

CHAPTER ONE:

I held on my shopping bags and walked as fast as I could, the sound of my boots on the pavement was muffled by rustling of the wind in the leaves. Rain had begun falling again and I was regretting not having taken the car. My jeans were getting tight so I thought I would walk to get some exercise. I had gone to the supermarket for a fridge refill. Kids eat so much munchies! Of course, I know that I should not allow them to, but it keeps them quiet and me happy. The old Mrs Basle, my neighbour, used to say that I am selfish as I ruin the girls' health for some peace. Well she quickly changed her mind when I sent Eli and Kelly for a sleeper at her place! A tall man, not minding the rain, strutted a hundred metres away from me. He paused in front of nearly all the houses at each side of the road as if he was looking for someone. Fear crept up my spine, as I got suspicious. Trying to remain concealed I slowed down putting more distance between us. He was a few metres away from my house when he stopped abruptly. I could see my car in the driveway, if I reached it before the man noticed me, I could drive off and come back later in the evening unnoticed. Mrs Basle was sitting under her porch reading a newspaper without her spectacles when the stranger approached her. I stealthily strode past him catching the conversation. "Do you know where Miss Sally Doyle lives? I know that it is on this street but." "Of course." The old woman was as blind as a bat and I hoped that as she rose to meet the man she didn't see me slip by. "But why are you looking for her?" "Well," he hesitated. "She is a relative of mine and we have lost touch for a long time now." Blind as a bat, curios as a cat, she was a zoo on her own. I quicken my pace but the bomb struck anyway. "Well, if it isn't her over there, I'd be damn." By then, thankfully I was next to my car. I got my keys out unlock the door, jumped inside, powered the engine, and sped out of the driveway. I had only one thought in my mind, flee. The man ran a few paces trying to catch up with the car. He had broad shoulders and his blue eyes were glittering. I noticed an ugly scar, which run down his right cheek. His khaki coat floated behind him like a cape. I had to admit that it was quite stimulating to watch such an athlete in action. I put my hand outside my window and lifted a finger at him. He knew he had lost and slowed down, he would never be able to catch up with me. A strange smile was pasted on his face and I wondered if we had not begun to play game five minutes ago when I saw him and decided to eclipse myself. But one thing was for sure; if someone was usurping identity to find me then I was in greater trouble than I had bargained for. My objective now was to pick up the kids and get away from town as soon as possible. I knew it was not

going to be as easy as usual because of the kids. Four years before I was a lonely woman with a big secret. Then, everything cleared up; the bad men are behind bars but to what cost! My sister, the mother of Kelly and Eli, was murdered. Her husband, a born loser, was not financially apt to take care of the girls. Eventually, they were put under my care after the matter was sent to court. If they were not risking separation and being put into host families, I don't believe I would have stood a chance of an adoptive parent. The entire martyr was supposed to have been securely sealed, so what was that man looking for? Primary school was a five-minute ride from home, practical for an emergency. It was raining heavily and I had to hurry in the small building. My boots were soiled and heavy. I knocked on the closed doors and Miss Welling answered. She had Kelly by the hand and looked frustrated. "Miss Doyle! You are answering my prayers! Look at the state in which Kelly is! Eli has painted her face with a marker. Can you believe that? How on earth am I going to clean that?" Kelly had drawings of balls with eight legs about each of them, Eli's notion of spiders. Kelly smiled broadly when she saw me; she had two teeth missing in the front. She pointed proudly at a spider on her chin and said: "Look aunt Sal, Eli drew a spiderr on my face. It looks good, huh? She says it is gonna help me stop being afraid of them." I stoop her in my arms and hugged her. The idea of losing any of them or simply stop hearing their giggles would definitely kill me. "I'm sure you are going to stop fearing spiders with her help. Now, why don't you go look for your sister and pack your things? Aunty Sal is going to take you both on a ride, okay?" Kelly nodded and I put her back on her feet. She hurried excitedly back towards the playgroups. Eli had obviously not stop to her sister's face, cause the latter had an enormous tart drawn on the back of her Barbie t-shirt. The sisters had had a hair fling the week before and the result was catastrophically hilarious. Eli had bits of hair missing and chewing gum stuck in her mane while Kelly had half of her head completely shaven. I nearly fainted when I got back from work and saw the girls watching T.V in such a state and Mrs Basle sleeping on the couch. She pretended to have heard nothing suspicious. My guess was that she was too full of them to care. I brought the girls to the hairdresser who only managed to save some hair on Eli's head while Kelly came back shaven like a sheep. I had to double my efforts not to cry then.

