models with their dark eyebrows perfectly arched over smouldering eyes.

Allegra shook his hand firmly and noticed a tiny beauty spot by the corner of his right eye. It somehow

offset his flawless features, stopping them short of sickeningly perfect.

“Everything okay? You feeling alright?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

“It’s going to be a long day today. If at any time you feel like a break, let me know and we’ll take time out for as long you like. It’s important that—”

“I’ll be fine,” she interrupted.

Michael paused and then nodded. In silence, he led her to the hub and watched her take the same seat she had last time. He followed suit and turned to look at her.

“Firstly, I want to say a real deep thank you for getting up today and coming here. It took a lot of courage. Not many people would—”

“I don’t expect this bleeding heart stuff from you so let’s just get on with it,” Allegra interjected.

Michael stopped and watched her eyes, challenging him to challenge her. Instead, he nodded and moved on: “Today I’m going to run you through all the details of Vokoban, all the ins and outs and inner workings of what we do and how we do it. Later today you will have a chance to talk to some of the field agents who have worked some of our harder cases. We want you to get a thorough and close-up look at what life will be like at Vokoban.”

Allegra said nothing.

“Ready?”

Her eyes met his. “Of course. My life is but to serve you.”

He stared at her for a long moment and then, with a sigh, continued. “We have a presentation that covers induction but I always talk my agents through it instead. It is of the utmost importance that you and I connect.”

Again, she said nothing so Michael continued. “The basics: Vokoban was put together just under two years ago. We employ 72 field agents, 30 special agents, 10 therapists, five lawyers, two media relations officers and a host of auxiliary staff. I am a special agent. It is my team’s job to research the targets in our database and assign a field agent to them. We are the ones that co-ordinate the operations and we look after two to three agents each. The field agents have one primary target to begin with. As they gain experience, they can be assigned two to three other targets which increases over time, depending on circumstances.”

“Where do you get information for this database from?”

Michael brightened, pleased that she was responding. “From several different sources; past crimes and convictions, police records and reports, referrals from social workers and therapists, teachers, doctors, friends, relatives – basically everywhere and anywhere.”

“And how do you know which ones to follow?”

“The special agents are responsible for the research stage. We obviously can’t chase up every lead by placing a field agent so we run them through other

databases and liaise with surveillance units. We are extremely thorough because ‘Mr Regular Joe with his blonde locks and disarming smile’ could be raping his daughter every night. We suspect everything and excuse nothing.”

Allegra grimaced and waited for him to continue.

“Our field agents receive three weeks of thorough training; weapons, negotiation, intelligence, psychology and acting classes.”

“Acting classes?”

“Yes. Those are actually one of the more important classes. You go through three weeks of acting classes before we put you in the field. We teach you how to look, act and even *think* like a young girl. We need to adjust your language, not only verbal but your body language too. We need to make you into something other than what you are. We need to toughen you up mentally to equip you with what you need to deal with your targets. This will involve a process of desensitisation to make it easier.”

“Desensitisation?”

Michael met her eyes. “Basically, we show you things to get you used to what these men are capable of.”

“‘Things’?”

Michael nodded. “Images, videos, leaflets, accounts from victims and police reports.”

“From child abuse cases?”

“Yes.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

He frowned. “Allegra, it’s a really important part of your training. It, perhaps more than anything else, will equip you with the tenacity you need for this role.”

She raised a brow mockingly but said nothing.

“Listen, I know you’re angry and I know you’re confused. I know you’re questioning what you’re doing here but that you’re not able to walk away – I understand that, but please know that you’re doing the right thing.”

Allegra said nothing, partly annoyed that he had an answer for everything, but also impressed that he was so in tune with her feelings. He displayed this uncanny ability throughout the rest of the session, answering questions and easing concerns before she voiced them. He took her through the various stages of training, ran her through past successes and gave her a timetable of classes. She was quietly comforted by the structure of it all.

After the morning session, he took her to lunch on the first floor of the building. She almost laughed when she saw a canteen that looked like any other. She was expecting a glass-chrome deal with security checks just to buy food. She sat down with a sandwich and relaxed, glad to be out of the hub. Here she could pretend that this place was normal and that the things happening beyond the walls of the canteen were okay. She watched Michael take a bite of his sandwich. He had let his professional guard down. It felt strange watching him act like a normal man with none of the

secrecy and suspicion usually present in his eyes.

“What’s your favourite colour?” she asked.

He looked up with surprise and shook his head to indicate ‘Why?’

