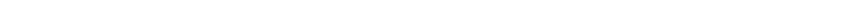


ALEX

HANNAH MARSHALL



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First Revision – October 2011

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgements:

Firstly I'd like to thank God for giving me such an amazing talent to write stories and enjoy writing them.

Secondly thanks are due to Mr. Anthony Horowitz. He is my inspiration for writing this book, due to his fantastic books 'The Alex Rider Series' - a seriously good read if you're into spies and adventure and action-packed books. (He's a bit like James Bond, only he's 14- that's Alex Rider now, not Mr. Anthony Horowitz!)

Thanks also to my family and friends for supporting me and encouraging me and reading drafts of my story, whilst it was still in the early stages. Thank you guys for giving me helpful and useful hints and tips.

And finally; thank you to you. Yes, YOU the reader! A huge thank you to you for buying my first ever book, and I hope you thoroughly enjoy it and I hope I can continue to write many more captivating books in the future.

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CHAPTER 1

“School is for losers!” Alex protested.

“I don’t care. You are going and that’s final!” Dad said. “School gets you good grades and good jobs in the future.”

Alex was sitting in her jeans, black and pink Nike Airs and ACDC t-shirt on her bed. It was the first day of a new semester, in a new school, in a new city. She had always hated school and now she had to start all over again.

Ever since her mom had walked out on them when she was five, she had been stuck with her dad, who had a dead-end job until he finally quit and decided to move to Chicago. And she had no say in the matter.

Her dad was OK for a dad, but sucked as a friend, which Alex needed at the best of times. Alex wasn’t very good at making friends and keeping them long enough, but she managed to, last semester. Somehow.

All Alex wanted to do, was stay in one place and not go to school. She had nearly dropped out of one of her previous grammar schools, but somehow managed to stay for a whole semester.

“Look, I know you don’t ever wanna move, but we had to. I quit my other job and there was none available in New York anymore, that’s why we’ve had to move to Chicago cos I got a new job here. If you hadn’t already noticed.” dad said calmly and sarcastically.

“Yeah, I had noticed you big lump, you.” Alex replied cheekily.

She nearly always called her dad a big lump because he had a very large pot-belly. Some people called it a ‘beer-belly’.

Her dad had thin brown hair, green eyes, a squashy nose and a large mouth. He wore a Green Day t-shirt, which was way too small for him, not only because he was chubby but because it was a male teenager’s t-shirt (it was her brother’s before he

moved out when he was 17 in 2000.) And her dad looked rather ridiculous in it.

William was Alex's older brother and he was to be twenty seven that October. Alex was born in 1993 and was to be seventeen in September. Two days into the semester it would be her birthday, and as usual she suspected she would have made no friends by then so it would be a family affair, but seeing as most of her family still lived in New York or California (her grandparents from her dad's side) and it took ages to travel by car or train, it would just be her dad and her.

"C'mon," her dad said after a while "it may be fun and you might actually enjoy it, make new friends quickly, settle in, knuckle down and get good grades. Think about it. You don't wanna get a crap dead-end job like your old man. Do you?"

Alex sat there thinking of what her dad had said. She liked dancing and always was up for something new (in the dance department) but her dad said it wasn't a real qualification, so she had to ditch that idea and think hard of what she wanted to be, which she didn't know.

"Yeah I suppose I could try to like the new school and get new friends and blah blah blah good grades." Alex replied after her period of thought.

"That's the spirit!" her dad exclaimed, over excitedly and beaming. Her dad gave her a tremendous hug and then handed her a brown paper bag containing her lunch, which he had taken from the fridge, like he had always known Alex would say yes to going to school. Alex picked up her Nike hoodie and grabbed her lunch from her dad.

"Let's go then shall we?" Alex asked sarcastically.

"That's exactly what we're doing anyway" her dad said, pushing Alex through the front door of their apartment and locking it after them.

"Dad?" Alex enquired suddenly.

Her dad stopped. “Yeah love, what do you want now? Not more allowance already?” he said with a hint of ‘I-told-you-not-to-spend-all-of-your-allowance-at-once’ tone in his voice.

“No dad, not more allowance. I’m just wondering how come we moved from ‘The Big Apple’, a good place to, well... a crap place like Chicago? I know it’s cos of your job an’ all, but seriously, why Chicago, why not somewhere like California or Texas, I’ve always wanted to live there, not on a ranch or whatever, but y’know, somewhere kinda remote-“

Her dad interrupted “You mean somewhere without a school very close, don’t you?”

Alex continued “No dad, just shush a minute and listen. Somewhere kinda remote, but not like the North Pole or some shit-hole like that. Why did we move here dad?” Alex asked, slightly disappointed.

Her dad stuck an arm around her (which she shook off), galloped down the apartment block’s stairs and stopped on the next floor down, panting heavily because he was out of breath. Alex slowly walked down after him and mumbled, as she passed “I always told you to go to the gym, but you never listened. Consequences are you’re unfit dad. I’m not exceptionally fit either but, I’m thinner, fitter and healthier than you.”

“Listen doll,” (he had a habit of calling her doll, something he picked up from an old, black ‘n’ white movie, Western movie, or Public Enemies probably) he said “we moved to Chicago cos this was the only place which had a good enough job, with good pay, and where anyone would give me an interview for what little experience I have. As you know, I dropped outta high school before I graduated, became an apprentice in carpentry, which for the record I was very good at, and got married at a youngish age. I don’t want you to go down the same road as I did. I’m a waster Al, that’s why your mom left me. I hadn’t got a proper job and was useless, which I still am. It’s not your fault by the way Al, so don’t you ever think it is, OK?”

Alex didn't realise that's what had happened to her dad, because both her dad and her mom never talked about it (perhaps to keep her from getting 'upset' at a young age.) Now she understood the importance of school, so you could get jobs and didn't end up as "useless, pathetic bums like me" (her dad's exact words.)

"You're not a waster dad" she said "And you're not useless. You raised me successfully by yourself didn't you?"

He smiled half heartedly and went outside. Alex followed suit.

Outside it was cold and raining heavily as usual. Neither one of them had brought an umbrella with them, but at least Alex had a hood which she put up immediately to protect her long, perfectly straightened chocolate brown hair. Her dad didn't seem to mind getting wet, because he didn't have a hood or anything, so he quickly got soaked but didn't complain, which is what Alex would usually do. And she was good at it too (complaining that is, not getting wet in the rain).

It was quite a long way to walk to the apartment block's underground parking lot (at least fifteen minutes) to where their 1969 Pontiac GTO was parked. By the time they got there, Alex's hoody was absolutely drenched and she started moaning about how her hair would frizz like anything in the rain and her dad looked like he had just come out of a pool, fully clothed.

"Dad you should've put a jacket on cos you look half drowned and it's embarrassing." Alex said, yanking the front passenger's door open, making it creak loudly (as usual) "And for the billionth time, oil the door, it sounds like a fricking cow mooing angrily" she added.

CHAPTER 2

The rain finally stopped as Alex stepped out of the car in the large parking lot of Jenkins Grammar School. She watched as people rushed by and then someone knocked into her.

The person stopped by Alex. "Look where you're going. You coulda caused an accident!" That was it, he walked off then.

"Um OK, how rude" Alex said to herself. She thought the boy's behaviour a bit strange. No 'Sorry. Are you alright? I'm so and so'. Alex shook her head then pulled the front passenger's seat forward and tugged her backpack from off the floor where it was wedged. She left the seat forward and slammed the door shut. Alex's dad hadn't even got out of the car yet, so she waited rather impatiently, tapping her foot without even realising it, until his door was shut and the car manually locked.

"Nice ride" a boy shouted mockingly, looking at the Pontiac, and then burst out laughing along with his friends.

Alex was pissed off already "Yeah it is nice actually! It gets us from A to B, so we don't need some flashy ride like you've got. Oh wait, like you haven't got!" she yelled looking at his dilapidated 1953 Chevy pickup. "And I thought mine was a wreck" she added fiercely "looks like I'm wrong!" and with that, Alex stormed off after her father, who hadn't realised she had stopped, with a chorus of "Ooh" (in that stupid sing-song voice) behind her.

"What was that all about doll?" her dad asked when she was near enough.

Alex sighed and said bitterly "Oh nothing really, just some prick taking the piss outta our ride. He can't say much though; his 1953 Chevy pickup is falling apart. The radiator is hanging off, half his front licence plate is missing- it's a wonder how he's not been arrested and is still driving the damn thing; he has dents and scratches on mainly the front of his ride. It looks as if he can't drive properly."

Her dad chuckled. "Let's go doll. I need to speak to the principal and fill out some forms for you so you can actually go to this school legally."

Ten minutes later they were outside the principal's office after getting a bit lost and stopping to ask for directions from the janitor. Her dad knocked heavily on the office door with the back of his knuckles and then grabbed Alex and put her in front of him. She looked up and he had a cheesy grin plastered on his face, which Alex grimaced at, so he squeezed her shoulders, making her wince slightly as it hurt.

The office door opened and a middle-aged man stood in the doorway, wearing a white shirt, black suit and a really nice blue silk tie.

"Hello I'm David James and this is Alexandra James, my daughter. I phoned yesterday." her dad said.

The principal seemed to remember her dad quite suddenly and said "Oh yes, I remember. Hello Mr. James. Hello Alexandra."

"Would you mind calling me Alex please?" she asked the principal politely.

"Of course I will." Principal Andrews replied with a slight nod of his head, which meant he understood. He stepped aside and gestured for them to enter his office, which they did.

* * *

Mrs Andrews called the register and stopped, presumably on Alex's name. She took her glasses off and rose up from her seat. "Class we have a new student joining us this semester. Please welcome Alexandra James. Where are you Alexandra?" she said smiling.

"It's Alex" she replied slightly frustrated. "Oh wait that's me" she added to herself. Alex stood up from her seat at the back of the class.

Mrs Andrews nodded "My apologies Alex."

“No it’s my apologies Miss. I shouldn’t have been so rude.” Alex said, going scarlet.

“That’s quite alright. Anyway this is Alex. She has moved from New York...” (How did she know all this? Presumably her father had told the principal, who told his wife- Mrs Andrews.) “... and is starting afresh, so I want all of you to be as nice as possible. I know it’s hard for some of you,” she threw a look at the boy who laughed at Alex earlier “but I want you all to try. Welcome to our class Alex. This is your form room. Every morning and afternoon you must come straight here. That’s all I have to say for now. You may sit.”

Alex sat back down again and sunk slightly in her seat. She glanced over at the boy that laughed at her and noticed he had sunk really low in his seat too, probably out of embarrassment or shame.

* * *

David James got in his 1969 Pontiac GTO and drove away from the school. Alex was now an official student of Jenkins Grammar School and was hopefully going to stay for a whole year and enjoy each semester as it came and went. As David waited at the red traffic light, he pulled out his cell phone and texted his daughter:

‘Hey doll. Hope u have a fab day.

C u later. I’ll pick u up @ 4.

Tell me all about ur day @ home.

Love you

Dad xxx’

He hit the send button just as the light turned to green. He put his foot down and sped off to his home in South East Chicago.

* * *

“Time for a pop quiz” Mrs Andrews said. The class (except Alex) groaned.

Alex smiled in her seat because she had always been pretty ace at general knowledge quizzes, (which she hoped this was) and opened her backpack where she grabbed her pencil case and put it on her desk, pulling a black pen out in the process.

Despite her attitude and behaviour this morning, Alex surprisingly liked this school, and couldn't wait to make new friends. Which she hoped would be easy.

Mrs Andrews came around with the pop quiz and placed it face down on each pupil's desk, so they couldn't see what was written. "You have until the end of this lesson to complete the pop quiz. It's not graded because it's a bit of fun. You can do what some people do and sit there all lesson, but it would be easier to just do the quiz." Mrs Andrews said with a hint of crossness in her voice.

She then glanced at a girl in the front row who had obviously broken the rules by dying her hair completely purple and who was wearing gothic clothes.

"She must be the 'some people'" Alex thought.

The teacher looked at the clock on the wall above the White Board and waited until the big hand was on o'clock before saying "Right class you may begin."

Alex turned her paper over and wrote her name and the date on the top of the paper.

Question 1:

What is the capital of America?

Alex wrote 'Washington DC'

Question 2:

Where in France is Paris?

'Northern France on the river Siene'

Alex worked steadily through the quiz and found the questions all pretty easy, especially the math and English based questions.

When she had finished all twenty questions, she put her pen down in the groove at the top of her table, looked at the teacher then at the clock. As she didn't know how long she had left, she stared out of the window and waited for the bell. At least she wasn't the only one to finish presumably early, four girls and two boys had finished as well.

The weather outside looked a lot better than previously. The sun was shining and there were only a few fluffy white clouds as far as she could see.

A bird flew into the huge oak tree that was in the middle of the space of grass outside the classroom window. And as the window was open slightly, she heard the tweeting of the birds and buzzing of bees collecting pollen.

Eventually the bell rang and Mrs Andrews said "Pens down everyone. The quiz is now over."

The students put their pens down and waited to be dismissed.

"You are now all dismissed. The first lesson is English with Miss Chainey. Room 4E."

Alex gathered her things and headed for the classroom door. As she left, the same boy that she had encountered before, walked into her on purpose.

"Oi!" he yelled "Watch where you're going."

"You walked into me!" Alex yelled after him as he walked off..

CHAPTER 3

Alex walked as quickly as she could in the crowded corridor. She kept getting shoved, nudged and elbowed in the ribs, back and arms, much to her annoyance.

“Hey make way for the new meat!” a female voice yelled suddenly.

‘New meat’ Alex thought. Obviously she was the ‘new meat’ but she didn’t like being called that. She tried to search for the person, to whom the voice belonged, but she couldn’t find her in the mass of people, and eventually she was knocked to the floor. Typical.

A hand came down and Alex grabbed it gratefully. She was pulled up into a practically empty corridor. She took it as everyone was in their classes and she was late.

“Hi, I’m Jackie.” the same female voice as before said.

“Hi, I’m Alex.” Alex said “You called me ‘new meat’ didn’t you?” she added.

Jackie looked at her apologetically “Yeah I did. Sorry ‘bout that. It gets people outta the way. Well usually.”

Alex shook her head disapprovingly “Um OK. What are you doing here?”

“I’m in your form class. Mrs Andrews told me to look after you, at least until you settle in. I have to show you around and stuff for a few days. I’ll be your friend and guide. Is that OK?” Jackie replied.

Alex nodded. “Yeah, that’ll be great. Thanks.”

Jackie and Alex walked down the corridor towards 4E. Alex thought it was an appropriate time to strike up a conversation.

“So where do you come from then Jackie?” Alex asked carefully

Jackie chuckled “First of all you can call me Jack if you want, all my friends do. You’ll meet them soon, and secondly I’m from here. East Chicago. What ‘bout you?”

Again Alex nodded “OK Jack. I’m from South-East Chicago. Well I was born in New York, but my dad quit his dead-end job there, so ya know.”

“No I don’t know, but I’m guessing he found a job here and practically forced you to move. What about your mom, why don’t you move in with her?” Jackie replied. When Alex didn’t answer she continued “Anyways I didn’t think you were from ‘round here cos you ain’t got the Chicago accent. I thought it was a Yank’s, but I wasn’t sure.”

Alex ‘mmm’ed and Jackie said “What’s up by the way, you don’t seem happy about something? And I can tell something happened in your life that you ain’t happy about and couldn’t control.”

Alex suddenly stopped walking “How do you know that Jack?”

Jackie chuckled again “I’m psychic haha. Nah only joking, I can read people’s body language. I got it from my mom. She’s a kinda shrink or whatever they’re called nowadays.”

“Ah sounds cool.” Alex said sounding impressed. She had to admit Jackie was good. She was still upset about the whole having to go to school thing, but not nearly as upset as about the fact her mom had walked out on her for what seemed like no reason.

Alex decided to tell Jackie the whole truth, but as she opened her mouth to speak again, Jackie interrupted her and said “Tell me what you’re gonna say later, cos we’re here now. Hey Joey. Hey Judy.” She said to her friends who were waiting outside the classroom for her.

Alex pushed her bag onto her shoulder and then was pushed slightly into the class by Jackie.

As she fell through the door, Jackie said “Just to let you know, we call Judy ‘Juno’, after the movie, cos she got knocked up at a young age. The only difference is Judy’s ‘boy friend’ is an ass called Max Jones. Maximilian Lucas Jones to be precise. Haha what a name! Anyway, as you can tell Judy is six weeks

pregnant! Still she's gonna be a mommy. Aw how sweet!" at this Jackie threw her head back and laughed. Loudly.

Judy ('Juno') punched her in the arm and Jackie returned it saying "Hey, what was that for you... you... Damn I can't think of a good enough insult that I haven't used before!" Jackie scowled at the floor then laughed, Judy and Joey joined in the laughter as Alex stood there quietly.

Alex decided to join in with the laughter despite the fact she didn't find the 'joke' funny and sat down in the empty seat by her. Joey clapped Alex on the back, said 'Hi' and sat down in the seat to Alex's right. Jackie sat in front of her, and Judy sat on Alex's left.

Miss Chainey stood up from her wooden desk, on the somewhat raised platform and shouted "Quiet class, or you're all in detention!"

"Miss Chainey is well strict." Joey whispered from the corner of his mouth.

Alex smiled cautiously at Joey and stared straight ahead at Miss Chainey.

Miss C said politely and in proper English (no doubt because she was a teacher from England) "Right class, that's better. Welcome to English. Today we are going to be studying 'Romeo and Juliet' by William Shakespeare. Has anyone read a bit of or all of it before?"

No hands went up.

Miss Chainey continued. "No? Well that's absolutely grand. Excellent news for me. I adore 'Romeo and Juliet'. Maybe we can arrange a little act-out with the drama department?"

Everyone groaned.

"Strict, huh?" Alex side-whispered to Joey. "Somehow I don't think so."