"Miss Doyle, may I know what is happening? It not usual for a parent to come fetch a child before the end of school." Miss Welling broke me out of my thoughts. She should have understood by then that we were not a normal

family. "Well," I said cautiously even though I was lying and had made up that story long before. "Something has come up with the girls' father. You see, I have to explain them what is going on." "Of course, Miss Doyle, I understand. But perhaps I could be of help to you if you let me know what is going on with Mr Armstrong." "Uh, yes. He is gay and he wants the girls to meet his partner. Court order allows him to but the girls need some explanations first. So if a man comes here looking for them, just give him this message, okay?" I scribbled some words on a piece of paper firmly folded the sheet and handed it to Miss Welling. She was thankfully lost for words and I was spared to make conversation to her. Eli was the eldest but she was the same height as her sister. In their shorts and with their new haircut they looked like brothers. I made a mental note to buy them some clothes; nice pretty little dresses. Eli ran into my open arms and planted a wet kiss on my left cheek. Kelly was carrying the bags, which I eventually received from her. We said goodbye to Miss Welling. Kelly insisted that we all had to kiss her and we obliged. Miss Welling was taken by surprise but conspicuously appreciated the show of love from the girls. Outside I had to tug the girls along to stop them from slashing mud at me. "Aunt Sal, you can tell us, now. What is happening? Daddy won't be back, right?" Eli asked when we were all seated in my dark blue Toyota Corolla. Is a child of ten usually that suspicious and a good actress? "Eli, were you and Kelly eavesdropping on Miss Wellington and I?" "Yes we were. So, what is going on and what did you write in that note?" "Well, at least she is no liar!" "I met a man while I was coming back home after shopping." "Aunt Sal!" Kelly cried distressingly. "We don't wanna hear any grossy details! And where are my smarties?" "Shut up, dummy. She ain't finished yet." "Eli, stop calling your sister a dummy. Kelly you will not get any smarties unless you clean your face of those drawings. Eli, don't even bother pinching something from that shopping bag. The munchies are in the front" Her hand had crept towards my shopping. "Listen girls, we are perhaps in trouble. Do you remember Sam Bennett? The inspector who helped us three years back?" "Yeah, I do." Eli said and Kelly acknowledged. "The man with the grey eyes and many muscles. Mama liked him. She said that he was hot." "Aha, she even said she would gladly have him keep her warm at night. But then she stopped." Kelly went on knowingly. "What do you mean she stopped, Kelly?" It was Eli who replied then. "Well, he told her to stop phoning him and to stop hassing him." "Hassing? You mean harassing?" "I don't remember. Perhaps. I was listening with a glass on the door. You know, like in the movies? And Kelly was peeking through the keyhole it was quite hard

for us even to make out the beginning of their phrases. It may mean harassing. What does the word mean anyway?" "It means to annoy. Like Mrs Basle, always trying to find out what is happening in others lives." I said with a tone of irritation. Mrs Basle was aware that we were in hiding, why the hell did she have to reveal our shelter to that man! Now we will be on the run again, just when the girls had adapted to this area, the old bitch. "Oh," she paused a second to consider this change. "So, I was saying that Sam Bennett is the only one who can help us right now. I have to get in touch with him. Girls can you search my address book for his mobile number please?" "Yes," they both replied. I slowed down the car and parked it in front of a café. "Does, B-E-N-N-E-T-T spell Bennett?" Kelly asked. "Yeah," Eli replied. "Here, aunt Sal." She handed me the phone number. Rain was still falling, heavier this time. I dialled Sam's number and he replied with a warm voice. "Yeah, Sam Bennett here." "Hi, Sam, it's Sally." He paused a minute. Our friendship dated ever since I could remember. He was my brother's best friend and was always there for me even after Ned and him stopped being friends over a girl I don't remember well. He incorporated the local police force and I was one of the many programmers at D-Soft. Then we have both changed our lives too much for our friendship to remain unaffected. After the case went to court, after I became the legal tutor of the girls, I dropped the job and severed all ties. "Sally, who? Sally Doyle? Sally Hutton." "Sally Doyle, Sam." "I'm sorry madam but Sally Doyle died three years back." "Come on, Sam. Stop being an ass, I may be in trouble right now and it may be because of you." "You are always in deep shit Sally, but never because of me. Otherwise why do you phone old Sam for help? So what's wrong this time?" "There is this guy who was looking for me today." "What's wrong with that? Perhaps you have finally been able to use your charms on someone. Damn it, Sally!" He broke out suddenly with anger and deep regret. "Why didn't you phone me once in a while to let me know how you were coping? You even changed phone number!" "Who do you think your shitting with, Sam? I still read the newspaper you know. And a year back it said that you were then an investigator working with the FBI on some important cases. I'm surprise you've still got your old mobile number. You knew all the while where I was, what I did, where the girls go to school. You were aware of what we ate everyday; at least you had the means to know. So that is why I am phoning you to know why is some guy I never say in my life telling my neighbours that we are relatives and asking where I live? Why didn't you keep your promise that everything would be okay after I have testified in court?" I was yelling and fearful the girls didn't