“I just figure if we’re going to be spending a lot of time together and relying on each other, we should know the basics about each other.”

Michael smiled. “Blue.”

Despite herself, Allegra basked in his smile. “Mine too.”

He raised a brow. “Not black and cream then?”

She blushed and averted her gaze. “Not black and cream.”

“Favourite movie?”

“That’s easy. ‘The Godfather’.”

Michael held up his hands. “Hey, I’m not going to argue with that.”

“You have Italian in your blood too, don’t you? With a name like Stallone?”

Michael nodded. “Yes. My father was mixed Italian and Sicilian. He came over here in the late 1960s and married my mother – she’s Danish. It was a weird combination but they made it work.”

*So that’s where he gets his gorgeous looks from.* “Do you speak Italian? Or Danish for that matter?”

“I don’t, no. You?”

Allegra shook her head. “My mother tried to teach me when I was young but,” a pause, “she passed away before we could make any real progress.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Thin lines of concern creased his forehead.

Allegra waved it away. “Favourite book?” she changed the subject.

“‘The Count of Monte Cristo’.”

She laughed. “Such a man’s man,” she said in a gruff voice.

An hour flew past as they shared stories and anecdotes over the rest of their lunch. When they got up to leave, as if it was set to clockwork, Michael’s guard came back up, his eyes became professional and his posture businesslike. The transformation intrigued her.

In silence they walked back to the hub. As she stepped in, Allegra saw that there was already a group of people in there.

“Everyone, this is Allegra. Allegra meet Caitlin.” Michael indicated a slim, fragile-looking girl with long blonde hair and translucent skin. “Sophie,” a slight brunette with shoulder-length hair. “And Rayla,” a petite South-Asian girl with luscious black hair. “They make up three of our 72 field agents,” finished Michael.

“Hi,” said Allegra nervously. All three girls were beautiful and had a certain quality about them. Allegra couldn’t quite put her finger on it. They were all extremely slim and very petite. Then it occurred to her: they looked like children. They looked like beautiful children rather than grown women. It was uncanny and unsettling.

“How old are you all?” Allegra asked falteringly. “If you don’t mind me asking,” she added quickly.

Caitlin, the blonde, stood up. “I just want to introduce myself properly, Allegra. As Michael said, my name is Caitlin. I have been with the unit from its inception. I am 24 and am currently placed with three targets.” The assertiveness in her voice betrayed her doll-like appearance. “Basically, the three of us are here so we can have a chat and hopefully provide you with some insight that you haven’t received so far,” a brief glance at Michael. “Michael will slip away and come back at the end of the afternoon.”

Allegra looked to him with sudden panic. He wasn’t going to leave her with these strange, otherworldly creatures, was he?

He touched her arm and smiled reassuringly. “I’ll be back at three. Use this time, Allegra. These girls live in the world you’re about to enter. They can tell you things I’m not equipped to.”

She nodded hesitantly. “Okay.”

He exchanged partings with the other girls and left with one last glance at Allegra. She turned to the girls and smiled, trying to hide her anxiety. She felt like an outsider thrown into some strange clique.

Rayla stood and surveyed Allegra coolly. “Rayla Nagra. I work in the Special Interests Group under Agent Rasel Kundra. Men with very particular tastes, be it a taste for ‘exotic’ girls or a certain fetish, are assigned to us. I’m 25 and have been with the unit for a year.”

Allegra nodded and offered a small smile of acknowledgement.

Lastly, the skinny brunette stood up. “Sophie. I’m 20 and I just joined the unit five months ago.” Her voice was so soft that Allegra could barely hear her. “I am also assigned to Michael. He wanted me for a target called—”

“Sophie,” interrupted Rayla. “We’re not allowed to discuss targets with each other. You know that.”

Sophie looked stricken, her gaze torn between Rayla and Allegra. “I’m sorry,” she said into the air between and fell silent.

It was Caitlin who spoke next. “Allegra, we’re here to answer your questions about the workings of the unit. We can’t divulge any specific information about the targets we are working on because as you know, everything within the unit is highly classified. Having said that, please do ask if you have any questions and we will try our best to answer them.”

Questions whizzed through Allegra’s head. She asked the most prominent one: “Why?”

Caitlin frowned thoughtfully but it was Rayla who spoke. “That’s exactly the right question you should ask: ‘Why?’ Some of these special agents drum the importance of *responsibility* and *duty* into your head but that’s mainly bullshit.”

Allegra blinked, taken aback by her abrasive honesty. “Then why? Why did you join?”