Joey side-whispered back "Don't be fooled. This is just a facade for you. She knows you're new. Really she's a psycho bitch,

determined to suck the brains out of our skulls and turn us all into writers, or English teachers. She's a bit like what's-her-name from High School Musical. The weird drama teacher. Except worse. I really hate High School Musical, and this stupid psychotic English teacher. For frick's sake, she's madder than the mad hatter."

Alex tried to suppress a laugh but couldn't and it came out as a snort. Immediately Miss Chainey, who had been marking the register, turned into her horrible state. ("She is gonna be a mega bitch now, just watch." Joey whispered again). He was right.

"Who was that?!" the teacher demanded suddenly, "I will not tolerate snickering or whispering in my class."

No one piped up. Just as well really, because she looked as if she was about to explode. Alex could imagine the steam coming out of her ears with rage.

The tension was almost unbearable, and Alex nearly gave in and admitted it was her.

"It was me Miss" Judy said suddenly, relieving Alex (and it seemed the rest of the class too.) "I was laughing at myself, because I remembered something funny in the movie version of 'Romeo and Juliet'. I know it's completely inappropriate, and you can put me in detention if you want. I'm so sorry Miss. Really I am." Judy lapsed into silence and wondered if she had gone too far. Again.

Debora Chainey seemed happy with the confession and gave Judy a 'strict' warning.

"Phew. That was close." thought Alex. Then she turned to Judy while Miss Chainey was writing on the board and said "Thanks for that. But why d'you do it?"

Judy seemed to think of her answer carefully. "Cos I like you, and I don't want you to get into trouble. I can see you're not one for lying, you seem the type to follow your parents' wishes and sometimes lie to them when it is convenient- like we all do, and I

know we're gonna get along just fine, and be friends. Trust me..." she added smiling "...I have a feeling."

"Feelings" Alex thought. Everyone seemed to have a 'feeling' or 'thought' about Alex and their friendship. However, she smiled again and breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks" she said again.

Miss Chainey started to hand out the books of 'Romeo and Juliet', and as she came round to where the little group was sat at the back, she gave Judy the dirtiest look ever, Alex thought, and then plonked the plastic-covered copy of 'Romeo and Juliet' on Judy's desk.

When Miss left the area and started walking back up to the front of the class, Judy leant across Alex, and Jackie turned around, Joey leant in from the other side, but not as far as Judy, to avoid intruding in Alex's 'girly' bubble.

"Did you see that?" Judy asked "She just gave me the dirtiest look ever!" Joey nodded.

Jackie rolled her eyes and gestured saying "See Al, bitch or what? Frickin' hell!"

Jackie whipped around as Joey made an inclination with his head which read "Quick Miss has turned around, she's about to start. Don't get in trouble again!"

As Jackie turned around Judy pulled back across Alex's desk and slouched in her seat. Alex hadn't even said a word, which was unusual as she usually had tons to say on matters such as these.

Miss Chainey's voice drawled on in a rather boring way, on Act 1 of Romeo and Juliet. The class was supposed to follow, but they didn't seem like they could be bothered, even Alex who liked English.

"Act 1, Scene 2" read Miss Chainey. She stopped unexpectedly as she had noticed someone rolling their eyes. "Wayne!" she barked ("What a name" thought Alex) "What have I just read?" she continued.

Wayne stopped leaning on his arms on his desk, sat up and offered "Act 1, Scene 2?"

Miss Chainey didn't look amused, though the rest of the class laughed "I am not amused" (she really did sound like Queen Victoria then- "One is not amused". Alex silently laughed at this thought of hers.) "No I didn't. I just read Act 1, Scene 1. What can you tell me about scene one?"

Wayne sat in silence; it was obvious he hadn't been listening. He shrugged his shoulders and said "Dunno, Miss"

Debra Chainey sighed and barked "For your insolence, you will read Scene 2, to the class!"

Wayne sighed but did as he was told:

"[SCENE II. A Street.]

(Enter CAPULET, PARIS, and Servant)

Capulet: But Montague is bound as well as me,

In penalty alike; and 'tis not hard, I think,

For men as old as we to keep the peace.

Paris: Of honourable reckoning are you both,

And pity 'tis you lived at odds so long.

But now my lord, what say you to my suit?

Capulet: But saying o'er what I have said before.

My child is yet a stranger in the world,

She hath not seen the change of fourteen years.

Let two more summers wither in their pride

Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride.

Paris: Younger than she are happy mothers made.

Capulet: And too soon marred are those so early made.

Earth hath swallowed all my hopes but she,

She is the hopeful lady of my earth.

But woo her gentle Paris, get her heart,

My will to her consent is but a part.-“

“Thank you Wayne. You can stop now” she said picking up from where he left off. She was satisfied with his obedience and glad that she wasn’t doing the reading herself.

* * *

Half an hour of tedious play reading later, Alex and her friends were walking down the corridor to their next lesson.

“Religious Studies. Great!” Joey remarked mockingly. Alex smiled and made a mental note to mock Joey on the way to every R.S lesson.

Alex was finally happy. She had good friends, liked the school (so far) and the future looked promising. She could actually see herself staying here and maybe graduating, and keeping her friends longer than about a week. All in all, she was a lot happier, bouncier, and brighter. She couldn’t wait to hang out on the weekend with her new found friends and chill at the movies, or in the mall or whatever.

“Whatcha thinkin’ bout Ally?” Jackie threw in surprisingly. Alex hadn’t realised she had been smiling to herself, not listening to the others and she nearly walked into a bin, which could have been disastrous- Mean Girls remake or what?

Alex was snapped out of her thoughts “Huh? What’ya say?”

Jackie giggled “I said ‘Whatcha thinking bout Ally?’”

Alex stopped dead, her eyes wide with horror. “What did you just call me?”

“Ally” Jackie replied “Why?” she asked warily.

Alex didn’t reply but walked over to a random locker and punched it. “Ouch” she said under her breath. She slid down onto the floor. She didn’t care if she was late for her lesson, but now her happy-bubble had just exploded without warning. She felt depressed again, but tried not to show it.

She didn't budge, however, and the other three walked over to her. Evidently her posture and body language was 'closed' and indicated that she was upset because Jackie said "I know something's up. What did I say?"

She sat down on the floor next to her and placed a hand on Alex's right knee, which she had pulled in close to her body. She was now in the process of pulling up the other one.

Joey crouched in front of Alex and tried to balance on the balls of his feet, much to his dismay. He kept falling over backwards, so decided to sit cross-legged in front of her. Only Judy remained standing, as she was so pregnant.

Alex tried to suppress it, but couldn't, and a small tear rolled down her cheek.

"Hey don't cry babe" Joey said comfortingly. Alex raised an eyebrow.

"Joey's a gentleman. Sometimes. He calls girls 'babe' a lot, you'll see that. Some girls hate it, but others, it makes them feel grand, like I can tell you're feeling now. You're relaxing slightly." Jackie said quietly.

Alex smiled and did feel a bit better. But it was so scary that Jackie could do what she could do. Read people's body language. Creepy or what?

Alex heaved a sigh and began telling Joey, Judy and Jackie everything. She started with the fact that her mom called her Ally, when she was really little, before she walked out on her. She told them about having to live with her dad for the last eleven years, having to move, not wanting to go to school etc. and all that happened right up until she met them. She didn't need to tell them about English obviously as they were with her.

The two girls and Joey listened intently and no one spoke until Alex had finished. "So that's what's going on in my life now." She left nothing out, even stating that she had never had a boyfriend before. "I had a summer fling once, but it didn't work out."

What was wrong with her? All her old friends had had tons of boyfriends, but she never had one. She did fancy plenty of boys, but none of them took an interest in her.

“Oh” Jackie said really apologetically. “I didn’t realise. I’m so sorry. I won’t ever call you Ally again. Sorry” she said again for saying it then.

“It’s OK, really” Alex said. “Thanks for listening.” The four of them smiled and all joined in one big group hug, being careful not to squish Judy’s bump, which by the way was quite big.

Jackie looked at her rubber wristwatch (the thin, elongated ones, that seemed fairly popular nowadays.) and gasped “Snap! We’re twenty mins late. Nearly. I hate walking into lessons late and besides I think this is much nicer to be honest” she giggled again.

Alex thought about skiving off with them, but realised it was probably better that she didn’t on her first day. “We should get going guys” she said getting up from her place on the floor, and rubbing her bum, as it was now rather numb.

“My ass is numb now and sore.” Joey said seeming to read Alex’s mind.

“Mine too!” exclaimed Alex and Jackie together.

Judy laughed as it didn’t affect her in the slightest as she had not sat on the floor.

They walked together with their arms wrapped around each shoulder and at once Alex felt happy again, pity it was going to be spoiled again by a teacher shouting.

“Oh well” she thought, as long as she had her friends with her she was fine getting yelled at by a teacher. It couldn’t be as bad as her dad shouting at her for missing her curfew, as usual.

The teacher seemed in the middle of a lecture when the four of them walked in laughing loudly because they forgot to let go and walked into the door still attached to each other.

“Why are you late?” the male teacher said sternly. Jackie and Alex burst out laughing again

“S-sorry sir” Jackie said in between laughs. Judy and Joey had already composed themselves and sat down on two of the three spare chairs at the back.

Jackie and Alex however, were finding it very hard to subside from their laughing, until Alex noticed there was only one chair left, which meant one of them had to sit at the front.

“Jack, there’s only one chair left.” She said seriously. Jackie didn’t realise she was being serious and carried on laughing although nothing was funny anymore.

Alex nudged Jackie and said “I’m being serious” Jackie stopped laughing and became straight faced again.

“Oh” she said disappointedly “What are we gonna do? One of us’ll have to sit at the front.”

Alex nodded “I know. But which one of us?”

“Flip a coin?” suggested Joey.

“Miss Evans shall sit at the front as she cannot control herself and is always talking.” said Mr Josephs

“Miss Evans?” Alex wondered. Her last name wasn’t Evans, it was James. Then she clicked

“It’s you, isn’t it?” Alex asked Jackie.

“Yeah hi. I’m Jacqueline Rebecca Evans. What an absolute nightmare.” She kicked Alex slightly in the shin and dragged herself and her messenger bag towards the front of the class reluctantly.

Jackie dumped her bag next to a chair directly opposite Mr Josephs’ desk and kicked out her chair, catching her shin in the process, she didn’t cry out but flopped onto the chair sulking.

“Right now we shall begin again. Sorry for that class.” Mr Josephs said calmly. He returned to the board and began scribbling down the lesson’s objectives, while Alex, Joey and

Judy sniggered and Jackie sat at the front, where she evidently didn't want to be next to the sweaty boy on her left and the geeky girl (who had a brace contraption on the outside of her mouth).

CHAPTER 4

Jackie was still sulking as the little group left the R.S class and headed outside for recess. (They still had that, but at least they didn't have to play tag, or climb the climbing frames or trees, like they did in Kindergarten or in 1st grade.)

As they pushed the front doors open they were immediately blinded by the sun, it wasn't even midday yet, but it sure was hot. They were roasting, so they all had to rip their hoodies, jumpers and cardigans off, the only exception to the 'ripping off' was Judy, the two girls had to help her, and Joey held down Juno's t-shirt so it wouldn't come up and show her bra, much to Joey's amusement- he imagined what would happen if her bra would show on the lawn and he couldn't stifle a big laugh, much to Judy, Jackie and Alex's annoyance as they were all concentrating so hard to get Judy's jumper off.

"What?" Joey asked defensively. "I'm a guy, and I just imagine stuff, got a problem?"

"Yeah I do, you asshole" Judy said aggressively. It was the first word she had said in ages and Joey, who had known Judy since Kindergarten and Jackie since 2nd grade, shrank back slightly.

Even Jackie was stunned at Judy's aggressive "Whoah PMS-ing or what!" she said laughing. Suddenly her face dropped, when Judy didn't smile, and stared at the floor.

"I'm not PMS-ing actually Jackie, I'm pregnant and I'm having mood swings. You try having a baby, and then you'll see what I'm on about!" Judy snapped, with what could only be described as 'venom.'

The tension was incredibly high and everyone shut up and either stared at the ground or looked about them and watched the others chatting, texting, or in the corner by the bike shed, smoking.

Alex gave up standing then, and decided to sit on the steps, seeing as they hadn't even come down to the school's lawn.

A couple of students bounded past them; their long, flowing hair bouncing with every step, and they seemed to be the snobby 'plastic' girls that Alex had seen in movies, such as Mean Girls. She wondered how much their folks would pay to send them here, but realised they would probably go to a snobby, private grammar school, not a local grammar school if they were that rich.

Alex was just contemplating this thought when a really cute guy caught her eye. He was on his own, standing in the shade of the old oak tree and she couldn't help but gawk. She tried not to, but her jaw and eyes were disobedient. Her eyes seemed to pop out of their sockets and her jaw just dropped.

She had fancied plenty of boys over the years, but they all turned out to be jerks, who were just either not interested, or only went out with her for a couple of days, a week tops, to show her off to his 'macho' friends, who were all jerks anyway.

But this guy seemed somehow different, not like anyone she had seen before. This seemed to happen in a dream, she had seen this sort of thing- a normal, quiet (ish in her case) girl and a fit guy getting together in movies; not here and not now in this school, this city and certainly not in this life.

Alex seemed to have realised she had been gawking because she felt an elbow in her back and Jackie's words were just floating into her ears. Jackie had been telling Alex that she was gaping at Nick Baxter, but because she was gaping and had zoned out, Alex hadn't heard a word she had said.

"...so by the look on your face, you think there could be a flirtatious moment between you and Nick and I'm thinking... it's not gonna happen." Jackie finished her monologue- she hadn't realised Alex hadn't been listening until she spoke.

"Huh? Whad'ya say?" Alex replied still looking at the "hot hunk that would no doubt have huge muscles and a six pack."

"You're so shallow Al!" Judy put in.

Alex instantly turned her head round and focused again “Huh? What, I didn’t speak?”

Judy and Jackie smirked and Judy said “You were thinking aloud. You said ‘He’s such a hot hunk that would no doubt have huge muscles and a six pack.’ That’s what you just said.”

Judy seemed to be back in a good mood and the tension had lifted, although there was still a little bit between Judy and Joey. “It’ll pass soon.” Jackie had said. Sure enough Joey apologised and the tension had dispersed.

Jackie tried again “That’s Nick Baxter, he’s on the soccer team. He plays under 21’s soccer and I do believe is trying out for the football team this year too. He is a hunk with huge muscles and a six pack. I used to date him, back in 8th grade. We’ve both moved on now, but we still talk now and again but it’s hard. We use simple sentences and there’s a lot of tension. His body language is usually closed and he has something on his mind, which I can’t figure out. Anyways it doesn’t matter, what happened, happened. The past is the past and we’ve moved on, like I said.”

Alex wanted to ask what happened between them, but something in Jackie’s eyes told Alex that it was best to keep her mouth shut.

“Still if you wanna get with him, then get with him. It’s got nothing to do with me anymore and I have no problems. Neither do these two. Right?”

Silence.

“Right?” she asked again.

“Sure, I don’t care to be honest, I’m more concerned about my baby right now, and the fact he or she has no daddy.” Judy said, with the happy-glint in her eye gone.

Joey merely nodded in agreement, he didn’t understand the way the female brain worked, but he was sympathetic. Most of the time. He wasn’t like most guys either- get a girl, get her drunk

and sleep with her (probably getting her pregnant), then dump her and sleep around, like pretty much all of the jocks, the only exceptions being Nick, Tom and Jake.

Tom and Jake used to be best friends with Judy and Joey and slowly when Jackie, who was hard as nails and more like 'one of the guys' rather than a girly-girl, became friends with them, Tom and Jake seemed to drift away from Judy and Joey.

Their friendship started to fade away and they stopped talking as much or seeing each other as often as they used to until eventually they stopped talking altogether.

Tom and Jake liked to go out drinking with 'the guys' (the jocks), but with them both being in rather intimate relationships; could only do Friday or Saturday nights, rather than every day like they did before getting girlfriends with the two best cheerleaders-two of the 'plastics' whom Alex had seen earlier.

Their relationships were somewhat quiet and personal- not out there and 'advertised' so the whole school knew that 'So and so did it with so and so at so and so's house party, last weekend!' This was just as well really because they liked to keep things private and between them and their partners, and not everybody else in the school, no matter how much they were teased or bribed or bullied.

"It's much nicer than it was at half eight this morning" Alex randomly said. "It was pissing it down."

Jackie stared at Alex like she had gone mad, and it was quiet. Very quiet. "Tumble-weed moment" Alex thought.

"That. Was. Random." Jackie said slowly, still staring at Alex and then raised an eyebrow.

* * *

"Yeah she wasn't particularly happy to go to school this morning. I hope she's OK. I haven't had a text saying 'Arrgghh help me! Get me outta her.' Frankly, I think she's OK, but I haven't even

had a text confirming that either.” David James said into the phone, while twisting the cord around his finger.

“I’m sure she is fine David. She’s probably a little bit stressed at the moment. She’ll settle in, in no time. Remember your first day at a new school, it was tough for you wasn’t it? Just imagine what’s it like for her, being dragged from pillar to post, by you and Geraldine.” The female voice was saying on the other side of the phone.

“I know mom, it’s just I’m a little worried, that’s all.” David continued.

“To be honest, you’re always been a ‘little worried’ about her. You’re worried she’s growing up fast and you’re going to lose the little child she once was. Face it David, she’s 16 and she’s nearly a woman. You’ve gotta stop worrying and let her get on with life. Both you and Geraldine were terrible for being worried all the time. And don’t even get me started on the nagging. You need to relax a little. I’ve told you this time and time again.” Patricia James carried on saying.

“Yes I know mom, but...” David tried to say.

“But nothing. I always said Geraldine was no good for you. I could see right through her persona, she was too strict on your child and you were always too soft. You needed to be a bit tougher and she needed to be less tough. It’s no wonder that your daughter is rebelling. I knew she would, just like Toby, her cousin, who is now 14, just so you know. Anyway David, you need to stop worrying, and relax and stop moaning every five minutes. I’m getting sick of it. You have bad parenting in my opinion.”