dare move. They stared and listen with wide teary eyes at me. "Describe him physically." "A white man, tall, broad shoulders, athletic body, blue eyes, and a scar on his left cheek. He seemed to know a bit about me but he had no notion of what I looked like physically. He wore a khaki rain coat and was well dressed." "Can you get near a fax machine? I think that I have got an idea of whom you are talking about. I'll send you some pictures and you will pick out the guy, okay?" "Yeah, give me ten minutes to find a fax machine, I'll call you back." I hung up the phone took a deep breath, smiled and fronted the girls. "Come on, we've got to find a fax machine." They nodded their mouths full. The smarties box lay empty between Kelly and Eli. I pretended not to have noticed, we had no time to lose. The sooner we finished with our stranger, the better I'd feel. We alighted the car, and ran inside the café. We took a seat next to a window with a view onto the street. A waitress approached us. She had a badge on her blouse written, 'Dill's Café'. "Hello, what can I get you?" "I want a hot chocolate!" Kelly cried. "No hot chocolate. Go on appreciating the little pieces of chocolate stuck between your teeth. Very soon you both won't have any left. I wondered if you have a fax machine in this café?" "Of course," the waitress replied. "Every café has one nowadays." "Can I make use of it? I need to receive an urgent fax." "I'll go ask the boss. But you must consume something, so what can I get you?" "I'll have a hot cappuccino and thanks for your help." "You welcome," she replied striding away. "What are we not going to have left, aunt Sal? Teeth or chocolate?" That was Kelly. "Both," I said briskly. The waitress was back with my cappuccino and the fax number written on a piece of paper. I dialled Sam's number once again. "Yeah, Sam Bennett here." "Sam, the number is 230-2336386, got it?" I repeated the number to be certain that he had it right. I signalled the waitress and she pointed to the other side of the room. The machine was on a thick wooden table and it was printing a portrait. "Are you receiving Sally?" "Yep, how many are you sending?" "There are four pictures on one sheet. I am sending two sheets but with only four persons. You know how it works." It was a test. If I chose the two right pictures then I was credible. The first sheet was out. "Sam, I thought I told you that he was white? You sent me two pictures of a young Hispanic boy and two more of an Afro-Caribbean." I heard him chuckle on the other end. "My sister went out with those two guys. I wonder if she keeps the police database as portfolio." I couldn't help laugh at that. It has been so long since we last chatted pleasantly. I glanced at the girls across the rooms. They were spilling the cappuccino all over the table. A beep from the fax machine announced that the last sheet was out. "There he is,

the first and last." I looked closely at the picture; the deep blue eyes struck me first. He was not that bad looking. No, he was quite handsome and the scar gave him a coarse look. His face was lean with a strong jaw. "Hey, that's not a picture from the police database, is it? Where did you get it?" "Peter Joshua Manger, a private eye and another victim of my sister's charms. He often works with the police because of his contacts. He is called a street guy. There's nothing to fear from him and anyway I've already given him a call. He is on a private business, nothing harmful, you should meet him." "What did you tell him about me?" "Nothing important. I only asked what was his business with you. He replied that it was because of a will. It looks like someone died and left you something. I can't tell you more. He is good at his job, very professional." "I can see that." I replied. "He is sitting with my nieces. How did he find me? Got to leave, Sam. I'll phone you later." I hung up, folded the paper, and put it inside the pocket of my jeans before speeding across the room towards them.

CHAPTER TWO:

He was not wearing his coat anymore. Dressed in a dark blue short-sleeved shirt and a pair of old jeans and marine boots he was not eye catching. His shirt revealed tanned muscular arms. He was sitting next to Eli and was showing her how to make a boat with a piece of paper. The boat was supposed to float on the spilled cappuccino. Kelly, with her blacken face, was grinning at him. I looked at both girls and I felt sheer desperation and guilt. They did not look like the lovely little girls you see in the cereal publicity, they looked like tramps fetched right from the street. And it was my fault; I was not a good substitute mother figure. How was I going to learn how to cope with kids? Sheila, their mother was the eldest daughter of the family. Ned was two years older than me and I was the youngest. I was always the one doing the wrong things at the wrong time, the one that no one thought to give any responsibility to. But then Sheila, at twenty, married John had two children and we no more heard of her. She was five years older than me and at that time I knew very little about her, except that the parents used to worry a lot about her and the kids. After school I went to College, I was a law student and had a part-time job in a computer software company. "Hello, Sally." Mr Manger broke me from my thoughts. Unconsciously I had reached the table and I was staring into the blank like an idiot remembering the happy old times. I began my scrutiny of him. He had one more scar, a tiny one, in his eyebrow. His eyes were azure blue and cold, very troubling. His face and hair were slightly damp with perspiration

yet he looked comfortable; he had his way around kids. He smiled trying to put me at ease, but it brought no warmth to his eyes. It was obvious that we shared a distaste of each other. Unfortunately for him, his job forced him to interact with me; he needed something that only I could provide him with. I couldn't see his teeth through his crispy smile. He seemed younger than I expected but I stopped myself from deducing his age, not a wise thing to do because then I'll tend to act by it. "What do you want?" I asked holding his gaze. His eyes wandered over my face, he smiled again, and I saw his perfectly well aligned, white teeth. "Well, to begin with, I continued to hunt you to give you a reply to your note." He unfolded the paper boat with his large masculine hands. The paper was damp with cappuccino but my words were still legible. 'Go to Hell,' it read. Kelly got up from her seat looked at the paper quizzically. "What have you written, Aunt Sal?" She said her front head creased. "I says 'go to hell,' dummy!" Eli replied nastily. "Eli, what did I tell you just awhile ago? Her name is Kelly, not dummy, right?" I told her sternly. The latter nodded, this time it was understood. "Now, girls, I want you to sit at the counter and order yourselves an ice-cream while I speak to this mister, okay?" After I had seen that they were well seated and had their ice cream, I gathered my courage and moved back towards Mr Manger. He had been watching my every movement, a realisation, which put me ill at ease. "I am sorry for that note. I took you to be someone else. Well, your job is to know things so you must probably know my situation and I am sure that you understand my conduct." He went on staring at me, this time it was more professional. Perhaps trying to know my facial expressions, to see if he could find when I lie or when I tell the truth. "So," he began. "You have been in contact with Bennett. I guess you would have been out of the country if it weren't for your urge to phone him. I'd better be straight and clear with you. I have been looking for you for two months now." "I thought it was supposed to be harder than that." I couldn't help to pipe in. He smiled, this time both his eyes and teeth were bright. "I've got my contacts. And if it was meant to be an easy task I would never have taken the job." "Why were you looking for me?" "I have been looking for you, on the demand of a dying man." "Oh my god! Is it my dad?" I panicked; it has been a year since I last saw my parents. My reaction amused Mr Manger. "No, Sally. It's not your dad." "Phew! You got me scared a second. It reminds me, I've got to pay him a visit. You know like unload all my sins and ask him for forgiveness. Anyway who is that old man?" "Mr Gregory Patterson. He wishes to see you." I was shocked. I was the last person this man would surely want to see. "You're joking, right? I got his son behind bars. Because