Rayla raised her head defiantly, chin jutting out as

she spoke. “I was date-raped two years ago. The bastard got away with it because there wasn’t enough evidence.”

Allegra’s eyes grew wide. She started to speak but was silenced by Rayla’s scowl.

“Don’t apologise. It wasn’t your fault,” she said curtly.

Chastened by her tone, Allegra said nothing.

“Anyway, Vokoban got wind of my case and got in touch. I made a deal with them: I work for you, you set an agent on the tail of the cunt who raped me. They told me it was a waste of time – that the fucker didn’t fit the profile of a paedo – but I wasn’t gonna give up. They put a sweet little blonde thing on his tail and guess what? He happily fucked himself over like a moth to a flame. He’s rotting in jail as we speak,” she finished triumphantly. “These fuckers deserve to rot in prison and if we’re not going to put them there, the bastard politicians certainly aren’t gonna do it.”

Allegra processed the information, secretly relieved that agents were made to see a therapist. She looked to Caitlin, glad to turn from Rayla’s searing gaze.

“I wish I could say my intentions were as noble.” Caitlin’s soft blonde lashes fluttered. “I did it because no other job would pay a 22-year-old the kind of money I was offered. I was in a lot of debt. My parents retired, bills were overflowing, the bank was calling me every day. I was depressed, manic, just totally apathetic. Then I met Michael and it all went from

there. I was in a tight spot and that's why I started. I have stayed because I genuinely believe in the work we do."

"Do you regret your decision?" asked Allegra.

Caitlin shook her head vehemently. "Not one bit. I can't say what we do is pleasant or even tolerable but it *is* important and it makes a difference."

Allegra nodded and looked to Sophie who was sitting meekly in the corner. The others looked at her expectantly.

"I, er, well, I did it because..." she paused, "I knew a girl who needed help but didn't know where to turn." Her soft voice was barely audible. "When I was young, my next-door neighbour, Mary, used to climb through my window at night. She told me it was because she was scared of the dark. I didn't think too much of it. Years later, when I was about 12, I realised that I had never climbed into her room – it was always the other way round – so I decided to try it. When I got to her window, I saw... her father." Sophie took a sharp intake of breath.

"You don't understand – he was so *big*, like a rugby player. He– he was on top of her, pulling off her nightie, shushing her, telling her to be quiet, telling her that he loved her, that she owed him. "This is the rawest, most natural thing we can do together – you know that," he told her.

"She was as still as a doll. He turned her around on her hands and knees. She looked so tiny beneath him."

Sophie's voice wavered. "She kept moving away when he tried to get inside her so he wrapped his arm around her stomach, forcing her to stay still. When she squealed in pain, he clasped his hand around her mouth, telling her that her mother would be jealous and angry with her if she found out. I remember the tears rolling down her face but she said nothing. She didn't even struggle; she just succumbed to him."

"He took so long. I know I should have done something but I was frozen and it went on for so long until finally, he... finished. Afterwards, when he was done, he kissed her goodnight and said he loved her. I ran home. All that time, like an idiot, I hadn't realised what was going on; why Mary always begged me not to tell my mum that she was staying over. I wanted to talk to her about it. The next time I saw her I tried to talk to her but I couldn't." Tears rolled down Sophie's cheeks. "Two months later they moved away. I can still remember the fear in Mary's eyes when she told me they were leaving. I saw it and I said nothing."

Sophie stopped to catch her breath. "I tried to find her two years ago but I couldn't. I didn't help her while I had the chance but there are others I *can* help and *that's* why I do this."

Caitlin walked over and put an arm around Sophie.

Allegra stared at her with sorrow. "But... how do you handle it? How do you deal with that kind of man being near you?"

"It will freak you out, Allegra," said Rayla. "I won't

lie to you and say that it won't. The first time will leave you cold and sweaty and like a mad dog in the summer, just going crazy, but when you find your feet, you will be fine."

"How many have you had?" asked Allegra, wincing at her choice of words.

"I've taken care of five over the past year. Some of the more experienced agents are assigned up to 10 targets a year, depending on how quickly they finish each case."

Allegra nodded. "Have you dealt with a guy that has escaped conviction?"

Rayla's eyes dropped to the floor. "Yes. It happens. It makes you furious because it was all for nothing but some men get off on a technicality, others look too much like Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt for anyone to ever believe they're sick in the head."

Allegra tried to formulate a new question as she digested the answer to her old one. "What about the ones you do manage to put away? How long do they stay inside?"