“Mother!” David exclaimed “My parenting is fine thank you. And what, yours was superb?”

“I raised you didn’t I?” she exclaimed back.

David had to admit he hadn’t been such a good parent in the past, as he was lazy and let Alex get away with pretty much anything.

“Just call me if she wants to visit me in England. Where I live.”
She emphasised this last bit.

“Oh how is that by the way mom?” He said.

Patricia didn’t speak for a moment, but when she did she said “A lot better, now that I don’t have to put up with you David. You’re a waster in my opinion. You were lazy as a boy, and you’re lazy now.”

“Thanks mom. Love you too” David said sarcastically.

“Hmmp!” was the reply from his mom.

The line went dead.

“Bye then mom.” David said to the ‘hung up’ tone.

* * *

The four of them trooped inside as the bell finished ringing. According to Joey they had math with Mrs Adgar. The door was already open and Mrs Adgar was waiting for them in the doorway. “Hello children” she said politely.

The four of them walked in silently and took their assigned seats, all except Alex.

“Ah you must be Alex?” Miss Adgar said in a British accent.

“Yeah I’m Alex. Where am I-“

“There is a spare seat near the front of the class. Not directly, just a couple of rows from the front. I hope you don’t mind me splitting you up, for the time being. I shall try and arrange for you all to sit together.” Mrs Adgar said in her nice, slightly posh accent.

“Miss?” Alex began; and wondered if she were being rude, still she continued “Where are you from?”

Miss Adgar smiled and said “I am from Buckinghamshire, England. I have been brought up to speak properly and I have learnt to speak and act with etiquette. That is good manners, by the way Miss James.” she added to Alex’s perplexed look.

Alex smiled at the teacher. She always liked the English; the British boys always seemed nice in the movies. It seemed to be the same with the English; they always loved the American accent and the American boys. That's the way it worked she supposed.

Test papers were handed out to see what each student had learned. Only Alex wasn't given a test paper. Miss Adgar gave Alex a starter task, a textbook and a workbook.

"Do the problems on this starter task, if you can, and then if you have finished, go on to the problems on page eighteen in this textbook." Miss Adgar said, pointing at the starter task sheet, and the textbook.

"Sure Miss" Alex said obediently. Alex pulled out a pen, a ruler, protractor, pencil and compass from her pencil case. She turned over the sheet of paper, and began the questions.

They seemed quite easy, at first, but they began to get progressively harder. Alex wasn't sure if she was allowed to put her hand up during a class test, so she missed out the ones she couldn't do, to come back to at the end.

CHAPTER 5

David sat on the sofa in his apartment in South-East Chicago. He hadn't heard from his daughter, since he dropped her off at school earlier this morning. She wasn't in a good mood then, and he hoped she had made friends and was feeling better.

He flicked through the T.V Magazine, to see what was on and the only thing that seemed to draw his attention was 'Cash in the Attic' on BBC America. He had never seen it before, so he didn't know exactly what it was about, but guessed it was about people selling their old stuff at auctions and getting a lot of money.

He thought it was a good idea, as there was a lot of stuff that both he and Alex could get rid of. He decided he would mention that to Alex when they next had a conversation over a meal or whenever.

Suddenly his phone buzzed from in the kitchen. He sprang up, and grabbed it from the worktop. It was a text from Alex- "At last" he thought, and he flipped it open and opened the text, which read:

'Hey Dad. Everything OK.

Made 4 new friends so in a better mood now.

C ya later, D.

Love you,

Alex

Xxxx'

He smiled and typed a message back:

'Hey doll.

Glad ur OK and happy.

Hope school is good

Talk 2 u later.

Dad

Xxx'

He sent it and went back to the T.V.

CHAPTER 6

“Yay!” the girls exclaimed as they left math.

“What’s so ‘yay’?” Alex asked

“It’s lunch now” Jackie said “We all go over mine. I don’t live too far. Wanna join us?”

“Um, I got lunch with me an-“Alex started

“Doesn’t matter. So you in or not?” Judy asked quickly

Alex thought about what her dad might say if she went of the school grounds. (Dad: “No you may not go off the school grounds!”) “Oh, who cares?” She thought.

“Yeah, why not?” Alex answered “I see no harm in going”

“Good” Judy and Jackie said together.

Joey, as he had been for quite a while now, remained silent.

Alex began to get concerned. “What’s up with Joey? He’s quiet. You were chatty this morning” she added, directing this last bit at Joey.

Joey seemed to be in a world of his own, but answered the question anyway, even though he was staring straight ahead, and thinking of other things. He said straight “I’m good. No need to worry, just mulling things over in my head. I didn’t get a question in math, so I’m tryna work it out.”

He said all of this without blinking, which made Alex worry even more. Still, he was game, even though he didn’t look, sound or even act it.

Alex still didn’t seem convinced but shrugged her shoulders and followed the girls, with Joey taking up the rear.

“So, where do you live then?” Alex put in.

“Not far. Just past the gates, and the bus stop next to the grit dumpster and past those traffic lights” Jackie said, pointing.

Alex thought that seemed a bit far, but going to the shops near her apartment, which were just ten minutes walk (there and back), seemed long. Well anything that didn't involve her room or living room seemed far to her. She really was lazy, and needed to get out more.

"OK, it doesn't seem too bad. I really do need to get out more though" she said, laughing.

Jackie and Judy smiled, as though they had a plan 'up their sleeve' and said in unison "Good. We'll take you out on Saturday. How's that?"

Alex thought about it, her friends had hardly ever taken her out, where she lived before and she supposed it could be a good experience. "Yeah, sounds great. What time though?"

"Dunno yet, Al. Let's get the week over first shall we?" Jackie said laughing again. This time Joey seemed to lighten up, as he laughed as well.

"Feeling better?" Alex asked him

"Yeah, much." Was the reply "I'll ask my mom when I get home, so I don't stress about it and create tension in this group."

They left the school grounds together, Jackie and Alex linking arms, like two little children and Joey trying to link Judy's, which she eventually accepted.

They walked off in silence and as they passed the bus stop, Alex saw a car advert and a 'MISSING' poster, which was dog-eared and dishevelled. They crossed the road at the striped pedestrian crossing, and walked past the half-empty grit dumpster. They passed people's houses and crossed over another street before heading towards the traffic lights, which were on red, even though there was no traffic.

They passed a pet shop, with a sad-looking, bedraggled puppy in its window. It was a tiny Jack Russell and Alex felt sorry for it. She had wanted one for a long time, and both her parents wouldn't let her have one, as she was always too young and

‘irresponsible to have a pet’. Now, at nearly seventeen she could finally buy one, if she had the money. She made a mental note to come and buy it tomorrow after school, with her dad’s permission of course, and if he said no, then she would just keep it at Jackie’s, providing it was OK with her parents.

She hadn’t realised she had stopped and was pouting at the poor, tiny puppy, until Jackie tugged her sleeve “Yes it’s cute and shouldn’t be locked up in that cage in a pet shop, but we haven’t got all day. We gotta go now, before mom goes to work. She’ll have gone shopping and I’m not supposed to eat anything she’s bought, without her confirmation that it’s actually for me, and not for her or my Nan. I did that once and got into trouble.” Jackie added chuckling slightly.

Alex smiled, that reminded of her when she was young. “Sorry” She said. “I’m coming.” She turned and walked off, glancing at the puppy as she went, who seemed to have locked onto and followed her gaze.

Two minutes after the pet shop was a gate, hanging off its hinges and rusting. It led to a wild, tangled and unkempt garden, and an old house, with peeling paint. She wondered if this was Jackie’s house, but she carried on walking.

“That’s my neighbour’s house. He’s old and smells of onions all the time. Look at his garden; it hasn’t been tended to for months. Still he is like ninety five and is probably dying. Poor git” Jackie said to Alex’s quizzical look.

They carried on walking to another house, which was better than the first, but not much better. At least the garden was tidy and the gate was hanging properly. There were daisies and buttercups in the grass and there were potted flowers, which Alex couldn’t remember the name of.

She opened her mouth to speak, but Jackie interrupted “This is me”

“It’s nice” Alex said politely. It was. At least it was a house and not one of the projects in which Alex lived.

“Thanks, but it’s a tip inside. It’s not the greatest place to live, but it’s what Nan could afford and it’s close to the school. She can’t afford much to be honest. She’s better than two years ago, but still not great. To be honest, she could do with better things and a lot more too at that, but we’re comfortable. For now, at least.” Jackie said confidently.

Alex followed Jackie into the garden, after she unlatched and opened the gate. “You said your mom’s gone shopping, but you just said you live with your Nan. Make up your mind Jack.” Alex said jokingly.

Jackie responded “Yeah, I do live with my Nan, but she’s old and frail, so mom goes out shopping for her and me. I’ve moved out, while I look for a job and get a place to crash. Mom and dad work full-time, so they can’t be there for Nan all the time, which is where I come in. I’ve moved out from all the shit that’s going on at home at the moment too.”

Alex looked surprised; it was the first time she had heard Jackie swear all day. “I haven’t heard you swear before Jack, that’s why I’m shocked” she said to Jackie’s ‘taken-aback’ look.

They went into Jackie’s house.

It was to a certain extent nicer than Alex’s apartment. With a proper staircase, living room, dining room and kitchen. It was a small kitchen, as Alex could see because the door was open. Just like all the doors on this floor.

“Hey Nan. Hey mom!” Jackie shouted brightly. Her mom, Alex assumed, came from out of the living room and stood in the doorway. “Hey mom. You alright?”

“Yes dear, I’m fine thank you. Hello Judy. Hello Joey. How are you all? Oh, who’s this?” she added, inclining her head towards Alex.

“Oh right, this is Alex. Our new friend. She’s just moved into the school. She’s from New York City. She’s living with her dad.”

“Hello Alex” Mrs Evans said sweetly “I’m Rebecca Evans. Obviously you know Jacqueline.” She added beaming

Alex nodded, she thought it right to introduce herself properly, so did so “Hello, I’m Alexandra James, but everyone calls me Alex like Jackie just said.”

“Quite, certainly” Rebecca said politely. Obviously she had been brought up well.

An old woman shuffled into view behind Rebecca and stood, leaning on a walking stick, which was intricately designed and carved beautifully. It was made of mahogany and had a rose around the handle. It was covered in lots of roses, Alex found out later.

“Nan!” Jackie exclaimed and ran over to give her, what looked like to be a squeazy hug, but turned out to be a really gentle one. Probably because she was so frail.

“What on earth is that ruckus?” She demanded in the nicest way possible

“We’re talking mom” Rebecca shouted.

“You have to shout cos she’s half deaf” Jackie explained to Alex who was puzzled by Rebecca’s shouting. “Oh and in case you hadn’t worked out my middle name is my mom’s name- hence Jackie Rebecca Evans and my mom being Rebecca Mary Evans. Mary is my Nan’s name. We all have each other’s names in our name somewhere, well apart from my dad’s, or all the men’s names in fact.” Jackie added chuckling.

CHAPTER 7

Half an hour later, the four children were sitting on the floor by the fireside, in Jackie's Nan's living room. Her mom and her Nan were in the kitchen eating. They thought it would be best to leave them alone, while they ate. The children had sandwiches, crisps, cake, fruit, cereal bars, nuts, pop and anything else you could think of.

They ate and talked about school, friends, family and any issues they had. They laughed and joked and tried to think of good baby names for Judy's baby. They couldn't tell if it was a boy or girl yet, so they thought of names for both genders and names that were unisex like Jo and Jack.

"How about Elizabeth for a girl and Dominic for a boy?" Alex asked

Judy pulled a face and said "Elizabeth, I like. Um, Dominic, no sorry"

"OK... How about..." Joey started

"Benjamin?" Alex finished

"Awww, that's cute Al, but I dunno." Judy said

"Why don't you ask your mom Jack?" Joey asked suggestively

"I tried Joe, we didn't get far" Judy said laughing

"Juno?" Alex asked, laughing. It sounded strange calling her Juno, but she probably could live with it.

Judy finished her mouthful "Yeah?"

"Who's gonna be the dad, cos Max has effed off now, hasn't he?" asked Alex, carefully

Judy thought for a moment, took another bite of her sandwich, shrugged and said "I really don't know. I wanna keep it, but I think I'll prob have to give it up for adoption, unless I find a boyfriend- no Joey, sorry mate- who will love me for who I am, and would want to raise a child. If I give it up for adoption, the

parents will come up with a good name, so we don't have to worry. I'm sure it'll be all sorted and fine."

After this little speech, they all lapsed into silence, which was quite awkward.

After a long pause, in which nobody spoke, Alex piped up, just to fill the silence "When does the next lesson start?"

Joey looked at his cell phone, at the same time Jackie looked at her watch. Together they said "In about five minutes" They looked at each other and laughed, eventually the laughing spread and soon Judy and Alex were laughing too.

Alex, who hadn't laughed so much for a long time, gasped between laughs "Argh! My ribs hurt and I'm crying from laughing so hard!"

Everyone carried on laughing and eventually the rapturous laughing subsided and they all stopped dead. They sat there taking in the warmth of the fire and then started to clear up, in another long silence.

"We really should get going" Jackie said to her mom and Nan, as they all took their plates, cups and garbage into the kitchen.

"Where do you want these?" Alex requested

"Just put them by the sink, like everyone else." Mrs Evans said respectfully

Alex felt rude, by not washing up "Are you sure? I could wash them up for you, if you like?"

Mrs Evans smiled cheerfully "No dear, it's fine. You go off to school now and have a good afternoon."

Alex sauntered after the other three, and as she neared the door, she turned and thanked Rebecca, for letting her stay for lunch and sharing her food.

She left the house and jogged down the garden path, to the others who were waiting patiently for her. Now she had to

endure the sadness and guilt of walking past the pet shop and the sad, bedraggled Jack Russell puppy.

Once outside Alex stopped again and shook her head, she pushed open the pet shop door calling behind her as she did “I won’t be a minute, you guys walk on, and I’ll catch you up.”

She walked nervously towards the desk and the young woman looked up. “Hello dear, may I help you?”

Alex smiled politely and said “Yes. Please can I come back and buy the Jack Russell puppy tomorrow, because I have school now and no money? I want to look after it, as it looks sad and needs a new home.” She felt awkward for asking such a silly question, but also good for requesting to give the puppy a nice new home.

The young woman looked at the puppy and back at Alex “Hold on please miss, I have to ask my father a minute, he is on his break, and I am looking after the store. I’ll be right back” and with that she disappeared behind the beaded curtain.

Alex stood behind the desk and turned to face the door and window, the puppy was now wagging its tail and looking longingly up at Alex. Her friends had indeed walked on. Whether they waited out of sight around the corner or were heading back to school, she didn’t know. All she knew was that they weren’t outside the shop window, gawping in to see what she was doing.

The young woman came back with her father and sat back on the wheeled seat and spun around slowly. She looked about Alex’s age, but was acting like a small child, spinning on her chair.

“Right miss, what is it that you want?” the girl’s father asked politely.

Alex turned back to the desk. “I was wondering if I could buy this Jack Russell puppy tomorrow. I know it may not be here still, so I was wondering if you could reserve the puppy. Like keep it back, and say it’s sold or something. I gotta go back to school now, but I really want the Jack Russell. Is that even possible?”

The pet shop owner looked at her and said “You want me to reserve the puppy? How old are you kid?”

“Sixteen; nearly seventeen” replied Alex. “I know it seems silly, but it’s the only way I can think of doing it. Sorry, I’ll leave now.”

The pet shop owner stopped her, thought for a moment, looked at his daughter who shrugged her shoulders and finally agreed to let Alex come back and get the puppy tomorrow. As soon as he uttered the words ‘Yes I suppose’, Alex’s heart leapt with joy and she bounced out of the shop in a flurry of ‘Thank yous’

Outside the shop and away from the window, Alex did a dance of joy, much to the amusement of her friends, whom she couldn’t see, and the weird looks from the passers by.

Alex suddenly realized she was being watched and stopped her ‘happy jig’ (as she liked to call it). She was sixteen, and was acting like a six or seven year old. “How embarrassing!” she thought.

“What the heck was that stupid, weird dance for?” asked Joe opened-mouthed, when Alex had caught up with her friends.

“It wasn’t a stupid, weird dance” Alex retorted “it was my ‘happy jig’.” Alex smiled sweetly, but secretly wanted to pummel Joe for saying it was a ‘stupid, weird dance’ “

“Well whatever it was,” Joe said stubbornly “Why were you doing it?”

Alex smiled again but sarcastically “Because... I’m happy”

Joe was getting tired of Alex not getting to the point, and Alex was getting tired of Joe asking too many questions.

Joe sighed “And why might that be?” he asked, while he exhaled his sigh.

Alex sighed too. “Because, my dear friend, I got what I want, sort of. Now, no more questions please.” Joey just rolled his eyes, but remained silent.

Jackie and Judy had remained silent while this little exchange had gone on, but now Judy piped up “We’re late for Humanities. Only by two minutes, but by the time we get to school, find the class, apologize to the teacher and sit down it’ll be more like twenty, so now we’re really pushing it. Let’s go. Al and Joey shut up and stop arguing!”

The four of them began to run to school, skidding to a halt, just in time to cross the road, before sprinting off again. Once or twice Alex tripped over her feet and nearly face-planted into the sidewalk. Mercifully she didn’t, and she carried on running.

All too quickly they became sweaty and exhausted and didn’t want to walk into their class stinking, so they slowed to ‘power’ walk. Jackie reassured the girls she had some body spray, and Joe kindly decided to tell them he remembered his Lynx Chocolate.

“Thanks for that Joe. We really wanted to know that!” Jackie said laughing, whilst they carried on with their ‘power’ walking.

They could see the gates of the school though they were still a good five minutes or so away. Thankfully Jackie’s cousin, Marco showed up and offered them all a lift. Alex had always been taught and reminded of the ‘Stranger Danger’ scheme, and her senses told her not to get in the car with Marco (no matter how damn cute he was).