of my testimony, Gregory Junior Patterson will be spending the rest of his life in jail with no right to make appeal in a superior court. He lost loads of money because of me and unless he needs my help to pay his hospital bills I can't find any reason for him to want to see me again!" "I am not aware of his motivations Miss Doyle. I am only obeying orders." He was trying to intimidate me. Saying that it was not his fault he could not find an answer to my questions. I had a feeling that it was my friendship with Sam that stopped him from pouncing to my throat. "Anyway, you say that this man has been dying for two months now?" I asked nastily. "You'll probably laugh at me but it seems that he is hanging onto life just to be able to see you one last time. You'd be surprised at all the things dying people want to do." I didn't laugh; I was solemn. I was in a dilemma, I couldn't refuse to comply to a dying man's last wish, and I couldn't drive into the enemy's courtyard with my nieces. It was too dangerous even after those years. "And the kids?" "You can bring them along. When I fist opened your case and found out about your new responsibilities, I was perplexed too. So I phoned Wilkins, his legal representative, and asked him about the girls. He said that Mr Patterson would love to see them too." "Well, that's great then, where is he, now?" "In a private hospital, the 'Dover Clinic'. It's a day and a half travel by car from here." "Okay then give us a week to get there." I'll have to let the school know about the girls' absence and ask Mrs Basle to watch the house. I took a peek at the Kelly and Eli. They were talking to one of the waiters. "I can't." Mr Manger replied. "What do you mean you cannot? I can't reach there before, it would cost too much by plane." "I have to drive you there, you are not my only job you know. So get ready by six-thirty tonight, I'll come pick you up. Wilkins has everything planned on how you should get back here. I am only doing Bennett a favour by driving you and the girls there." "How come he is always doing things behind my back?" I felt frustrated and angry with Sam. 'Sly and Cautious' that was his motto. "He cares about you and prefers to be on the safe side." Mr Manger replied as if he was talking to a silly, self-centred little girl. "You probably mean that I would be safe with you. Are you both forgetting that there is nothing left for me to fear?" "Like I told you before, my job was to find you and to pass you Mr Patterson's message. I am driving you because Bennett asked me to and I never refuse to help a friend." This time he was stern and slow which meant that it was time to shut up and comply with the orders. I stood up, whistle to attract the girls' attention, and signalled them that it was time to leave. I left the table refusing to give Mr Manger another glance and paid the bill. The girls had had two ice creams each! "Why did you order and ate

so much?" I demanded firmly. My lack of authority upon them was depressing and I was aware of Mr Manger's stare. He perhaps pitied me. What did I care anyway? "Aunt Sal, you were taking so much time!" Eli replied placing emphasis on the 'so'. "Yes, Aunt Sal." Kelly continued. "And Eli said that as we were not hearing anything, we would make you angry so you'd want us back." "But, honeys, I was just having a chat with the mister." The poor little girls had either felt left behind or were only trying to make me feel guilty, as I had prevented them from listening. "Josh is very nice, Aunt Sal?" That was Kelly with her beaten-dog look. "He told you his name? Well, if you say so." I picked Kelly in my arms and tugged Eli along as she waved at Mr Manger. I was supposed to be packed by six o'clock. That leaves me five hours. "I am going to drop you back at school and you will take the school bus at the usual time, okay?" That was met by loud complains. "Now, shut up. I am bored of your graffiti, your childish behaviour, and everything! This has to cease, I am warning both of you. If you go against my rules, I will ground you, no T.V no snacks, no Smarties! Is that understood?" Two nods. "Kelly, didn't I ask you to clean your face before phoning Sam?" Another nod. "Then, why are the spiders still there?" "It's Eli who drew!" She wailed. "Who 'drew' not 'drawed'. Anyway, you allowed her to. So now you clean. Eli, my dear, you are the eldest, I am sure that you are aware of that, yes?" Eli nodded. "I am going to ask you to stop feeding Kelly with those stories you make up. Yes, I am aware that you count ghastly stories to her at night and I want you to stop it. I want you to look after her as if she is your responsibility. I want you to be a responsible young lady. So, as from today, I'll set new rules which you and your sister will have to abide by if you want us to live happily. Have you both understood?" I parked the car in the schoolyard the rain had stopped but the sun was not out yet. I knelt and the girls gave me a kiss on the cheek before Miss Welling took them inside. It was a good thing I had already taken my week off work. I work in a Law Firm, Rob & Sons. I was the only woman working there and I hated the place but it was the only job I found decent in that area. Woman here stay at home and look after children, something that I was evidently not good at. Being under the witness protection scheme (WTS), I was forced to live in that area for a year at least and therefore had no choice in the careere field. I had to live under the name Doyle and the girls' family name was changed from Fisher to Armstrong. It was not that hard to try and make them remember that name, they were not even aware of what their family name was at that time, due to the three marriages of my sister. I was twenty- six with a master in criminal laws and I was working as