Caitlin took over. "It depends. Some get life sentences. Others are freed within a year."

"A year? It hardly seems worth it."

"Don't ever question that, Allegra," said Caitlin emphatically. "Don't ever question the worth of our work. What you will see during training will shock your system. You will meet victims of child abuse cases and you will realise that during your time in the unit, if you put away *one* guy for even *one* year, you will be

helping some little girl out there from becoming the battered shells we come across.”

Allegra drew in a shaky breath. “I’m just a little overwhelmed.”

It was Sophie’s turn to speak up. “Caitlin is right,” she said softly. “Allegra, we meet the worst kind of men in our work but you have to believe it’s worth it. Me telling you that won’t make you believe it but hopefully once you have finished your training you will have that sense of belief in what we do.”

“What is—” Allegra stopped, reconsidering her question. “What is the worst encounter you have had?”

Sophie’s eyes turned to ice and she turned, deflecting the question to the others. Caitlin, the leader figure, stayed silent and even Rayla’s hard exterior seemed to crack.

“I don’t want to bring back nightmares for any of you but I’m really really scared here. I’m scared of these monsters and what they can do and if you tell me the worst, I will be prepared.”

“Your training will run you through all that,” said Caitlin.

“I’m not interested in the training. I’m interested in *you*.”

Caitlin sighed. “I’ve been here the longest so I guess I’ll field this question.” She took a deep breath and crossed her legs in her chair. “I think your first is always the worst but there was one guy who just made me sick. It wasn’t anything violent or even unusual when

you think about it but he used to like licking my skin. I mean, all the way down, everywhere – my stomach, my arms, my neck. Not kissing but licking it and I could feel his saliva drying on my skin, goosebumps growing underneath. Every time I was with him I felt disgusted afterwards.”

Allegra saw the vulnerability in Caitlin’s eyes and wondered if she could really expose herself in this way. “How many times did you... how many times, on average, does a field agent have an encounter with a target?” she asked, adopting their language to make the question more clinical.

“It varies,” answered Caitlin. “It can be from three to 10. It depends on how good the field agent is, how quickly the target responds and the severity of the act that happens between them.”

“Have you all slept with one of these men? Michael said it helps the conviction.”

The girls fell silent again.

Allegra gulped, swallowing the lump in her throat. “How many?”

Caitlin looked up slowly. “Nine.”

Allegra drew back in her chair as if physically pushed.

“One,” said Sophie.

“One,” echoed Rayla.

Caitlin looked at her in surprise. “One?”

Rayla nodded. “I nail them with oral,” she said with a hint of pride. It made Allegra feel queasy.

“Do you have any other questions or worries?” asked Caitlin.

Allegra drew her eyes away from Rayla. “Do you ever worry that these men will track you down once they are out? I mean, you *do* have to testify, right?”

“Targets with spent convictions will be kept under loose surveillance. But you have to understand that these men are not violent per se. They are sick with sick habits but more often than not, they are cowards who wouldn’t dream of tracking down an agent.”

Allegra asked about the process of convicting a target from beginning to end and began to relax in the other women’s company. For the first time, she saw herself as others did: a strange being, not a woman but not quite a girl. The others, like her, looked 14 or 15 despite being in their twenties.

At precisely 3 p.m., Michael knocked on the door and looked in. “Do you need more time?” he directed at Allegra.

She shook her head, comforted by his presence. As he walked in, she caught a subtle exchange of glances between him and Caitlin. She didn’t quite know what it meant. She thanked the three women for their time and help, and watched them file out of the room one by one.

“Okay?” asked Michael.

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“You have anything else to ask me?”

She shook her head.

“I hope you’re not too overwhelmed.” He tried to gauge if one last pep talk was needed.

“I’m okay.” Allegra met his eyes, reassured by his concern.

He decided against the pep talk. “Let me take you home.” When he caught the look on her face – a mixture of surprise and concern – he immediately amended it: “I mean, let me call the driver who’ll take you home.” He led her back through the labyrinth of corridors down to the foyer where he discharged her for the day.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said with a smile that looked sad to Allegra.

“Bye Michael.” She stepped out into the cool May air and felt familiar butterflies in her stomach. A part of her was so scared, it froze the blood in her body, but another part was strangely excited about the journey she was about to begin. She knew it would be frightening and dangerous, but, to her own surprise, she felt ready. In spite of herself, she felt determined to be a part of something important, to make herself proud. And yes, to make Michael proud.