Her friends were telling her to get in the car, but her dad’s voice kept saying “Never, ever get into a car with a stranger even if your friends say it is OK and they know them.”

Alex overrid this statement, and told herself “It obviously didn’t apply to actually making friends with complete strangers or bunking off school and going to their houses at lunchtime” as she got into the car.

Two and half minutes later, Marco stopped the Volvo in the parking lot and the teens sprang out the back. Alex hit her head on the door and Marco laughed, but looked apologetically when Alex shot him a dirty look.

Jackie slammed the front and back doors (as they all got out the same side) and Marco sped off, kicking up some dust in his wake. The four teens raced in through the front doors ignoring the receptionist shouting at them to stop running because they were late. Very late.

Their Humanities class was on the other side of the school, through a small courtyard, along two corridors, up three flights of steps, along another corridor and four doors to the right.

They arrived breathless, hot and a little smelly so they quickly sprayed themselves all over and went in. As soon as they entered, there came a volley of words from Mr. Exeter, the head of the Humanities department

“Where have you been?” he bellowed his face red, and spraying spit everywhere as he spoke.

None of the teenagers spoke but stood stock still in front of him.

The silence thereafter was very awkward. The whole class had turned to stare at the ensemble at the back of the class and you could hear a pin drop. Mr. Exeter pointed them to their seats and each one sat down after the other like dominoes, and the rest of the class looked around in unison, which was quite scary to watch and rather unnerving.

The hour dragged on and the four teenagers were starting to get bored. Whenever Mr. Exeter’s back was turned, Joey would scribble down a note and pass it to Judy, who would hide it, only to pull it out, read it, reply to it and pass it on to Jackie. Jackie would do the same as Judy, and then smile at Joey.

Getting it to Alex, was the difficult part as she was so far back, and in the last five minutes they nearly got caught twice. Thankfully the rest of the class was too engrossed by Mr. Exeter’s diagrams and explanations to pay any attention and to snitch on them.

Alex was sitting three rows behind Jackie, and it was her job to look up at the right time and to catch the note which had been scrunpled into a ball. She had dropped it twice and missed it

once so far, each time dropping her pen or book off the table and stooping to pick them and the note up each time the teacher turned around.

The last time the note was thrown at her it was in shorthand and it took Alex a while to decipher it. It turned out to say:

I am bored in lesson; wanna skip it, cos it's whack? We could all say we need the loo, individually and meet outside. What do you say?

Jackie's answer had been 'yeah', Judy's was 'let's try' and Alex had just replied, just as the bell rang. "What a waste of a note" she thought.

"Too late now" Jackie said, raising her eyebrows.

Alex waited until the others had left and said, "Sorry guys, I couldn't work out the note, until it was too late."

Joey half smiled, half frowned and replied "Nah, it was my fault Al, should write proper."

"Like you were doing previously" Alex interrupted.

"Yeah, like I was doing, and so you can understand it" he continued.

The four trooped back along the corridor, down the many stairs and into the little seating area in what seemed to be the middle of the campus.

"So I was thinking, what we gonna do this weekend? Same as always?" Judy asked Joey.

"Nah, I was thinking we could have a house party at mine. Just us lot, no one else. We need to celebrate a week's worth of Alex, and the fact that she's survived, sticking it out and actually is enjoying school. Well, I'm sure today was pretty shit, but after this weekend, you'll get used to it." Joey said, directing the last bit at Alex.

Alex smiled and said sarcastically “Oh thanks, now I feel really loved ‘A week’s worth of Alex’, what am I? Not enough for you, or am I really that bad?”

Joey looked genuinely worried that he had offended and hurt Alex’s feelings. “No, I didn’t mean it like that. I mean that it was a new week and we’ve made a new friend, who hasn’t run a mile after we first said hello.”

“Joey, I’m kidding. I know what you mean. You’re a silly idiot.” Alex added smiling and then laughing quietly.

“Oh, that’s OK then” Joey replied, rather relieved.

The group finally agreed to keep in touch about the weekend and said their goodbyes. Joey and Jackie went to collect their bikes and Judy got into her mother’s car. As the other three left simultaneously, Alex waved them goodbye and waited to be picked up by her dad, by the front gates..

CHAPTER 8

The trees rushed by as Alex looked out of the front passenger's window. She had been smiling as she entered the car, and her dad was also smiling. He had asked her about her day and she told him everything from her first lesson, to being knocked down in the corridor, to Jackie picking her up, all the way until the little chat in the car park.

She even mentioned the part about going to Jackie's for lunch; which she supposed her dad would shout at her for, but he didn't, he just listened contently, nodding here and there and not interrupting (which was a nice change). The only bit Alex left out was the Jack Russell puppy part, and wanting to buy it. She thought it was best that she kept that part quiet, just in case her dad went mad and shouted at her.

"Sounds like you've had a fun-filled and wonderful day, honey" he finally said looking at her, while they sat at the lights. He patted her leg and drove off again.

"I did yeah. Um, so can I go out on the weekend then?" she asked while playing with a strand of her hair- miraculously it had stayed pretty much straight, even though she had ran and it had been windy at lunch.

"We'll see" he replied "Just get this week over first; see how much homework you get, chores etc. Oh, and your behavior."

"You're still banging on about my behavior? Sheesh. I thought that had stopped when I was fifteen." She said, slightly agitated.

"Nope. Still going strong." He said smiling and then he laughed at Alex's 'I'm-not-in-the-mood-for-this-and-I-was-happy-and-now-I'm-not' look.

She pulled a face and said "For crying out loud dad, that's not fair!"

"Well... that's new. You usually swear hon" he said in a tad sarcastic voice.

They rounded yet another corner and drove down the ramp of the parking lot. Graham, the security guard was still there in his office, drinking a cup of coffee, reading a magazine and occasionally looking up at the T.V screen. He saw the James' come in, looked up and nodded a 'Hello'

David parked the Pontiac and walked towards the stairwell, nearest Graham's security booth. "Alright Graham?" he asked as he popped his head out of the booth.

"Aye, I'm not too bad, aye" he said in a thick Scottish accent. He was wearing his bright yellow high-visibility jacket and had his 'work' trousers on- thick walking trousers, and his sturdy walking boots. He smiled at Alex and said "My, you're looking in a better mood. I'm taking it you had a great day in school. Eh, lass?"

Alex smiled; she liked Graham as he was a great conversationalist. "Yeah, I did thanks. Has it been busy today?"

"Not really busy, lass. Just been the usual really." Graham replied.

"Then why on earth is there a security booth and a security guard?" she asked, puzzled.

"It's because the Government wanted there to be one." He replied

"Funny thing for a parking lot, that's not in the city centre, to have isn't it?"

"Aye, but it don't matter, them folks that live 'ere are fine with it, an' so am I, cos I got work. It is great here, I get to see you most days, and most of the time you don't look grumpy. Well, 'cept this mo'ning when you were pretty unhappy, prob'ly cos you were goin' to school and it was your first time and..." he continued.

"Yup, most days I'm fine. Today not so. School and all that jazz" Alex replied. 'All that jazz' seemed to be her new favourite sentence, ever since a boy in school had said it at break-time.

Graham's grammar had always been shocking, but Alex just assumed it was because he was Scottish and that was the dialect, and how they spoke. She roughly understood what he was on about, excluding the 'thems' and 'ayes' that weren't in the right place, or used incorrectly.

"So dad, how was your day?" Alex asked as they ascended the stairs in the apartment. Her voice echoed along the walls and bounced back at her, amplifying the sound.

Her dad nodded and pushed open the doors at the top of the stairs on their floor. "It wasn't too bad. I had no work today, so I stayed in and worried about you and watched T.V. Oh, and I called my mom. She's fine by the way" he added pulling the apartment keys out of his pocket. He pushed the door open, disabled the burglar alarm (which he bought and installed himself, most probably without the landlord's permission, but Alex suspected he didn't really care, as it was for their safety) and flicked on the light.

Alex dumped her bag in the hallway, kicked off her Nike Airs and walked into the sitting room. "Mmm, that's good then isn't it? Cor! I didn't realize how sore my feet are" she said plonking down on the armchair and rubbing the soles of her feet.

"I expect that's because you've been on your feet all day, well, except when you were in your lessons behind a desk." He father concluded, also sitting down in the other armchair. It was slightly weird having a three-person sofa, and no one to occupy it, unless they snuggled up and watched a film together, like they sometimes did.

* * *

"Geraldine, when's dinner ready love?" Robert asked as he took off his tie. Today had been another busy day at the office and he just wanted lovely food, a shower and bed. No sex tonight, which wasn't really unusual anymore as either him or Geraldine (or sometimes both) were just too tired, as they were rushed off their feet at work.

Geraldine was in the kitchen serving the food when Robert called, “Just serving it up now love. Go wash your hands, it’ll be on the table when you come back” she called, shouting from the kitchen.

Robert obeyed his fiancée and washed his hands in their en-suite bathroom. As he left, he looked in the full-length mirror near the door to their bedroom. He looked drawn, old and tired. The fact of the matter was, he was forty-two and had been in his newspaper columnist’s job for twelve years now. He enjoyed it very much, but some days it just seemed to take it out of him, and he often wondered if he should carry on doing the same job for another two years or so (give or take a few sick days and holidays).

Geraldine had indeed put the food on the table, and had even pulled out Robert’s chair, letting him sit before she did. She was a fabulous cook, and that was one of the reasons why Robert and her were brought together, which is kind of odd really, if you think about it.

“So, how was your day at work Robert?” Geraldine asked politely. She disliked shortening his name to ‘Rob’ (or for some reason- she never understood why, ‘Bob’) and she hated her name being shortened to ‘Gerri’ or ‘Ger’.

Robert poured himself some wine and sprinkled salt on his beef roast dinner. “Oh, the same old stuff- columns, busyness, bagels, lunch and lots and lots of cups of tea. The usual really.”

“Oh. Well, what was your article about today?” Geraldine asked.

Robert had already started eating and was now trying to stuff more food into his mouth, whilst still chewing the mouthful he already had. “Unnnnggghhhhh” he said because his mouth was so full.

“I told you not to cram your mouth full of food” Geraldine said huffily, whilst stabbing her carrots and a potato and bringing the fork to her mouth. Robert finally finished his mouthful and said “Sorry, I forgot you hate that. I do beg your pardon. Well, my

article is about the youth of today, and their actions, contributions and attitudes in the community, and their role in society. It's really quite-

"Oh how fascinating!" Exclaimed Geraldine; a little over-excited.

"Yes well, it's quite a hard article to do, so I suppose I will be bogged down with work. No sex, maybe spending a little less time together than we normally do. So..." Robert replied in his posh 'look-at-me-I'm-so-happy-and-proud-of-what-I-do-so-ha-ha' voice.

Geraldine took another mouthful of food and raised her eyebrows. "Well what we both do," she said when she had finished chewing "is full-day jobs, or nearly full-day, so we don't really see each other anyway- no change there then. And the sex thing, well that hasn't happened for a while has it? Still, we're happy and content, and to be honest, I cannot wait to marry you and start a family of our own and I'm absolutely ecstatic that you chose me to be your girlfriend and then your fiancée, well, after four years together. I cannot wait, truly I can't" she said gushing (as per usual at meal-times).

"Well good, I'm thrilled also, but what about Alex?" Robert asked.

"What of her?" Geraldine replied. "Frankly as I have no custody over her, as I didn't want any, she is neither my concern nor my priority. You and our family, if we do ever have one, are my concern and my priority. You are far more important to me than a silly, selfish girl and her stupid, ill-mannered, jobless jerk-of-a-father. Honestly, I don't know what I saw in him. Really I don't, you're a much better person, and you will make a wonderful, caring, compassionate and loving father. You will be a great father-figure to our little boy or little girl." Geraldine said, doing one of her 'I-don't-care-about-anyone-else-except-for-us' speeches.

The tension at that precise moment could be cut with a knife, and neither spoke for a few minutes, silently eating their dinner

and contemplating what was said, and how they were progressing in their jobs.

The sudden ringing of the telephone made both of them jump and exclaim "I'll get it!"

Each got up and ran to the phone, but it was Geraldine who got there first. "Hello?" she asked politely. "Oh, it's you" she said dejectedly "What do you want?" she added nastily. She listened surprising contently and then said:

"Right, well I don't care. I have no interest in her or in you for that matter. Goodbye!" she told the voice on the other end, and with that, she hung up slamming the phone into its holder.

When she returned to the table, Robert had nearly finished eating and hers was gone. She sat down huffily, and sighed.

"Who was that hon?" Robert asked.

"Him" Geraldine replied.

"Him?" he enquired

"Yes him Robert. David. My ex-husband. The bastard. Do I need to describe him any further?" she added

"No, no. I understand. What did he want?"

"He wanted to know if I wanted to speak to her..." the way Geraldine emphasised 'her' made it seem like Alex was an insect or something nasty on the sole of Geraldine's shoes. She really said it in a horrible way, and Robert felt sorry for the girl. "...as she had been wondering recently about what had happened and if it was her fault. She isn't very happy, to be honest."

"Can you blame her? You treated her like shit, and you walked out on her!" Robert wanted to say. Instead he retorted:

"Why did you say 'no'? Just because you want nothing to do to her, doesn't mean she doesn't need an explanation Geraldine. I think you should ring her back, or if you won't, I will and I will force you to speak to her. If you're going to be like this, I may

have to rethink our future plans, you do realise I haven't booked the venue for our wedding yet, don't you?"

"You wouldn't dare!" Geraldine screamed shooting up on to her feet. She had had enough. Her day had made her stressed and now she was having a mental breakdown. She broke into tears then and sank to the floor sobbing like a small child, who had just got told off.

"I would. You know I would. Call her back now and apologise. Let her know it's not her fault, that it was yours for whatever reason. I do not want to see a child like this, or hear of a child who thinks they are worthless and the cause and centre of family problems, and the reason why their parents have split. I don't think you realise, but I know what she's going through, I had to grow up with divorced parents and then my mom died in a car accident. I still kept in touch with her, but after her death, everything went downhill. I resorted to crime, and drug and alcohol misuse. I'm clean now, I went into foster care, and that changed my life for the better, for good. Don't put Alex through all that pain and misery, it's not worth it. Trust me. And another thing, I do not want our children going through the same thing as I did, or as Alex is going through, so if you want to be like you are now, and act selfishly, then I'm sorry, but you'll have to leave. This is my house, and it is now my turn to 'wear the trousers' and take on the dominant role, which you so stubbornly take, so I have no choice but to obey you. Now it's your turn to obey me, or I will leave you. Now call David back and apologise to him and to Alex and speak to her. Arrange a catch-up with her and her dad and I shall come along too, then after a while make it her and you. Let her adjust to you and come to you, let her and her dad gain your trust again. I am glad David is still keeping in contact with you, but I am a little surprised also, as if it were me, I would keep my daughter, or son, away from you as you have no right to treat a child in that manner and in the way you have spoken to her and her father. I am finished now. Go call them back" Robert lectured.

When he had finished, Geraldine got up and like an obedient child marched over to the phone and pressed the redial button. No answer. She turned around, wiped her eyes and shrugged at Robert.

“Well keep trying” he urged. “I’m going to have a bath. Thank you for dinner. Let me know how you get on.” He added smiling to himself as he walked out of the room. He felt fantastic and had just triumphed over Geraldine, and now he punched the air, once he was out of sight.

He walked into the bathroom and turned on the taps. As he did so he could hear the sobs coming from the living room, and wondered if he had been too strong. He thought for a moment and said “Nah that was strong and meaningful enough.” His message had finally sunk through to Geraldine. He had wanted to say that for a long time and had, sort of, been planning it each day, waiting for the opportune moment to ‘strike’, which he did tonight (unexpectedly for he had surprised himself with his meaningful eruption).

CHAPTER 9

Roughly 4,000 miles from Chicago, Illinois the curtains were about to open in Wales' own Millennium Centre. It was Act One of a murder mystery play called 'The Mysterious Death of Master Llewellyn Jones'. The main protagonist of this play; Llewellyn Jones, was a carpenter's apprentice and had lived in Aberystwyth for nigh on six years. He was eighteen and had previously lived in Blaenafon. Well that was his home town, and since the closure of the coal mines, it was hard to find work.

As the curtains rose and the play had began, somewhere in the dark, Mr. Bridge was sitting not taking the play in. He was stroking the black P9 in his shiny silver suit jacket pocket. Tonight there was going to be a real murder, and then the operation could begin. Target One was somewhere in this room. Target Two was in London, in Hyde Park and Target Three was 4,000 miles away in Chicago, Illinois. All were on the same side of the Earth and some were closer to home than the others. Like John Pride and Martha Wickard.

"I expect you know why you are here Master Jones?" the woman's voice said, echoing around the auditorium.

"No, I have no idea ma'am. Papa sent me here to collect something for him and his business but he didn't say what. Ever since the closure of the coal mines, papa has been doing various jobs to help others and to gain money, but so far, all have been rather crude." Llewellyn Jones's voice boomed from the stage. His voice was astonishingly low for an eighteen year old, rather too low Mr. Bridge thought to himself, while still silently playing with his gun as if it were a toy.

The play dragged on and Mr. Bridge didn't take any of it in, he was far too busy thinking of the task ahead. He would wait until John Pride went out in the interval and kill him in the toilets. That was his plan, but first he had to make sure no one saw, or was in the toilets at the exact moment. Finally the safety curtain came down and the lights went up, it was the interval. Now Mr.

Bridge had to move quickly. He got up and searched for John Pride.

He found him, heading towards the door to the left of the stage in their section of seats. He matched the description perfectly and was wearing the same clothes as in the photograph. Well he would be, seeing as the photograph had been taken at the moment he stepped out of his house and got into the taxi to take him to his destination.