a secretary in a degrading Law Firm. I set aside the idea of leaving when the girls began to appreciate school and the rent went down. Mrs Basle had fallen asleep under her porch when I got the car in the garage. The house was frightfully big when I was alone. The girls were the joy of my life and I regretted having scolded them. Meeting Manger, speaking to Sam after all these years brought back emotions I thought I had well buried. I went into the kitchen and opened the fridge, empty. I had forgotten the shopping bags inside the car. I went back into the garage and opened the car. Something fell out while I picked the shopping bags, my address book. It was opened at the letter 'F' for family and I could see my parent's phone number and address. When Mr Manger said that I was to leave for the Dover Clinic I felt that it was the signal I had waited for so long. I missed my family; this solitude in which I was living was killing me. My job was boring; the kids seem to need me even less each day that passes by. When I wake up in the morning they are already sitting in the kitchen eating cereals. The kitchen is the only place they avoid making a mess, perhaps it was because my sister used to spend most of her time there. She was such a great cook compared to me. The Dove Clinic was found in Denver, where I was born. My parents were still living there and so did my brother, Ned, the last time I heard about them. I had asked for a week to reach the clinic, as I wanted to visit my parents first, but Mr Manger wouldn't comply, so, we'll bring him along. Anyway he is obliged towards Sam and he has to accompany me until my final destination. I'll bring the shopping along; I was going to need the maximum chocolate to lure the girls into silence during the trip. I began the packing with the girls' clothes. I packed all the dresses they have, unfortunately it summed up to three each. At this time of the year the weather was most of the time sunny, it eventually gave me less to pack. For the first time I set myself to ironing. I ironed everything I wanted to pack, from underwear to jeans. Thankfully, there's lady who comes once a week to do the laundry and the ironing. Afterwards I took a bath and baked some biscuits. Chocolate chips cookies, the girls' favourite.

CHAPTER THREE:

It was past three o'clock and I could hear the girls giggling as they opened the front door. I hid the burnt cookies inside the oven and placed all that seemed digestible in a nice little serving dish, my smallest. "Eli, stop punching my bag! Hey it smells burnt." "A-ha seems like aunt Sal has cooked something." I ignored them and waited for their entrance in the kitchen. Kelly's face was cleaned of the marker. On seeing the plate of

cookies, Eli instantly reached out her hand but I was faster and pulled out the cookies from her grasp. "You are both going to take a bath, clean your shoes of the mud you had so pleasantly put on them and clean your rooms before coming downstairs, alright? Then you are going to have some cookies while waiting for Mr Manger's arrival." The girls looked blankly at me. They had probably thought that it was a crisis I was going through that had made me so stern some while ago and that now it would have been over. But no such luck. I repeated my orders slowly and their shoulders flinched under the weight of these responsibilities. That was already too much for them; still they obliged and left the kitchen pulling along their small Pokemon bags. Plan A, phase one was a success, now second phase, phoning Ned. I opened my address book and dialled Ned's phone number. The phone rang twice before someone picked up. A woman answered. "Hallo." Her voice was clear and soft carrying something familiar which I could not put my finger onto. "May I speak to Ned Vancouver, please?" "Yes, may I have your name, please?" It struck me then. It was Rebecca Jones; Ned was already going out with her when I left with the kids. She was a friend of mine at high school. And if I remembered clearly, which I'm sure I do, she went out with Sam as well. Perhaps she was the cause of their disputes? I erased that thought from my mind. So Rebecca is living with Ned. "Is it Mrs Vancouver?" I asked innocently. "No, I am simply a friend of Ned's. We are working together on a project. Mrs Vancouver is out, do you want me to give her a message?" That was a surprise. Who was Ned's wife? How about asking the questions to the subject himself? "Oh, I am sorry. I got mistaken. No it's okay, thank you. I'll speak directly to Ned. Can you please tell him that Miss Doyle wants to speak to him, urgently?" "Wait a second, please." Rebecca had no idea of my pseudonym, so thankfully I won't have to go through details of how I survived in a distant area with two kids and no job. Long distance calls were expensive and I have my mind set on a new car. I had missed so much of my brother's life. I heard Rebecca murmur my name and the quick muffling sound of steps before a deep warm voice, just like my brother, filled the receiver. "Sally! You lousy little thing, how have you been? We've missed you, you know? How are the girls?" "Ned, I've missed you too big brother. The girls are okay and what is Rebecca doing at your place?" I couldn't resist my curiosity and I was glad to hear Ned chuckle on the other end. Happiness filled me, after so long I was able to speak with him. But it did not last long. "I was sure you would want to know. Mrs Vancouver? No she's not. Anyway she is a lesbian and we work together at D-Soft. Know what? We are the top programmers, I've