Mr. Bridge followed John Pride outside into the foyer. He kept at a safe twenty-five yards away from him, so John wouldn't suspect he was being followed. The task in hand was supposed to be simple but as John walked past all the toilets on this floor and down the steps, Mr. Bridge wondered if it was going to be a little more difficult than originally been planned. Perhaps he was going outside for a cigarette. Who knew? All Mr. Bridge knew was that he had to keep following Mr. Pride no matter where he went. If he got into a taxi, he would call another one and demand the driver to follow the one in front (just like they did in some movies). If he turned around, Mr. Bridge would pretend to tie his shoelace or read a sign or pretend to engage in a conversation, just to blend in.

This was exactly like James Bond, except for all the cool gadgets and guns. Mr. Bridge had to remind himself he was no spy, and this was real, and he was a paid assassin. Yes Bond was paid, yes he killed, but he didn't do it for pleasure, or for a psycho maniac who would have his balls on a plate if he fouled up the slightest bit; quite literally too I might add.

John Pride left the Millennium Centre and began walking towards the Red Dragon Centre. He stopped and turned around, Mr. Bridge had nowhere to hide, which wasn't a problem. He stopped and tied his shoelace, not that one had come loose, but the idea was to give the impression one had. It had done its job, Mr. Pride carried on walking.

Now the real problem started. Once inside the Red Dragon Centre, it was all too easy to lose Target One. It was packed with

afternoon shoppers, (it was odd for a play to be on in the afternoon, but that was how it had happened) and Mr. Bridge had to keep an even less-than-twenty-five-yards-distance behind Mr. Pride. He kept a close eye on him, and although following his every move, he lost him once when three men around him had the same jacket on as he did. It wasn't exactly surprising as this was the major shopping capital of Wales, but it was worrying nonetheless.

Mr. Pride knew he was being followed and so walked into the Doctor Who Exhibition hoping to lose his pursuer, but it didn't work. As he walked past a glass case he saw Mr. Bridge following him and then Mr. Bridge; who had seen him looking, pretended to study the Daleks on the opposite side. John's plan of losing his follower was to no avail, and so he pulled a mobile out of his pocket and pressed the speed dial button. Once outside the Red Dragon Centre he stopped and waited.

"Bore da. Un tacsí-" he said to put off his follower and then he realised that maybe the phone operator, even though this was Cardiff, may not understand what he was asking. "Hello." He said resorting to English "One taxi please, to London. Thank you."

Mr. Bridge noted this down, cleverly concealed (he thought) behind the ticket booth stand. He didn't understand Welsh and for some reason only knew 'Bore da' which he couldn't remember whether it was 'hello' or 'good day'. Either way, it didn't matter.

"Oh. Well to the train station then..." Mr. Pride suddenly said.

"...in about five minutes? Thank you" he continued and then he hung up.

So, Mr. Pride was getting a taxi to the train station, on to London. Killing him on the train would be next to impossible. "Stupid, action films making it look so easy." Mr. Bridge said silently. "It's fucking impossible!" he said aloud, making passersby tut and shake their heads. Mr. Pride, thankfully,

hadn't heard and was still standing there watching the cars pull out of the car park and waiting.

* * *

John Pride was thirty-two and was born and bred in Cardiff, South Wales. He had lived with his parents until the age of twenty-two. He then decided to get his own place, near the bay, but not too expensive. He didn't find a house near the bay, but it wasn't in the city centre either, just sort of in the middle. He had never married and never once had a girlfriend. He wasn't queer; he just never fell in love, not even in school.

He worked as an office man, in a big bank firm; like most people these days, and eventually (through hard work, motivation, commitment, effort and promotions), became Assistant Bank Manager- the closest to being a big-time boss in a big-time company as he would ever get. For a long time anyway.

Mr. Bridge on the other hand, was a huge contrast to John Pride. He was fifty and had been in the business for twelve years. He started working for himself in Cardiff, setting up his own business, roping in and employing his own men - only men, women to him were considered weak and inappropriate for the job, but that was back then. His men consisted of hard-line criminals who needed this kind of work to survive.

He had makers, packers, shippers and sellers. This of course, was the cocaine industry, and everything he worked for and created fell on his shoulders. They had to avoid being caught, as there were plenty of people in the cocaine industry in New York and London, but not many in Cardiff, so they had to be careful.

Mr. Bridge was from New York himself, and had seen many people around him- his mother and father for instance, fall to the upheaval and joys of cocaine. He had seen it on T.V. and like many people had been influenced by it. He wanted to become a criminal mastermind, and this was the one place to start, everyone needed drugs, especially the 'gangs of New York' and

cocaine was the hardest hitting, fastest appearing and well sought-after drug that Mr. Bridge had ever come across.

Fuck heroin and weed, cocaine was the special, impressive drug. He had tried all three and could safely say, cocaine was the best and gave you an incredible high (well in his, and other coke users, opinion anyway).

By the time he reached twenty-eight he was already a millionaire in the coke industry; he started at just seventeen, and was very well known in New York. He was only the messenger boy at first, dealing on the streets and giving the money to his father, but after the death of his father and mother by; no prizes for guessing, a cocaine overdose, he became the head of the cocaine industry that his father had owned. Now he needed to change the company name from 'Bridge and Son' to something a little catchier.

After a while he decided he needed to move to London to start afresh, and so had his men dismissed, by Hugo, his main henchman and body guard. You could almost call him Hugo Boss as he was aiming for Mr. Bridge's position. Hugo dismissed the men and some of them met rather unfortunate and unpleasant ends. Hugo himself disappeared and gave up on the cocaine industry and the drug itself. He went into rehabilitation and became a bouncer at the doors of one of New York's many clubs.

When Mr. Bridge reached London, he soon got noticed and got lots of attention. The wrong sort of attention. He had been wanted by the police, by dealers, and other members of the cocaine industry- he owed money to a lot of people and he owed cocaine to a lot of people too and so he disappeared for a while. Stopped trading, stopped being involved. He waited for the 'storm' to die down, waited for the calm.

Then he emerged as a new man, wanting to start again- 'clean slate' and all that shit. His life was like 'Grand Theft Auto' and at times he thought about ending it all and getting a 'Game Over'

on the screen of his life, but eventually he was found by someone, who needed some important favours to be done.

She found him and knew he was the one. She didn't care about his past, or the fact that he was a sexist twat, all she knew was that he was right for this job, and he would do it. No questions asked. Working for her had taken him to all sorts of locations, and had led him to this, to now, to this very moment in time.

* * *

The taxi pulled up outside the train station and Mr. Bridge got out, paying the fare as he left. Mr. Pride had already gone in and was now paying for a one-way ticket to London via the ticket machine. Mr. Bridge hurried on and followed suit, he followed him onto the train and into a seat, with a table, three seats behind.

Suddenly Mr. Bridge realised that by going to London, Mr. Pride was leading him not only closer to his death, but closer to Target Two as well. He could assassinate them both in one day, then dispose of the gun and evidence, (being careful not to leave a trace) and book a hotel on the outskirts of London, away from it all. If all went to plan from now onwards, then tomorrow he would be on a plane heading to Chicago, Illinois, where Target Three was situated.

Target Two was Martha Wickard. She was twenty-six years old, a widow and quite poor. She struggled on in life, and Mr. Bridge knew this. He would make the killing as quick as possible, so her pain and misery could subside. She didn't know this, but would soon find out. Hopefully. If the plan succeeded.

CHAPTER 10

The night was drawing in and Alex could sense a storm brewing. She had spent the last five hours on the phone to her mom, weirdly and shockingly. They seemed to be getting along from what her dad could see and hear. She was laughing and smiling and in a way he knew Geraldine was laughing and smiling too, through the phone.

“It’s gonna be a bumpy ride!” her dad said like the shrunken head in the third Harry Potter film- it was scary that he could quote memorable (and not so memorable) lines in the character’s exact voice, and a bit lame that he would do such a thing. Still it was one of the many reasons why Alex loved him (even though she didn’t always show it), providing he didn’t do it in the streets. She could actually be nice to him sometimes and he could be funny sometimes too.

“Maybe not bumpy, but deffo stormy” Alex replied from the bathroom, where she was brushing her teeth. “What is the actual weather forecast for tonight Dad?” she asked after she had finished brushing.

“Well according to CNN” David said as he checked the internet “there’s gonna be storms. Listen to this:” he added finding the article.

“‘Across most parts of America, including Florida and Illinois, there will be high storms.’ That’s not unusual to have storms in Florida especially; it is hurricane central after all, well during the late summer anyway.” David said, not sounding at all surprised.

“Carry on reading dad” Alex said wanting to hear the weather report.

“Sorry” he said “‘There is a 90% chance of flooding tonight, and that small 10% chance of a hurricane.’ The map here (he pointed to the map as Alex walked into the living room) shows the wind and rain levels Al. ‘This will continue until six o’clock tomorrow morning. We shall be keeping you posted on the T.V, radio and

the CNN Website for more details about the hurricane possibility.” David said sounding worried.

Silence filled the flat thereafter. There was worry in the air and both David and Alex, (who had just sat down, only to stand up again) could feel it.

“Shit” Alex said, breaking the silence. David nodded, there was nothing more to say. They looked how they felt and it was as if someone had died- someone they didn’t know but respected and grieved for all the same.

They left the living room together and went to bed, not even saying goodnight. Sleep came quickly for Alex, but David lay awake, thinking. He thought of Geraldine, of the birth of Alex, of the disappearance of Geraldine, of the divorce form and of the phone call tonight. What made her change her mind and call back? Did she feel a pang of guilt that she had left Alex and that she needed an explanation? Did she feel worried and sad?

She hadn’t said. All David knew was they were talking again, after many years of strained silence and pain, and Alex was now happy. A part of him was alert, telling him his ex was not to be trusted and this was a way of getting at Alex. Another part told him not to worry, all was well, it was a one-off good thing and Alex was happy. And a third part, a much smaller part, was telling him that this was the road to ‘happy families’.

* * *

The next few days dragged on amidst the changeable weather- torrential rain, strong and high levels of wind and glorious sunshine. Alex had gone to school with no fuss and had enjoyed each day as they came and went. Apart from school, and buying the Jack Russell puppy Tuesday morning, nothing exciting happened. The puppy was a boy and so far neither of the teens could think of a suitable name. Mrs Evans agreed to let Alex keep the puppy at her place, and eventually a name was given to the puppy. He was a little rascal and thus his name became, ‘Rascal’.

It was kind of cute ‘Rascal the Russell’ it had a good ring to it, and whenever he saw Alex, (he knew she was the master, even though he was living with Jackie) he bounded up to her yelping and wagging his little tail. Occasionally, (Alex thought it was for the fun of it and Jackie agreed) Mrs Evans polished the hall floor, so when Alex came to visit he bounded, fell and slid across the floor on his belly, into her open arms.

* * *

Wednesday. 3:20 A.M. Raining. Alex lay awake listening to the rain beating heavily against her bedroom window. She hadn’t been sleeping for roughly the last two hours and had been tossing and turning so much that she had become hot and sweaty and very frustrated. She looked over at the digital alarm clock on her bedside table- 3:22 A.M. “Jolly good” she thought unimpressed. “Two minutes have gone by already” She decided that she would go and watch T.V quietly and crept out of bed and over to her door. She pulled it open as far as it would go before the absurdly loud creak and squeezed through the gap she had just created.

Once outside, she tiptoed past the dining room table, which occupied the same area as the lounge (they weren’t in separate rooms because there wasn’t enough space or rooms to start with and both her and her dad agreed it looked nice to have an open-plan dining room). As she walked past a chair, she stubbed her little toe on it. She had left it out since dinner and now she paid the price. Trying not to scream and make a loud fuss, she quietly (which was very hard) cursed and rubbed it better. However, she stilled hobbled over to the T.V remote on the coffee table, where it was left from its previous use.

She turned the T.V on by its switch on the side and without delay, turned down the volume on it. She grabbed the remote and selected the music channel called Kerrang, and sat back, wriggling to get comfortable. Good Charlotte was on, singing ‘Like It’s Her Birthday’ and Alex started singing quietly along.

“She’s so wasted, acting crazy, making a scene, like it’s her birthday.” Both Alex and Good Charlotte sang.

The song finally finished and a band Alex hadn’t heard before came on, she didn’t like them, so flicked to MTV and a man Alex didn’t recognise was interviewing Paramore- they looked strange without Zac or Josh; but Alex thought they were still good.

“Let’s take a look back at some of your old, or should I say ‘previous’ videos?” he said and directed the last bit towards Hayley.

“No, it’s OK to call them ‘old’ cuz that’s what they are.” She said. She smiled and nodded at Jeremy and Taylor.

“OK,” the man continued “Let’s take a look now at some of Paramore’s old videos. Let’s start with ‘Misery Business’.” He looked at Paramore “I like that one. I-it has a good, strong message. Well for me anyway. I think it sort of says, ‘No matter what happens in life, you gotta keep on going.’ Well that’s what I think anyway, I’m probably wrong but-“

“No, I wouldn’t say you were wrong, cuz it’s your opinion. I mean for me and the boys, we all have a different meaning and interpretation of the song, but that’s just us. Everyone out there will interpret it differently, so ya know” Hayley interrupted.

“Yes, so let’s get back. Here’s ‘Misery Business’” the man added, in a way that meant ‘we’re on a schedule and we’ve now gone off track, so let’s bring it back.’

‘Misery Business’ began to play and Alex turned it up a little bit. This was her favourite Paramore song, and so she got up and danced around the room. She wasn’t conscious of dancing in the comfort of her apartment, but she daren’t dance for anyone in school, it was far too embarrassing.

When the song finished the interviewer started asking Hayley and the boys about the past, including Zac and Josh leaving the band. “So tell me guys, why did the Farro brothers leave?”

As Hayley was about to answer, Alex heard her dad get up and quickly turned the T.V off. She would sleep better now, as music calmed the soul. She dashed to her bedroom and rapidly squeezed through the gap in her door. She then darted to her bed and dived under the covers. Her dad pushed open the door, making it creak and poked his head around it. He looked rough and bleary-eyed, but that was due to just waking up.

“Who are you talking to hon?” he asked sleepily.

“Oh no one, I must’ve been dreaming. Sorry dad” she said sheepishly.

“Oh OK” He replied in his ‘I don’t believe you’ voice. “Night.” He said.

“Night, Dad.” Alex said, forcing a yawn.

Her dad left the room and went back to bed and Alex laid back thinking of her answer to Nick Baxter’s question last week- “I noticed you staring at me. Wanna go out?”

It was early days yet, but she really liked him, however, she couldn’t be sure whether he really liked her or was just asking her out, to stop her gawping at him everyday, and to show off to his friends. She closed her eyes and in an instant she was sound asleep.

The next thing she knew was her dad shaking her awake and the horrible, bleak and grey light of an early Chicago morning spilled into her room through the opened curtains. She rubbed her eyes and sat up.

“Morning sweetheart” was all her dad said and he left the room to get ready for work.

She got up and got showered and dressed slowly. More slowly than usual. She felt like shit, not in poor health so to speak, but ill in a way- she didn’t feel herself.

“Morning” she croaked as she joined her dad for breakfast.

“Morning Al. Whoa you look quite rough this morning to be honest.”

“Hi Dad. Yeah, I feel like shit today. Dunno why, I just don’t feel myself.” Alex replied sounding depressed.

“I hope you’re not coming down with something” he replied

“Mmm, so do I. I’ve probably got a touch of a cold coming. I don’t want the flu though.”

“Nobody does hon.” Her dad said serving up the cooked breakfast of beans, two rashers of bacon, two sausages, an extra large fried egg and waffles on a separate plate, stacked high and covered in honey and yoghurt.

There was a glass of Orange Juice (which her friends shortened to ‘O.J’) or tea in a huge mug- so big it was almost a bucket on the table. Classic American breakfast. (Well the breakfast was a full-English, but still it was hearty).

Alex tucked into her full-English hungrily. It was ages since she had had one and waffles, and it wasn’t even the weekend!

After a while, David spoke “Another wet, miserable and cold day today, I’m afraid.”

Alex groaned and continued to stuff her face, her dad hadn’t even touched his (mind you it wasn’t nearly as big as Alex’s, but still plenty to eat and keep them going until at least dinner time, Alex thought).

“Joy” she said sarcastically. It really did rain a lot in Chicago- not as much as in England or in the mountainous areas, but still enough to make her fed up. At least she hadn’t developed S.A.D syndrome. Yet.

They finished breakfast in silence; her dad actually tucked in at last, and each got on with their own individual routines, so they could leave together, and David could drive Alex to school, which was four blocks away- too far to walk, especially in the rain.

As Alex cleared up, she started to sing “Second chances they don’t ever matter, people never change...” she went to brush

her teeth and afterwards she carried on "...once you're a whore, you're nothing more, I'm sorry that'll never change."

"What's that?" her dad asked, kind of stupidly.

"A song" Alex replied in a serious tone.

"Yes, I understand that, but what's it called?"

Alex was zipping up her hoody "'Misery Business'"

"By?"

"Paramore. Honestly Dad, keep up with the times, yeah?" she added laughing.

David was now getting his jacket on ready to step out of the door, but remembered he had left his briefcase on the bed, so took it off again.

"Dad?" Alex shouted stretching the word out and stressing it the way a child would.

"Yes?" he shouted back, imitating the way Alex had called him.

"Where are my sneakers?"

"In the dryer. Where you left 'em from yesterday's bout of rain."

"Oh. Muchas gracias, Dad."

"Muchas gracias?" David asked, puzzled.

Alex found her sneakers all nice and warm and dry in the dryer.

"Yeah. It's Spanish for thank you, Joey taught it to me, cos he went to Spain some years ago as a family vacation." She replied putting on her sneakers and tying the laces loosely and then yanking the tongue so that it stuck up in the 'cool' way.

CHAPTER 11

Mr. Bridge had failed. Failed big time. Martha Wickard was still alive and now he was in a taxi heading to the outskirts of London to meet with her. His boss, the psycho maniac.

* * *

It had gone like this:

The train had arrived at Waterloo Station at 18:20 and John Pride had walked out to the street, reading something as he left. Once outside, he called a taxi and had asked the driver to take him to Hyde Park. Mr. Bridge had followed him there in another taxi. John Pride strolled through the park- a peaceful evening walk, with some squirrels darting to and fro and birds chirruping in the trees.