got a new apartment, and I'm a happily married father to be." "Seems like life has been good on you. Whom are you married to?" "Sigel Banks, the most beautiful woman on earth and she is pregnant." "I've got the impression that you have just found that one out." "You're right we just learned that she is pregnant. I would have wanted you to get to know her but she's out right now. Why are you phoning anyway?" I could feel the reproaches in his voice. "Sally, three years of absence and only one phone call, well now it's two. You have no idea of how that has pained the parents and the eagerness with which they await your cards on their birthdays and you did not even bother coming back. What the hell had kept you away from us for so long?" "Ned, what gives you the right to criticise me? Did you phone me? Did you want to know more about the girls than the simple fact that they are alive? You rejected them, so did mom and dad. None of you wanted anything to do with them when you lot learned that John was not their father and that they were illegitimate kids. That Sheila was a prostitute and that if Patterson had not murdered her, she would have probably died of aids. You refused to identify her at the morgue, mom, and dad also. Sam had to bring me there. You have no idea how those deaths have hunted me. Seeing that girl being murdered and my sister in the same state at the morgue. I was afraid. I did not dare put my feet outside the police station. I lived in Sam's office for days until I dropped of fatigue and was hospitalised. Still I had no idea of the girls' existence while you did, right? Ned, you know what?" "Sally, I'm sorry. I have changed." "Ned, I'm the one who phoned, right, so let me finish. I don't believe that you deserve having kids. Being kept away from you all helped me forget the hate I felt those days when everyone was against me. When I ended up in psychiatry for a week with no visit from you. You are not worth my car, goodbye." "Sally, wait." I hung up the phone and cried. I cried until I thought my eyeballs would fall out of their sockets. After such a long time I still carried the grudge. I wanted to phone him back and say that I was sorry. We were all angry with Sheila for dying and revealing the painful truth. It just took longer for them to react; she had not betrayed me as she had done to them. I understood her better as I was the one who would always get caught in the school toilet smoking cigarettes. I was the one for whom my parents were called to fetch from school. I was the one whom the parents rejected and then it was Sheila's turn. For a second, on the morgue table, with three holes in her stomach and her face white as a sheet, I had felt close to her. I had felt her. A hole for my mother, a hole for my father and a hole for Ned;

one for each one who blamed me for being who I was. My parents, on the contrary of what I told Ned, did not blame Sheila for having done what she did. They blamed me. Patterson's aim was me, why did he have to kill Sheila? I was well aware of it but I wouldn't be able to face myself in a mirror constantly thinking about it. Plan A phase two had failed, it was time for plan B, Mr Manger. He arrived an hour later, five minutes before six. By then I had already dried my eyes, the girls were clean and eating cookies in front of the T.V, accompanied by me. The rain had stopped and I was surprised not having heard him drive in. He knocked on the door and Kelly answered. I heard her giggle and he came in the T.V room carrying her under his left arm like a sausage. Kelly was having the time of her life. Eli and I couldn't be bothered and we continued watching the program. Manger sat down and nibbled a cookie, which Kelly had given him. Why hadn't Eli reacted on his arrival? Her eyes were stuck on the television but I was sure that she was not paying attention to the man eating the camel dung. I perched myself a little and noticed tears in her deep blue eyes. Either she had heard me on the phone or something was bothering her. I scooped her small body in my arms and trying not to intrigue Kelly I forced a smile on the way to my room. I put her down on the bed, her short hair hid her ears, and the tears were now running freely. I hugged her and soothed her back as she began hiccupping and sobbing. "It's going to be okay, baby." She calmed herself with much effort. But that was her, always trying to act someone else role. "What's wrong? You know you can tell me, right?" I had no intention of letting her leave here before having settled the matter. She nodded. "I miss my mom so much and. and I heard you on the phone." "What did you hear Eli?" "I heard you telling him that he did not deserve kids and that you were not going to give him your car." "Eli, how many times must I tell you not to eavesdrop on others conversation? What have you thought? That I was speaking to your dad?" "Yeah. I'm sorry Aunt Sal I did not mean to listen. I was just coming to tell you that there was no more shower gel for me to take a bath." "Eli, I was not speaking to your dad. It was my brother, your uncle Ned. Come on dry your eyes. Your mother would be angry with me if I let you cry. I miss her too, you know. We all miss her. I haven't told you yet but we are going to see your grandparents and your uncle Ned as well as an old Mister." "Aunt Sal, why did you tell uncle Ned that he does not deserve to have children?" "Have you heard of the proverb; Curiosity killed the cat? It's not healthy to poke your nose everywhere. I told him that, cause he had acted wrongly some years before." "And your car?" "Eli!" This child would never learn anything! Still I

replied. "I was talking in terms of my car. If I continued talking to him on the phone I won't have money to pay the phone bill and I'll have to postpone buying a new car." Eli nodded knowingly. She smiled, jumped off from the bed, and headed out of the room. "Eli, wait a second. What did you do?" She looked at me puzzled so I rephrased my question. "What did you do about the shower gel?" She did not reply but stared at her shoes. "Oh, no Eli! You did not?" Without waiting for a reply I scooped her up again in my arms. How did I think that they could have been clean? While running to the bathroom I undressed her. We had little time left and I did not want Manger to wonder why we were late.