After a pleasant evening in the park, he exited at the other side and called another taxi, to take him to the centre of London; well to where the eating houses were at least. He stopped in a quaint little café and ordered a slice of chocolate cake and a glass of sparkling water.

John was wasting time, and Mr. Bridge needed to get him away from the city centre, to a secluded place where no one could interrupt his 'unfortunate' end. He eventually got up, paid and left, all the while being closely surveyed and pursued by Mr. Bridge. They walked for hours; well walked and took numerous buses, and eventually they reached South-East London.

This was known as 'Cockney and Chav Territory' to Mr. Bridge. This was so as every time he came here (which was a lot during the cocaine trade) it was full of chavs and Cockneys and so it had been known as the 'Chav and Cockney Territory' (or 'CCT' for short). This was a good place to kill someone, in just about the same way as any rough place where killings and attempted suicides took place. Occasionally one did actually kill themselves, but that's another story altogether.

John Pride, at long last, came to a deserted side street; presumably waiting for someone, other than Mr. Bridge to arrive, with a flickering street lamp and the stench of piss and alcohol. It had taken days for Mr. Bridge to track down, stalk and finally prepare to kill Target One, and now all of that came down to this moment right here, right now. One cock-up and Mr. Bridge was as good as dead himself- he might as well just put a bullet in his own brain.

He crept up to Mr. Pride and, screwing the silencer onto the barrel of his P9, took aim and squeezed the trigger. The bullet shot out of the barrel lightning fast and as it did so, John bent down to tie a loose shoe lace. The bullet embedded itself into the concrete, just inches behind his left foot. Realising his mistake, Mr. Bridge waited until John stood up and aimed at his head, he held it there for a moment, making sure he wasn't going to move, and squeezed the trigger once more. Again the bullet rocketed out of the barrel and this time blasted through the back of Target One's head and through the other side, where it landed with a 'plink' on the concrete slab. Target One crumpled and crashed to the floor, breaking something (probably his nose) as he landed heavily, but it didn't matter anyway as he was dead.

Mr. Bridge walked over the lifeless heap on the floor, kicked him on to his back, and pushed the gun into his cold, limp right hand, he closed his fingers around it and pressed them down, now it would be his fingerprints the police found and they would just treat it as another suicide casualty undoubtedly. Mr. Bridge left the scene of the crime swiftly and, making his way to the main streets walked towards his hotel, discarding his gloves into the Thames River, as he passed. Thankfully no one was around and so he could do it with ease, not worrying if someone saw him kill Target One or not.

His leather gloves were nice, but they had to go, and Mr. Bridge had plenty of them at home, as they were cheap; not real leather, and used as a means of hiding his fingerprints. However,

he had to be careful of a pattern, which was why he bought different coloured gloves, in both men's and women's styles (which usually didn't fit) and different sizes too.

He arrived at his hotel and leisure complex- he had deliberately chosen an expensive hotel this time, again to avoid a pattern and add to the confusion of the police, (hopefully in any case) and he went straight to his room, not even bothering to eat, even though he hadn't eaten for most of the day and was now starving. He dumped his grey duffel coat over the back of a chair and sat on the bed, to untie the laces on his army-style stiff boots.

Mr. Bridge suddenly had a slight trepidation about him and he didn't know why. He had to prepare thoroughly and properly to make sure he got everything. He soon fell asleep and began to mark out his plan in his head, for tomorrow.

Martha Wickard, he knew, was currently living in Surbiton. She worked as a cleaner and shelf stacker in Tesco, and mopped the floors and cleaned the staff and customer toilets. Her shifts were mainly at night but she was sometimes required to do a daily shift, due to other staff member's illnesses and when it was her turn on the rota. She did this for the minimum wage and as she hadn't received any qualifications, this, road sweeper and bin lady were the only jobs on offer. She didn't fancy the other two, and so took up the job of shop floor cleaner.

She started work at nine in the morning and worked until about two in the afternoon, or six in the evening until about eleven at night. Mr. Bridge had to catch her either before her morning shift, or her evening shift or after each one. The problem was, that he didn't exactly know when her shifts were- he knew the times, but didn't know which days she worked morning through the afternoon or evening through to night.

That night Martha phoned in sick and told them she was very ill; and she sounded it too, so she didn't go to work at all that evening. Of course Mr. Bridge didn't know this and so he waited for two hours before the morning shift and when she didn't

show, he came back in the evening and waited across the street in the thick shadows waiting for her to come along. When she didn't turn up, Mr. Bridge started to feel trepidation rise in him again. The next day his mobile rang and Mr. Bridge feared to answer it. The caller I.D read THE BOSS and so he didn't want to answer, but evidently he had to, so did shakily.

She wanted an update on his progress and confirmation on his success (or failure in this case) of his assassination requirements.

"Target One eliminated, ma'am." He said in a surprisingly confident voice, so much so he startled himself and squeaked out the next part "There was a... slight... problem with Target Two ma'am." He found it difficult to get his words out and was very aware that his boss was not an easy woman to impress, but an easy one to annoy and get a killing from- she would kill anyone who got in her way, gladly, or who didn't do as they were asked.

Mr. Bridge was met with silence, then she retold the message to someone who grunted, she told him to be at her house in one hour and to leave now and then the line went dead.

* * *

The house was huge. Bigger than any Mr. Bridge had ever seen. It was true that it was called a house but unmistakably looked like a mansion, and so Mr. Bridge called it 'The Mansion' (in his head of course). The taxi he had arrived in pulled up outside the huge, black ebony doors and Mr. Bridge got out. He paid and the driver sped off in the direction they had come, he didn't really want to hang around, she had called again to make sure Mr. Bridge wasn't skulking off somewhere else, and she sounded threatening and pissed off.

Mr. Bridge was left standing on the red gravel driveway which was huge itself and took in his surroundings- neat, ordered gardens, straight edges and geometrical shapes around him. It was like the houses of the medieval period; just like at Hampton Court, and the times of Henry VIII and all those sort of rich

people. The surrounding properties were pretty close together, using less space and there were lots (as far as Mr. Bridge could see as there were tall Oak, and Willow trees in the way) of ha-ha's in the gardens a little to the left and behind the house, as far as the eye could see.

The house itself was old, parts of it dating back to the 16th Century and had very long straight windows and a shining gold knocker and ancient steps. However, at the back (and a little to the right) of the house, there was extensive refurbishment going on, making what looked like, a conservatory, studio and swimming pool, which was naturally a huge contrast to the other side of the house. Still it was her choice. She certainly had the money for it!

However grand it was, it was still in a secluded area, and Mr. Bridge was fully aware of that. He slowly walked towards the house, up the stone steps and stopped outside the huge, ebony door. The large gold knocker (Mr. Bridge wondered if it was real gold) was shaped like a serpent. "Very like her and skilfully made" Mr. Bridge thought. He knocked the door with the serpent and the sound boomed out, resonated along the walls, making his ears ring slightly.

The door swung open and Mr. Bridge half expected to see a butler wearing a black suit with sharp creases ironed into the trousers, a stiff (possibly starched) white shirt, shiny, polished black boots and white gloved hands, but there was no such person. Instead there stood a six foot eight, muscle-bound man who was taller than most people and certainly built like a rugby player, if not buffer. He was extremely strong and just to prove it, he flexed his muscles as if taunting Mr. Bridge's puniness (he was five foot four, and thin and he certainly felt puny standing next to him).

"Who is it Ringo?" a female voice screeched from somewhere else in the mansion.

"Mr. Bridge ma'am. Just as you ordered- like a dog!" Ringo growled; directing the last bit at Mr. Bridge himself.

Ringo had dark hair and grey-green eyes. He had a long, deep and quite scary looking scar down his right cheek (just visible as he stood face on) and a skull and fire-ring tattoo on his right arm, just below his elbow. He had another tattoo; a serpent wrapped around a dagger, on his left upper arm, and the bottom of this was just visible under his sleeve, it was only shown clearly and fully when he pushed the sleeve up to scratch just below his shoulder, all the while looking Mr. Bridge up and down and narrowing his eyes.

“Whatcha lookin’ at?” he snarled accusingly and in a gruff voice.

“Um n-nothing” Mr. Bridge squeaked, Ringo was scaring him, but he plucked up the courage to continue. Clearing his throat he said, “I was merely admiring your tattoos, sir”

Ringo seemed satisfied and didn’t look like he was about to start a fight, and slammed the front door, (which had been left open all this time, bringing in a breeze, which neither of them noticed) and then turned to watch her glide down the stairs.

“I understand you fucked up...” she said calmly, reaching the last-but-one step and hovering there for a while. “...and that really pisses me off!” she suddenly snarled, shaking with anger.

“Ma’am with all due respect-“

“Silence! Ringo, love, would you leave us a moment please?” she added kindly to her minion. He walked off mumbling something about being “shot or maybe hung, then shot.” Evidently Ringo wanted Bridge dead.

When he was out of sight and ear-shot she continued harshly “I don’t care for excuses, Arthur, you have failed to kill Target Two, for whatever the reason, and now you have left her vulnerable to attack from third-party organisations! I gave you three, three simple tasks and you can only complete one of them!” this last bit she started getting higher and higher, until she was squeaking with rage, then all at once she brought it back down again and went on “Your incompetence neither amuses nor interests me, frankly I find it most irritating, and as my only paid

assassin, surely you can get your head around what I want and what I don't want?" Mr. Bridge opened his mouth to speak but she interrupted, slightly more calmly now, (like a parent telling off a child, but trying not to lose it) "You need to pull your socks up and get your act together." She then floated down to where Arthur was standing and stood directly in front of him.

An awkward silence followed her rant and each stood there staring at the other, with the woman hyperventilating and then breathing slowly with deep breaths to calm her down from her rant. Ringo appeared from behind the stairs and stood there watching, he took a step forward, then turned and took a step back the way he had come, then turned and took a step forward again. He really didn't know what to do and so stood quietly in the shadows watching the pair of them again.

"What do you want Ringo?" she asked, finally breaking the tense silence. "I don't like, nor understand lingering."

"Can I come back now?" he asked like a small child. "Have you finished speaking or do you want me to leave again?"

"You can stay. For now." She replied. "Come, let's have a cup of tea, and we can talk about your failure and what we shall do about it" she was humouring Mr. Bridge, but he smiled all the same.

They went into the lounge and sat down; Ringo was ordered to make the tea and so he left Mr. Bridge and her to it. "I suppose it is about time I told you my name, Arthur. You just know me as ma'am or her or the Boss don't you?"

Mr. Bridge nodded, he had to admit it was getting tiresome not knowing her name and just calling her 'her'. In that manner.

"Yes, do tell please." He said, slightly over-eagerly.

"I wanna know too ma'am" Ringo said as he brought back a shiny, silver tray with a teapot, teacups and saucers and sugar cubes on it.

"All in due course, all in due course Ringo dear. One lump or two?" she asked Mr. Bridge.

“Um, two please” he replied. Ringo set the tray down on the glass coffee table and spooned two lumps of sugar into Arthur’s tea.

Sitting in the lounge, they drank their tea and Mr. Bridge’s boss finally decided to tell him and Ringo her name, but rather than tell them straight out she had them playing a little guessing game first. They had both been in the dark about her identity for many years (between them) and it was getting to the point where Mr. Bridge was beginning to make up a name to give her- Barbara was one he came up with, but it didn’t suit her at all; too sweet and old lady-like for a psycho maniac (who had absolute power).

“It begins with the letter ‘L’” she said smiling smugly. Mr. Bridge had a feeling it wasn’t going to be fearsome, but a pretty name (probably why she chose to keep it a secret in the first place).

“Lydia?” Ringo asked suddenly. The boss shook her head.

“Laura?” Arthur asked. Again she shook her head.

“Lavender?” Ringo asked, and Arthur mouthed the word in disbelief.

“Lara?” asked Arthur in a sort of triumphant way.

“Nope, keep going”

“Lauren?” interjected Ringo

“Lola?” Arthur eventually asked, almost giving up.

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “You are absolutely correct.”

“Lola?” Arthur and Ringo repeated together, sounding surprised.

“Yes well done. You have my middle name” she said raising her eyebrows in a smug way- she was toying with them and was obviously enjoying it.

“Ms. Something Lola Someone” Arthur said, testing the name over and over again on his tongue, more to himself, than Ringo or her.

“Now my first name, I promise, begins with the letter ‘C’” she said again smiling. They could tell this was amusing her greatly.

“Catherine?” Arthur started.

“Claire?” Ringo joined in.

“Charlot-?” questioned Arthur

“No, Carol?” interrupted Ringo

“No Caroline!” barked Arthur, his voice rising in volume.

“Christine?” Ringo snapped back, rising to his feet.

All too soon they began arguing about the name-guessing, which the Boss just enjoyed until:

“Christina!” Arthur shouted looking like he was about to break Ringo’s nose or jaw.

“Shut up! Both of you!” she shouted as Ringo prepared to launch a volley of curses, and punches at Arthur. “Arthur has it again.”

“Too bad. Two nil.” Arthur thought.

“Christina Lola. Now for my last na-“

“I’m not going through another process of elimination, it’s tiresome and we end up fighting.” A sulky Arthur interrupted.

“You don’t have to. It’s ‘Christov’.”

“So you’re Christina Lola Christov?” Ringo asked. “I like”

“I don’t. It sounds too... fancy and pretty to be... a psycho maniac- sorry amazing, if slightly mental, criminal mastermind.” Arthur said, meaning to think in his head, but thinking aloud instead. “Sorry was that out loud?” he added ignorantly.

“Yes it was.” Christina cleared her throat. “I shall ignore that remark. Lola was my grandmother’s name and Christov my father’s family name, and both my parents like Christina, so there we go. Oh, and, er, I was married, so ‘Mrs’ would do, or rather ‘Ms’ after my husband died some time after the Second World War.”

So far, they had actually avoided talking about Arthur's misfortune and miscalculation regarding Martha Wickard, but he suspected it would come soon. He also suspected the niceness was a façade, leading up to the boiling point and explosion of words, actions, cursing and threats from his boss- Christina Lola Christov. He could just imagine the explosion of anger now in his mind and it wasn't a very pretty sight, or pretty sound.

It came as a surprise, but at the same time not. Christina suddenly exploded and screamed "I can't believe what you have done Arthur! You have really messed up this time! There are only two options for this sort of cock-up."

Arthur sat in silence for fear of saying the wrong thing and risk being shot. Without warning, Ringo launched himself at Arthur and started pounding him in the head, throwing blow after blow. Arthur tried to defend himself but carried on getting punched in the side of the head and the face, until his nose bled. Christina eventually pulled Ringo off him, and Ringo stormed out of the room to "cool off". Arthur's head was spinning and numb. He sat there in silence, wondering if that was his 'punishment'. He guessed it was, as Christina gave her smile- evil and sly at the same time. True criminal mastermind style; like those Bond baddies.

CHAPTER 12

The sound of gunfire alarmed Alex as she walked to school the next day. She started panicking, thinking someone was being murdered until she walked past a house and a boy's voice yelled "Die! Die Zombies! Haha you're no match for me. I am supreme ruler!" and then a female voice (presumably his mom) yelling "Johnny turn that thing off, it's time for school."

Alex stopped panicking then and the tension from her body left her and she carried on walking to school in her own world. This was the first day in weeks she had walked to school. It seemed every other day she wanted to walk, it was either pouring with rain, or she got up too late.

She felt light-headed in a happy way and began to skip gaily down the sidewalk. A few people noticed her, but she didn't care. She was too free and happy and content to care anymore. An old couple shuffled along in front of her so she slowed to a snail's pace and then they stopped to let her pass.

She heard the screams before she had even got to the school gates. She ran the last few yards through the gates and into the parking lot. There was confusion everywhere, people running, girls screaming, people yelling, teachers seeming to run towards the commotion in slow-motion. It seemed unreal- Alex didn't know what had happened, but there was blood; everywhere. And lots of it.

Alex nearly tripped over someone's foot as she ran past a Buick Muscle Car and a GMC Sierra. She saw Joey and Max Jones- she had grown to recognise him as he had a distinct way of walking; almost a limp, and had a scar on his chin that was quite noticeable. Joey didn't seem to have noticed her, but Max had.

"Al" he said as he approached; he was being strangely nice to her, but an absolute prick towards Judy. "You alright? You're late you know, but then again so are we all." He nodded at a group in front of them. The teachers still seemed to run in slow-motion and hadn't reached anyone yet.

“Yeah...” Alex said distantly not taking her eyes off the scene unfolding before her. It was almost like a dream and didn’t seem real. She still didn’t know what had happened; just the after-shock and effects of what had happened, what looked like only a few minutes earlier.

“W-what?” Alex began to ask Max.

“Um, I think it involves...” Max thought for a while, but had to ask one of his friends called Davie for the answer.

Davie turned around, obviously in shock and said, with wide eyes and unblinkingly “Lucas, car skid, Judy, crash, sound of bones breaking, screaming and blood.” Then he passed out.

Alex understood exactly what he meant- Judy had been accidently run over, by someone called Lucas (she had no idea who he was) but still wanted to see if Judy was OK. She fought her way to the front of the group, and found Judy unconscious on the floor surrounded by a pool of blood- a huge, gaping gash laid across her forehead, and her left arm was broken.

No doubt her baby was dead, because Lucas was saying how hard he hit her- “accidently of course” but Alex suspected otherwise. Judy was forever being called a slag and a slut and a whore because she was pregnant and many of the boys were ‘out to get her’ or ‘get their own back’ on her; whatever that actually meant in the teenagers so-called dictionary and stream of words, that only they (in their groups or ‘gangs’) actually knew.

Alex felt physically and mentally sick and couldn’t just stand there and not do anything, but she had to, there was nothing she could actually do. The head mistress and teachers finally got to the scene of commotion and stopped dead in their tracks. It took them a while to shoo the children out of the way and Mr. Denningham- the Physics teacher- whipped out his cell-phone and dialled ‘911’.