Downstairs in front of the T.V, Kelly was explaining to her new friend Josh why the man preferred the elephant dung to that of the camel. Manger had noticed Sally's quick run out of the room with Eli in her arms. The little girl had resisted the urge to look at him at his entrance. Something was wrong with her and Sally hadn't want Kelly to realise it. Sally did not lack skill with kids; it's only the fact that she was not a very disciplined woman herself. Who gives cookies to kids before dinner? Then he had heard her run again and the water running in the bathroom. He had looked at Kelly questioning and the little lady had shrugged her shoulders and said, "Aunt Sal must have learned that Eli did not have shower gel." "You mean she hadn't taken a bath?" "Yeah. She would probably be very angry with her. She made us promise to be good." Kelly went on again staring at the screen. "I have to tell Aunt Sal that I was the one who finished the shower gel." She placed the remote control on the sofa and left Manger heading for the stairs with a guilty air. Her little dress floated around her, she was heartbreakingly cute. Her hair was very short and blond and her eyes as blue as those of her sister's. They were so different from their aunt. Sally is a tall woman, with black hairs and brown eyes. He was used to detail people until he even took a guess at their underwear. He thought about Sally a second then laughed. She was not strikingly beautiful, more like negligee. Her hair had not been cut for months, he was sure she wore cotton underwear, practical. By the state of her living room, bits of cookies everywhere, he was sure that sure had someone to clean. She used to wear a nose stud from a photograph Sam sent him. He had noticed her weakness for high heeled boots, she must have been wild in her youth. He would not have been surprised if she had a tattoo on her buttocks. Manger followed Kelly stealthily; he waited behind the bathroom door and listened. "Aunt Sal?" "Yes, honey?" "Sorry I finished the shower gel." "You will have to be punished for that. You know that, right?"

"Yes, I am sorry." "Being sorry is not enough. Come here. Did you hear? I told you to approach." Manger felt a chill up his spine. He was ready to pounce if he heard the girl cry but then all he heard was a giggle as Sally said "Give me a kiss now. No, that's not enough punishment. You'll have to give me another kiss and one to your sister as well." Manger couldn't resist the urge; he peered inside. Kelly was lying on the bathroom floor and both Sally and Eli, rolled in Pokemon towel, were ticking her. He nearly gave a sigh of relief and pleasure at this scene. A glance at his watch revealed that they were twenty minutes late. Kelly's nice dress was wet. He took off his jacket

CHAPTER FOUR:

I was content doing nothing just sitting in the back of the car and being driven. What did I care anyway? The girls were sleeping therefore I did not have to put on an act. I could just be simple old me, silent and thoughtful behind that stupid look. I closed my eyes for a while and tried to relax; to no avail. Something was haunting me, the fact that I was riding with this man, a full-grown man, not the plastic Barbie doll named Ken, and someone gorgeous at it put me ill at ease. I was too conscious of myself. Are my trousers making my legs look fat like caterpillars? How about my new t-shirt, it looked great in the showcase. I had to hold onto something, come back to reality; no one in here cares about my cellulite neither about my well-concealed beauty. "Ouch!" He exclaimed, surprised and painfully. I had involuntarily squeezed his hand with my nails. Oh god, he speaks as well! Someone please pinch me, I think I am dreaming. *'Come on, Sally. No time to get hysteric. He is just a male of the human specie. It is not as if you had not seen any. Okay you are right; the men in that boring little town are no matches to this one. Anyway, you have to get a grip on yourself, remember, he does not think the world of you.'*

"Oh, sorry. Bad dream." I managed to mumble and turned to the window.

We drove in silence for some minutes then he said to my amazement:

"You were wide awake."

"What?" I questioned. I knew quite well what he was talking about but he had taken so long to say it, I thought it was already forgotten. But it seemed that he was rummaging in his mind. "When you nearly bruised me with your long nails, you were wide awake."

"You mean I did it on purpose? What for? The pleasure of having to clean my long nails again?"

"I knew you are not right in your head!" I heard his teasing tone, but ignored it. He had asked for this quarrel.

"Yeah, you are right." I replied in a light tone, which silenced him for some seconds. He wanted to be right but he did not want me to capitulate that way. He wanted to win through a Knock Out. He sighed deeply, his face in the moving streetlamp looked tired. He had been driving for six hours now.

"Park the car." I said.

"What for? You want to pee now?" His bluntness nearly shocked me.

"Shut up. I will drive, you look like you are going to drop on the wheel."

"I am aware of my capacities and I have rode a car for longer than that."

"That's right, you had to drive your car here, I don't think you've had some sleep, at least those bags underneath your eyes don't say so. And I don't want to risk being driven to the dove clinic in a stretcher along with the girls. So be a good boy and let me take over. You get two hours rest and then you drive us into the city. That way no one will get lost." He was silent for a moment, took a look at me to assure himself of my good intentions, I made cute doggy eyes and it worked. He pulled up to the side of the road and got out. I moved to the driver's seat and waited for him. He had moved the seat way too backwards for my foot to reach the pedals properly. I tried to put it right but it would not budge. His Land Rover, I had to admit, was very comfortable. One minute passed still no sign of him. Who takes all that time to round a car? I unclasped my seat belt and locked all the doors, my utmost security measure in case of imminent fright, while I stared outside looking for a sign of life. None, I was beginning to panic, two minutes now. The traffic was fluent and I could not see anything except form car headlights. How the seconds seemed to feel like hours! I glanced at the girls; nothing could disturb their profound sleep. He must have been angry with me for having made him take us to Dill's for dinner, and that was his retribution. My old ghosts came back haunting me. *'Oh god, make him come back!'* I don't remember since when I had begun to think of Manger as someone safe but at that precise moment, as I tried to remain calm, Manger's presence felt closest to a mother's womb. The shadows reminded me of Gregory and the indistinctive noises around me brought me into some kind of trance. There was a rap on the passenger window and I jumped out of my seat giving out a soft yelp. It was Manger, I thought of keeping the doors locked to punish him for having left us waiting in the car without giving any indication of the nature of his lateness. Thankfully, I thought better of it. He sat on the seat and pulled his long legs inside. He looked like a sausage in a hotdog. He adjusted the seat and the belt before paying me any attention.