Alex stayed rooted to the spot in horror and she noticed several people (on both sides) had collapsed out of sheer terror and

shock. Her legs began shaking under her and she grasped Lucas' wing mirror to steady herself. The car had a dented and crumpled fender, but she didn't care about the car. She was more concerned about Judy and what her parents would say if their "darling little angel" (as her mom said) died.

Then she was violently sick. It was obvious to anyone what had happened, but she still couldn't believe it. She wanted to go home, but right now she needed to sit down and get the image of Judy's twisted, broken body and pain-stricken face out of her mind. It was scaring her and was rather nightmare-ish. She wanted this all to be a nightmare and to wake up and go to school and everything would be fine, but she knew it wasn't (she pinched herself several times to 'wake herself up' but she wouldn't, so it was evidently real). Then she too fainted.

CHAPTER 13

Alex woke up to the smell of vomit, bad plumbing and stale sweat. She had no clue as to where she was and her head was still reeling. She began to panic and started having a panic-attack as she had obviously just been kidnapped and she was nowhere near anywhere with a phone, or her dad, or the police and suddenly she couldn't breathe.

Also, the bed- if you could call it that- had a lumpy mattress, no blanket and a scratchy, uncovered pillow with feathers poking out of it. Evidently the occupants of the establishment had no idea into housekeeping and having 'guests' over. She rolled over, and smelling what was in the bucket beside the bed, threw up again. She felt like shit and was confused and she didn't like it at all.

There was a knocking on the door and the sliding of a hatch; like in prison cell doors; and a male voice growled in a Scouse accent through the gap. "Morning sunshine. How was your sleep?" the man seemed genuinely thoughtful, but Alex guessed it was another façade, to shield her from the truth. Far too many façades, from far too many people.

She still couldn't breathe and gestured to her throat, fear rising in her chest, and the feeling of her chest caving in. The door man seemed genuinely worried and rushed in not knowing what to do, and so had to call for backup. Backup came and they calmed Alex down after several attempts. The other guy, another night-shift guard left the room and left the door man with Alex.

"I'm Lucas" he said. "Are you alright?" he asked worriedly.

"Yeah, I am now. Thanks" Alex replied. "Where am I?"

Lucas sighed and wanted to tell her, but it was his duty not too. "I'm sorry I can't tell you that sunshine." He rubbed the back of his neck and added "The boss said if I tell you that, then I'll have _"

"You'll have to kill me" Alex finished.

A phone started vibrating somewhere in the building, so she looked around trying to find her bag and coat, but they weren't in the room with her. The man sighed and pulled his own cell out of his jacket pocket while Alex watched in disappointment.

Lucas left the cell and slammed the door and the hatch across and began talking to whoever it was on the other end. Alex crept up to the door and crouched down, so she couldn't be seen should he open the hatch again and then she placed her ear on the cold, hard steel door. She had been expecting not to hear anything and therefore give up, but she was surprised she could hear quite well. It was kind of muffled, so she lay on her stomach and saw that in the middle of the door there was a bigger crack, than anywhere else along the door. She looked under the door and could just make out a man in a blue suit standing and jabbering down the phone. She could hear him clearly now, so she shut her eyes to concentrate on his voice.

"So I said to him, 'She's not gonna like that, so take her there instead', so then he said to me 'Shut up man, she'll go where we put her.' And so then I said-

He stopped. Evidently he had been told to shut up, as he was now apologising profusely. Then he cracked his knee, much to Alex's disgust and carried on talking. "Yeah, she's in there now. Just woke up. Uh huh. Yeah I'll take her to breakfast. How come I'm not allowed to know her name, but you are? I gotta call her 'sunshine' it's annoying me and I'm sure it's annoying her. Oh... right... fair enough. So what is for breakfast then? I'm sure she's hungry and we can't starve her, it's not right. The boss said..."

He stopped again and whirled around to sort of salute a grey-haired London man in an even greyer suit. The grey-haired man rolled his eyes and said "That'll be all Lucas. You always salute me. This is not the Army so there is no need." Then he turned around and left Lucas, Alex and the phone person alone again.

"Sorry, Nigel came around the corner. Now where was I?" he continued, asking himself rhetorically. "Oh yes. The boss said 'Do what you will to her, just make sure she doesn't starve or

dehydrate.’ I mean I don’t like the sound of any of this, but of course I have no say because I’m only the rookie and the dogsbody. I just don’t get why I get the shitty end of the stick and she gets the good end. I mean, she’s our prisoner, so why does she get treated like royalty and I don’t. I’ve been here longer Wendy and it’s not fair. I wanna come home.” He sounded like he was about five then and about to get into a tizzy.

Alex wondered who ‘Wendy’ was. It couldn’t be his wife because he was talking about breakfast and knowing her name, and Alex doubted this would be passed on to anyone outside the organisation. Or whatever it was.

“This sort of stuff,” Alex thought “would be Top Secret and confidential, not in the open air.” She sat up and scooted around so her back was against the door. A shiver went down her spine, but that was only due to the cold door. She now felt, for some reason healthy and not unwell like she had been previously. She had gotten used to the smell in the room so she didn’t feel sick, and was actually starting to, in a scary way, like this room. It was bare and boring, but for the time being, it was hers and it was big and it was away from her nagging dad.

She hadn’t thought of her dad at all, whilst she was here, but now thinking of him made her upset and miss him, but she blocked it out of her mind and began to think of how to escape.

She started to look for a piece of paper and a pencil to draw a map, but realised the room was practically bear and she had been either blindfolded or unconscious anyway, so didn’t know the layout of the building she was in, so she gave up and sat in the middle of the floor.

Alex heard the hatch being pulled across again and scurried across the room, where she flung herself onto her bed and pretended she had been there all along. The hatch was open and Lucas poked his head through as far as it would go. “Hello sunshine. Sorry about that. Now how about some nice food, eh?” he said grinning toothily.

Alex rolled her eyes, but got up and skipped to the door, eager to get out of the cell. She started to plan her escape, but first she had to find out where she was and if that was possible. It was probably going to be a hard mission; like 'Mission Impossible' but Alex thought "If Tom Cruise can do it, then so can I. It can't be that hard."

She allowed herself to be led out of the cell, down three stupidly long corridors, around six corners, (the majority being to the right) down two flights of steps and through some heavy double doors and into the large dining room, that was rather empty, save for the workers or whatever they were. Someone indicated to a random seat along one of the exceptionally long tables.

Why that specific one she didn't know, but soon found out. She was being led to breakfast early, because a loud klaxon sounded and there was a murmur and a drone of footsteps approaching and another forty inmates joined her at the table. All together there were two tables which seated twenty-two inmates and another long table at one end of the room for the twenty guards and doctors and whoever else they were judging by the clothes they wore.

Alex didn't know where she was, but it looked like some sort of prison and she could see to some extent a high, concrete wall with barbed wire on top and so she was rather scared. Breakfast was served and was lumpy gruel washed down with strong off-tasting water. It tasted like it was limewater, but then again it could've been iodine or some other concoction, she really didn't know. Breakfast lasted ten minutes and afterwards they were all given a day rota- what jobs and activities they were to participate in. This 'lecture' lasted another ten minutes and then they were left to their own devices until half-past ten, where they were required to do cardio-vascular exercises and other strengthening exercises.

* * *

The army assault course was the hardest one yet. Alex didn't understand why she had been kidnapped in the first place.

Maybe it was some twisted experiment and they chose random people 'out of a hat'.

Within the first two days of being in the prison, Alex had been befriended by a woman called Martha Wickard. She had warned her: "If we disobey the guards, then we will be shot at sundown or is it sunrise? I can't remember."

Whilst polishing her boots, (that they had all been given with no questions asked) one day, Martha continued what she had been saying only the day before. "One such man was killed last week- Thursday afternoon to be precise, Alex." They wore orange inmate jumpsuits over plain white t-shirts, with black army-style boots, and were sitting on one of the outside benches. Alex and Martha had unbuttoned their jumpsuits and tied them around their waists and sat there baking in the sun, not at all cooling off like they really wanted to do; they were knackered from the assault course- just like every other day in this stupid hell-hole.

The prison was like a training camp. Actually, it was like a concentration camp, but without the gas chambers or the Nazis. It was still strict and army-like, and they were tortured- well not tortured so-to-speak, but they were killed if they stepped so much as a toe out of line, by the guards. Alex was still scared of them and was always cautious about what she said and did. So far she hadn't stepped out of line and was thankful, but she guessed it was only a matter of time before she did. She was a rather cocky teenager and thought she knew it all, which most of the time wasn't the case.

Then one day it happened.

She had just finished her push-ups which she had to do for not eating all of her gruel- at least she hadn't been shot. She had to do one hundred and fifty push-ups and started at half eight- breakfast now started at eight sharp and finished at about twenty past to half past. It was twenty to one when she finally finished and as she sat down for lunch, the doors opened and everyone trailed in. They looked sad and had the same effect as a dog which has its tail between its legs.

She had swung one leg under the table and over the stool leg (it was one of those tables which has the stools attached to it) and was about to sit down, when she heard the gunshot. It was the sound of a rifle; which she had learnt was the only gun they used to kill, and it echoed off the shooting range walls- the shooting range wasn't just for target practice, but for shooting the disobedient inmates. She stood up and ran to the window, several inmates joined her, but the majority stayed rooted to their seats. Evidently they were used to the sound. So far, Alex hadn't experienced the shooting of someone or heard the gunshot, until now.

The guards hadn't arrived in the room yet, and weren't due to arrive until quarter past one. This gave Alex fifteen minutes to run out, find out who had been shot (because her curiosity got the better of her at times), pray for them; which she didn't normally do because she was agnostic, and run back to the luncheon, all without getting caught and before the guards arrived.

She raced toward the door and yanked it open. She tore down the corridor and passed a fire exit, so she skidded to a halt, turned around and slammed into the handle, letting the door bang shut behind her. She had never been to this part of the yard before, and the reason for that was because they were only allowed out at specific times and if the guards (that had their own rota to watch the inmates) were there with them. She pelted out into the blinding sunlight and shielding her eyes, found the shooting range and began running towards it. As she did, she saw the guard carrying the rifle exit the building so she ducked behind the garbage dumpster.

She watched him walk into the 'Firearms and Ammunition' bunker and dashed in a crouched position to the shooting range. She rolled inside. As she stood up she heard the sound of the guard returning and panicked. There was only one place to hide; under the table and so she rolled under it and breathed quietly and waited.

“Must be in ‘ere somewhere.” The guard said in a half-broad Scottish accent. He had obviously toned it down for the man that followed him into the shooting range. He began rummaging in a box to the left of Alex on a crate, and Alex was worried that he was going to look under the table and so didn’t breathe for what seemed an eternity.

The other man was starting to get impatient and looked to be of the deceiving type, and sure enough he was- he pulled out a silenced pistol from the back of his waistband and shot the rifle man in the back of the head. He died instantly and slumped to the floor. The other man, who was older than the rifle man looked around outside and came back in. He grabbed the rifle man by his ankles; for he had fallen on his face, and dragged him outside. Alex remained in cover and waited.

The man didn’t return, so she crawled out from under the table and pulled a face at the trail of blood left behind from the dead man. She gasped at the slumped figure by the target wall- it was Martha Wickard, her best friend in this hell-hole. Alex, who hadn’t shown emotion since that first day in school, cried as she stood there. She felt even lonelier in the world now. Two of her friends were dead, and she doubted she would ever see her father again.

A noise behind her made her jump. She had half expected to see a guard, but instead it was another inmate who clearly had followed her. The inmate was a girl who looked to be about ten and had fair hair and green eyes. She had a perplexed look upon her face and just stood there, rooted to the spot. Alex was quite perplexed too and didn’t know what to do or say for fear of the girl running and calling a guard.

The atmosphere grew very tense around the two girls and then suddenly the other girl spoke, in a squeaky voice.

“What are you doing here? I followed you here as I was interested in what you were doing. I should report you, but that would be tale-telling and besides I would get shouted at too; so here I am. I’m sorry for your loss. Were you close?”

Alex didn't know what to say, she just stood there astounded. The other girl seemed also to be in an awkward position, so she turned and ran away. Alex chased after her. In the corridor, Alex grabbed the sleeve of the girl's uniform and pulled her to a stop. Alex, not wanting the girl to cry, put her hand over the girl's mouth and hushed her. The girl suddenly stopped looking as if she were about to burst into tears and looked into Alex's eyes. It was evident to Alex that the girl was rather lonely and lowered her hand from the girl's mouth. The girl saw something in Alex's eyes, some sort of twinkle, and immediately hugged her tightly. Alex was slightly surprised, but hugged her back anyway. It seemed nothing could pull them apart until Alex looked at her watch.

"Crap! We gotta get back; the guards will be coming back soon. Let's go!" Alex said in horror. The girl gasped and with that, they turned on their heels and ran back down the corridor.

The pounding of their feet, on the Linoleum flooring, resonated off the walls and down the long and seemingly endless corridor. The sound seemed to go on forever and now Alex thought about it, it was a rather ominous and dull sound and it didn't make her feel any better. The girl stumbled and fell behind her, so Alex picked her up, grabbed her hand and practically dragged her onwards. Luckily she wasn't hurt; she just tripped, so she could carry on running and pulled alongside Alex, letting go of her hand. Guards were approaching the corner and Alex could see by their shadows they were armed with semi-automatic machine guns. So much for only one type of gun used.

Alex grabbed the girl by her hand again and they ducked inside a door which was ajar in the corridor. They kept quiet and stifled their breathing. Through the grill in the door, Alex saw the guards stop and hover outside the door for a moment. They began speaking in low voices and Alex strained to hear what they were saying.

"That's the thing see Manuel. One move and we shoot 'em dead. I don't like it, I really don't." The voice sounded between

high pitched and really gruff. A sort of average voice, if men could have an average voice.

The other voice was really low and he spoke more softly than the first man. "John, you have no choice in the matter, it's the boss's wishes and therefore we carry them out, no questions asked. That's what you signed up for. Now stop complaining and let's find those kids. CCTV showed them in the hangar yard, so they're probably still there."

Manuel suddenly stooped down to tie his shoelace and Alex could see he was a menacing-looking black man. He had a thick moustache above his upper lip and a fat scar ran down his chin. The other man; John, was a seedy and thin white man and he looked relatively scared of Manuel. John began twitching and shifting from one foot to the other; eager to move on from the somewhat eerie corridor.

"Move it!" Manuel suddenly barked and prodded John in the small of his back with the butt of his semi-automatic.

Silence filled the corridor and the echoing footsteps of the two guards faded and disappeared in the distance. Alex nudged the door open, and crawled out. "Coast is clear." She whispered and helped the girl; who still hadn't told Alex her name, up onto her feet in the blindingly bright corridor. Both girls blinked in the sudden harshness of the light, since they were in a dark room or cupboard (Alex didn't know which, all she knew was that it was a hiding place) for at least five minutes.

So far they had evaded the guards or made themselves hidden at their approaching footsteps; but that was about to change.

CHAPTER 14

David Frederick James. Born July 12, 1976. That was what the birth certificate said and David studied it now.

He was bored and was trying to occupy himself as best as possible. Alex had been gone for a week and he wasn't concerned. She had told him she was staying with Jackie in Miami, with her family, as it was now the summer. She had said she would be there for two weeks and home for the other four. What David failed to consider was to ring Jackie and see if Alex had actually arrived. Jackie, on the other hand, assumed Alex was still at her dad's place as she didn't exactly say what day she was arriving in Miami, so she sat and waited for the phone to ring. A lot of assumptions and not a lot of communication. An important factor one should remember to apply.

David slid the birth certificate back into its plastic sleeve and placed it carefully into the 'Memories Box' that he and Alex had made when she was eight. The box in question was just an old shoe box, but Alex had covered it in wrapping paper and stuck glitter and random crafts stuff all over it. She had drawn something on a piece of paper and had stuck it to the lid. Looking at it now, David couldn't make out what it was, but thinking back neither had Alex at twelve.

Now she was grown up, and unless the box was ever destroyed-God forbid- then their memories would be safely locked tight in the shoe box which David had somehow fixed a padlock and hook onto. He pulled the certificate out again and rummaged around for the photo he often looked at. He found it. David sat cross-legged like a small child on the carpeted lounge floor and took in the scenery and the memory flash-back enfolded in front of him mentally.

The picture he held was of him pushing Alex on the swing at the park. Her mother had taken the photograph, just a week before she left. Alex was five and was a happy, bubbly little girl with a bright personality. The picture showed that she was happy as she

was smiling with a wide, opened-mouthed smile; evidently she had just laughed at being pushed so high.

The flash-back brought David back to that park. It was winter and the family were wrapped up in their Christmas gear- knitted reindeer jumpers; thick, woolly-inside jackets; scarves; hats and gloves and little pink mittens for Alex. Geraldine and David had their arms wrapped around each other and Alex plodded on ahead enjoying the snow. They had had a snowball fight and Alex had wanted to go on the swing. Mummy had placed Alex in the baby seat and Daddy had stood behind ready to push. Mummy had then gone around the front and stood back, whilst Daddy pushed Alex on the swing. Alex, at that age, was a bundle of energy and squeaked for her to go higher- David didn't take her too high as she was only five, but high enough, which made Alex squeal with laughter and prompted Geraldine to take a photo.

"This was the bestest day ever and I want to do it again on Christmas and Boxing Day." Alex squealed again as she was hoisted onto David's shoulders for the journey home. David and Geraldine had chuckled, kissed and held hands with interlocking fingers. The perfect family on an amazing wintery day.

However that Christmas was to be the last ever as a family.

Geraldine left a week after Christmas, whilst Alex was in her local Kindergarten and David was at work. This shattered the family, and David's career plummeted downhill soon afterwards.

The sound of the phone ringing in the distance snapped David out of his memory and he jerked his head upwards. He put the photo and certificate back into the box, shut the lid and stood up, placing it on the coffee table as he did.

"Hello?" he asked curiously.

"Mr. James?" the female voice asked anxiously

"Yes that's me. What's happened?!" David asked even more anxiously.

“It’s your daughter. She has not arrived; I don’t even think she was on the plane. I’m really sorry, but we have reason to believe she is missing.”

David James dropped the phone and clasped his hands to his mouth in horror. Jackie’s mother carried on talking.

“Hello? David? Are you there? Are you alright?”

David picked up the phone and mumbled “Yeah. No. I don’t know.” And hung up, as soon as he did he immediately dialled 911 and asked for the police service.

CHAPTER 15

Alex was hauled up from the floor. There was no sign of the other girl, and Alex was very scared and was close to tears, but she held it together and stopped herself.

Truth be told she missed her dad and wanted to go home. She didn't know if her dad had cottoned on to the fact she wasn't at Jackie's in Miami, or Jackie realised Alex wasn't at her dad's. Even if they had, they had taken a very long time about getting the police and maybe the FBI involved to get her out. Maybe they didn't know where she was. Or maybe they did and couldn't get to her. Either way she had been in the prison for nearly two weeks now and she was beginning to think her life would end there.

"You..." The guard said slinging the rifle over his shoulder and dusting Alex's arms down- she had been given the opportunity to dust the rest of her down and he had stood there watching. "...are going home. Pack your bags some woman's ere for you."

The guard was one of the nice rookies and seemed to like Alex. However, Gordon, one of the older guards (but not the oldest- he had been here for almost twenty years now) didn't like her or the other girl who had, as Alex found out later, run away as soon as she saw the guard.

It turned out her name was Marica Awkovich and she was Russian. Her family had moved to America when Marica was two, for a chance of a better life, but within a week, her father was shot and her mother suicidal. She had been taken away to some mental institute and Marica had been carted off to the prison. Not just any prison but the *Western Bridge Prison for Delinquents and Socially Awkward Offenders* - hardly an award winning title. To the inmates and guards it was merely known as *Western Bridge Prison, Florida*.

Alex had never thought of herself as socially awkward or a delinquent but the guards and boss thought otherwise and

formed rather prominent choices and therefore kept her inside the prison along with the other delinquents. Much to her dismay and annoyance.

“Going home? You serious? Or are you just saying that to get my hopes up before you shoot me?” Alex asked wearily.

“No I’m being serious. You’re going home. Go and pack and I’ll meet you at the front in half an hour and don’t worry, I won’t have my gun with me OK? So no need to worry. You’re lucky I’m a nice guy, if George were here you’d probably be dead.” The guard said, and then shuffled off leaving Alex standing in a corridor.

“Brilliant” Alex thought. “I’m finally getting out of here. Whooo I can go home and go see my dad and maybe, finally, go to Miami with Jackie. Took a damn while to get me out though. Still I’m not complaining.”

Alex raced through the corridors and found herself back in the luncheon hall. She flung open the doors and raced up the flights of steps, round the six corridors and found her room. She wrenched open the door and went to pack. Then she realised she had nothing to pack so slowly left the room. Lucas the night guard (the same one who called her ‘sunshine’ on day one) was outside the door and saw her looking sorry for herself.

“What’s up love?” he asked nicely. It had turned out the ‘sunshine’ thing wasn’t actually a façade but genuine concern for her and he had shown it throughout the whole week and a half.

“I’m going home Lucas.” Alex replied. She had secretly told him her name and he hadn’t told anyone else.

“But surely that’s good Alex. Isn’t it?” Lucas questioned.

Alex half-smiled and said “Yes that’s very good, but I was told to pack and I can’t because I have nothing to pack. All I want is my cell phone and my house key and I’m sorted.”

Lucas thought for a while and when he spoke he sounded more than happy to help. “I am happy to help you, young Alex and so I

shall get your phone and key and bring them to you here, unless there is somewhere more convenient you would like them? You know I'm gonna miss you. You're a good kid. I still don't get why you were kidnapped 'cos you're not a delinquent or socially awkward. I don't know why I took up this job in the first place; I've always wanted to be a police officer or part of the FBI or even a bouncer outside a club. Do you think I should walk out with you and start all over again?"

Alex had begun to walk with Lucas down the corridor and she listened intently in silence, now she spoke. "Yes I think that's a good idea, do it now. I'll come with you to get my key and phone, but I'll be in the reception area, then you can dump your stun gun- I'm glad you have that and not a rifle- and change your clothes and leave through the front doors. I have half an hour and you can pretend you're with the woman who is here to collect me."

* * *

"I've got a Pair of Fours. What have you got?" Wendy asked Christopher.

Christopher checked his cards and placed them on the table smugly "King High" he replied.

"Damn, I've got a Pair of Twos." Andrew said, slapping his cards down and sulking.

They were sitting in the guards' control room, playing poker and drinking coffee. Just then the door opened and Lucas walked in. He nodded towards them and went over to the *Inmates' Stuff* cupboard. He opened it and took out Alex's cell phone and key. He pocketed them and shut the cupboard door. Wendy looked up from her cards.

"What are you doing Lucas?" she queried.

"Alex is leaving." He replied and left the room. He went next door into the male changing rooms, put Alex's things on the bench and unlocked his locker. He pulled out his jeans, *No Fear* t-shirt and *Reebok* sneakers. He shook off his guard's uniform; or

rather his overalls, and dressed in his normal, casual clothes. He was going home and he wasn't coming back. Something about Alex had told him to leave this job from the moment he had a long conversation with her about school and jobs. He kept going though because it was money and he needed it.

Lucas put his overalls into the locker and shut the door, turning the key. He sighed sounding depressed. Tonight was going to be a very long night. He pulled his black leather jacket on and adjusted its collar, and then he picked up Alex's cell phone and key which he left on the bench and pocketed them along with his own keys. He told himself he was going to do this and marched out of the changing room, past the control room; ignoring the bemused looks of the three guards, along the hallway to the front entrance where he found Alex and a woman waiting patiently. Lucas handed over Alex's things and held open the main doors for the three of them to leave.

"Thanks." Alex said and adding encouragingly "You're doing the right thing." She smiled and walked out into the cold night air and the beginnings of drizzly rain. She then allowed herself to be led to the waiting Ford Fusion and climbed into the backseat. The woman got into the front passenger's seat, the doors were shut and they were off leaving Lucas standing in the light rain.

"You're probably wondering who we are Alex" the woman said suddenly, breaking the silence. How did she know Alex's name? Alex had never seen this woman or the male driver before in her life. She sat there quietly and stared out of the window instead.

"Well," the woman continued "I'm Diane Whittard and I'm a member of the CPD." She had a slight Russian accent, but spoke perfect English. However, she was speaking to Alex as if she were a small child- pronouncing and articulating every word and letter, and it was starting to get on Alex's nerves.

"Do you know what that is?" Diane asked in her Anglo-Russo voice, sounding like a mother talking to a small child.

“I’m not dumb, and I’m not a baby!” Alex retorted. “I’m seventeen nearly, so speak to me like an adult!” Alex snapped the words, and then continued more calmly “Of course I know what CPD is. It’s the Chicago Police Department; it’s just the shortened version just like NYPD is the shortened version of New York Police Department.” And with that the car was enveloped in silence once more.

* * *

David was pacing up and down in the Police Station’s reception area and was starting to not only irritate the police officers behind the desk; as he had been doing it for the past half hour, but was quite frankly starting to bore and annoy himself now, so he sat down much to the relief of the police officers.

He was then called into an adjoining office a little way off from the main foyer, and had to sign a statement detailing exactly why he was here and his side of the story of his daughter’s disappearance. It wasn’t really a side but he did so anyway.

Roughly 1,200 miles away in Miami, Jackie’s mom, Rebecca was also filling in the exact same statement form, telling her side of the story. The two statements would then be sent off to some other hierarchy and would be correlated and sent back to the administration’s officer and then the police could decide what extreme and necessary approach to take in getting Alex back from wherever she was, and what ‘Code Level’ to take to control and clear up the mess.

David’s phone vibrated inside his jacket pocket but he ignored it, until it went off a second time (another text) and finally it carried on vibrating (the long annoying sound of a phone call) and so he had to answer it then. “I’m sorry.” He said to the chief of police “Can I answer this please? It may be Alex.” The chief of police, who was ‘interviewing’ him nodded and left the room.

“Hello?” David asked wearily.

“Dad it’s me! I’m fine, I’m safe.” Alex rushed down the phone.

“Where are...” David began, but was cut off, by Alex interrupting.

“In a car, with Diane Whittard, apparently going to the police station. I’m so glad I got out of the prison, but I really don’t want to go in another one!” blundered Alex without pausing for breath.

Her dad was stunned “Prison?”

“Diane says she’s from the CPD. Anyway, I got kidnapped and taken to *Western Bridge Prison for Delinquents and Socially Awkward Offenders*. Socially awkward? Delinquent? Me? Im not either of those, so I don’t know why I was kidnapped. I suspected it was for a twisted and delirious experiment, for which so-called offenders were involved; me being one of them. But I was kidnapped from school! The last day of the semester before the summer holidays! I don’t get it, I just don’t. There’s nothing interesting about me, I’m still a kid. Save me daddy. I need you. I miss you.” Alex spoke in a flurry of words and David couldn’t get a word in edgeways, until she stopped for breath, which he took as an opportunity to get his point across, before she rambled, and blurted through her account again.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold up there for a minute Alex, would you? Start again from the beginning slowly. I need to get the Chief of Police in here to listen to this. It’s unbelievable!”

Alex relayed her story to the both her dad and the Chief of Police and as she was on loudspeaker there was no need for her to shout, but she didn’t realise and did so anyway. The Chief of Police scribbled down the name of the prison and ordered his colleagues to find out more about said prison and who it was owned by via his walkie-talkie. One thing Alex forgot to repeat was the name of the police officer; Diane Whittard.

Sitting in the nearby office, PC Anne Millar found what she was looking for: a whole website dedicated to the works of Western Bridge Prison. “Dumb schmucks” she said under her breath. “Who would design and incorporate pictures of staff members

and the prison itself, illegally?" Then she answered her question in her mind *"Oh, don't be silly Anne, plenty of people advertise illegal organisations and products and that's what the Police are here for. That's what I'm here for. To crack down on them and put an end to it. Still, it's a clue, so stop moaning. Better tell the Chief."* She stopped reading, and called the Chief of Police over to her desk.

Yet again, David hadn't even thought about checking to see whether Diane Whittard really existed or even a member of the CPD. Neither was the case. It was totally made up. Diane Whittard was in fact Christina Christov and the chauffeur was in fact Mr. Arthur Bridge and they had come for Alex.

Alex was *Target Three* and now both *Targets One* and *Two* were dead, they could both concentrate on killing Alex. She didn't know it yet, but she was in grave danger. She would soon find out though.

* * *

After leaving Luton Airport, much to Alex's confusion, the driver took them along the motorway, heading south. Finally the driver stopped the Fusion outside a house, forty miles off the M5. Alex had been suspicious when they had joined the motorway as it was, according to Diane and the SAT NAV, in completely the opposite direction to the local Police Station in, what she would call in America, downtown, or as the Brits called it the outskirts of town. Diane had assured Alex they needed to grab a few things from her house and would stay the night probably as it was so late in the night by this time.

Diane ordered Alex out of the car and hastily added a 'please' just to sound that extra bit polite. Alex did as she was told and she stood in the now heavy rain. Diane ushered her to the front door and over the threshold. Alex stepped into the massive hall and eyed up the paintings and decorative features on the walls and along the entrance hall. This was Mr. John Pride's house and as he was dead, Diane knew they wouldn't be disturbed. The rooms were immaculate and well furnished and Alex gasped at

the shining, crystal goblets in the drink-glass cabinet in the dining room to the left off the hall. Luckily for them, John had never married and so he owned the house entirely to himself. "*Lucky bastard!*" Arthur had once said.

"The man whose body was found several weeks ago in a dark alley, not far from Thames Bridge has finally been identified as Mr. John Pride, aged thirty-two. The police suspect a suicide, as that specific area is renowned for such happenings, but residents near the area saw Mr. Pride being followed by a black-clad, hooded figure with the stature of a fifty year-old male." The news was blaring out of the T.V speakers from another room- the lounge. This was vast in size and expensively furnished also with a forty-six inch Plasma T.V, Dolby Digital surround sound, and a Blu-ray Player. Alex was startled to hear the T.V on and thought it was a ghost, then realised that was probably impossible and must be the driver, as Diane was still with her in the entrance hall. Sure enough the driver was in the lounge, and now was in the process of switching the T.V off.

"Mr. Bridge?" Diane asked. Mr. Bridge whirled around to find her standing outside the lounge's sliding doors, hands on hips and a slight smug look on her face. He re-entered the hall and did an awkward bow to Diane, probably because he had to as she was his boss, or to show off in front of Alex. Either way it looked stupid.

"Ma'am?" Mr. Bridge questioned.

"Boil the kettle would you?" she asked and looking at Alex now, added "Hot drink? Would you care for a tea, coffee or hot chocolate?"

Alex couldn't see through the falseness of the situation and smiled asking for hot chocolate.

"On the double." Mr. Bridge replied.

Diane smiled and waved him away. Now it was just Alex and Diane again. Her blue eyes pierced through Alex's and she thought she saw a flash of hatred in the woman's eyes, but it

was gone in an instant. "I think we should stay the night, Alex. You look hungry, thirsty and dog-tired. I'll get Arthur to bring you some food."

Alex still hadn't realised that these police officers were in fact fakes and were subsumed by their calm natures and pretend authority.

The food and drink went down well and suddenly Alex began to yawn. She hadn't had a proper sleep in ages and now she allowed herself to relax a little, she realised that had taken its toll and was catching up with her. She had also noticed that by eating considerably more than Diane and Arthur put together she had been half-starved and was rather weak. This also had taken its toll as she was, earlier exceptionally thin and drawn and pale, but now she felt fuller and fatter than she had in weeks.

"Look, I've called the station to let them know you're safe with me and that you're staying the night. You will be fine with us. We'll look after you very well. (*Very well indeed*)." Diane said abruptly. She then continued, making it clear to Alex that all was well, or so it seemed to Alex. "They are fine with you coming downtown tomorrow and know you are dead tired. They also said they shall see you tomorrow afternoon- let you sleep in and everything. You deserve a *really* good night's sleep, young Alex and tomorrow morning you and I shall go on a nice, long walk around the fields at the back of the house; a sort of prairie if you like. We'll get some colour back into those lovely cheeks of yours in no time." Diane continued, smiling falsely.

Alex still had no idea that she was beginning to be led into a trap and went along with it all. Alex began to relax and fall asleep on the sofa, but she was too tired to care anymore. She just wanted to sleep forever; not to die, as that was sometimes known as 'sleep' but to catch up on all the missed sleep she had had over the years, of course she knew that was impossible unless one really did die, but she could start with the catch-up of the last couple of weeks' missed sleep.

Alex trooped upstairs behind Diane, leaving Arthur in the study at the end off the hall downstairs. She willingly let herself be shown to her room and clambered into the bed. She was too tired to take in the unfamiliar surroundings and fell almost immediately into a deep, and well deserved sleep. However, this didn't last all too long.

At 4:46 A.M (as the bedside clock read in the half-cast moonlight spilling in from the un-curtained window) Alex was abruptly and rudely awoken by Arthur prodding her in her side. Her eyes snapped open, but for a moment her sight was still foggy. Groggily she got out of bed and moved to the end of the bed opposite Arthur who was now at the bedroom door. The whole house was eerily silent and Alex felt a pang of unease in the pit of her stomach.

"Finally," he said, whispering in the dark. "The moment has arrived."

Alex didn't understand what he meant, but as she was currently fully awake she watched in horror as Arthur produced a silenced P9 handgun from his dressing gown pocket. It was pointed at her face, at point blank range, aimed right between the eyes. Every nerve in her body told her to get out, to run, to go to the police, and to get as far away from here as possible, but her anxiety kept her firmly rooted to the spot. Adrenaline was racing around her body, but she physically couldn't move. "*Adrenaline is supposed to help you get away*" she thought "*not keep you rooted to the spot. C'mon Alex...*" she added willing herself to move "*get out, run, get the real police and find dad.*"

Arthur cracked his neck and loaded the gun. He moved it around her face, toying with her. Finally he settled back for the spot right between her eyes. It would kill her instantly and the silencer wouldn't alarm anyone, not even Christina Christov, the greatest Anglo-Russo psycho-maniac ever in this precise decade. Arthur's index finger was poised above the trigger, and he asked Alex a question it seemed all murderers asked their victims, right before they were killed. "Any last words?"

“Why me?! Alex queried miserably. Then everything went black.

THE END

NO TURNING BACK [SECOND INSTALMENT]

Alex opened her eyes slowly. She was in an unfamiliar room, on the floor. She sat up cautiously and looked around the room. Noticing a man on the floor she slid across on her knees and checked his pulse. He was dead. Then she noticed the pool of blood slowly spreading by the right side of his head. Evidently he had shot himself instead of shooting her. She was extremely grateful to this man, even if he was dead. Now she could get out and find her father; but first she had to avoid the woman downstairs.

Downstairs Christina was watching TV on low. She had been waiting for the gun shot, not realising it had a silencer on it. She thought Arthur had fallen asleep just like Ringo, but didn't fully register it. A noise on the stairs made her sit up straight in the chair and she listened intently. Then, satisfied there was no intruder, she settled back down again muting the TV, not realising the sound actually came from the movie she was watching.

Back upstairs, Alex had stripped her bed sheet and knotted it together. She opened the window and threw it out; it was nowhere near long enough, so she stole Arthur's bed sheet from the next room and did the same again. This time it was long enough, however it still left about a foot's drop. She left Arthur where he was but took his gun and then rooted through his pockets gingerly until she found bullets, his car keys, his wallet containing cash, a credit card and rather stupidly, his pin number. "Bingo!" she exclaimed, and pocketing her findings, began to climb out of the window and the 'rope'.