"Sorry, I scared you. Urgent need." That's all he said, his eyes darted on my face, embarrassing me. My hands were sweating as I put in the contact and pulled the car back on the motorway. I was dying to yell at him but the words were stuck in my throat and I did not want him to feel needed. I did not want to give the impression of a lady in distress and I was far from being that. I drove in silence keeping my eyes on the road. I was certain that his were on me, on the look out for flaws. Looking for something distinct with my driving, perhaps he cared a lot for his car. His way of silently criticising everything annoyed me. I was ready to front him, gathering all my courage I said,

"Who..." He was sleeping, his head tilted to the side his eyelids tightly closed and an expression of peace and satisfaction was upon his face. I smiled to myself, *'it seems like even the worse tyrant needs some hours of sleep.'* A plan began to merge in my head; I could drive to Ned's apartment. We could spend the night there; it was nearing midnight. We cannot make a visit at the clinic at this hour anyway, so...

It was three in the morning on my watch when I drove in Ned's underground parking. It was either too late or too early to knock at his door. I was too tired to make up a solution or an excuse, whichever I needed. Manger was still sleeping, snoring softly. Kelly was sleeping in Eli's arms, two perfect little angels. I threw my jacket over their tiny bodies, checked that the doors were locked, that we were correctly parked before closing my eyes for a well-deserved rest.

I was running on the main road and someone was chasing me. My legs felt heavy and it was hard to remember how to work them properly. I kept tripping and falling over with a feeling that people were trying to grope my legs, bruising me. The noise again, I did not know what it was, perhaps the pounding silence, and my own shrieks becoming unbearable to my ears. The familiar piercing of the knife stabbing the air after me, one, two, three times, a pause then again. I had heard it so often in my dreams that I knew exactly the next time it would hit and where. I knew perfectly the bow of the arm, the body bending with pressure and hatred, the swift. "Come on, Sal. It's okay you are safe now. No one will hurt you. Open your eyes." Big firm hands shook me gently. And I opened my eyes breathing hard. Another bad dream.

"Phew, thanks." I managed to say. He stared at me strangely. He had perhaps thought that I would jump in his arms and purred while he stroked

my hair and tried to comfort me. I was used to those nightmares; I live with them. Lately I was having less and less of insomnias, I dropped the medicines and I only had the nightmares when I was stressed out or during emotional 'booms'. Well guess that the fright I got that night was enough to destabilise me. "Sally," he said. He was still staring at me in the eyes and for a second I thought that it was quite romantic.

"Yes." I said gently.

"Your eyes."

"What's wrong with my eyes?" I took a look in the rear mirror. "Oh my god! My eyes!" They were all red and watery. I tried to touch them, "Ouch, it hurts!"

"Seems like we've got a case of conjunctivitis. Good thing we are heading for the hospital."

"We are not going to a hospital! We are going to the Dove Clinic, that's a lure; it's a place where people are prepared for the after world. They die there! Anyway it will be over in two days." A tear rolled down my cheek. I hastily rubbed it away.

"Aunt Sal, is it morning yet?" Eli had woken up in the back seat. I took a look at my watch, seven o'clock. The lights in the underground parking were still on. Manger replied.

"Yes, it is seven o'clock and I wonder why we are in an underground parking." I ignored his remark, fumbled in my handbag looking for my pair of sunglasses. No use scaring the girls or my brother. I couldn't find them. Everything was there, ranging from my make-up to a spare tampons, except from my sunglasses. *'What had I done with them? Or what have the girls done with them?'*

"Girls you've seen my sunglasses?" I asked lightly.

"Yeah, they are on the dressing table." Eli replied. *'Cool,'* I thought. *'What was I to do now?'* Manger passed his hand under his passenger seat and fished out a pair of womanly dark sunglasses, Gucci's.

"Here," he said. I muttered thanks and put them on, got down from the car.

"Could you give me ten minutes, please? I've got to go up and see someone." It was hard to believe that i was asking permission to go see my own brother. "I will be quick." I added to convince the impassive face fronting me.

"You've got ten minutes."

I directed myself towards the elevator doors after asking the girls to be good, useless task. My eyes were hurting and very teary. The elevator doors

closed on my back. It took eight unending seconds for the elevator to climb, still it was the wrong floor; third. A man in his sixties entered carrying a box of dusty old books. He punched in the ground floor in the control panel and noticing my presence said pleasantly; "I am going to sell them. Boring stuff anyway, good thing if I can get a couple of dollars outta them." I smiled and nodded knowingly. He was not very convincing, a big fat lie. Guilty minds always play tricks, none of my business anyway. I stepped on the fourth floor, and looked for Ned's apartment.

"63, 64 and 65." I knocked on the door. The corridors were painted in an ugly shade of yellow, mustard. The door opened on a pretty blond with green eyes with a freckled nose. She had a nightdress on and the small bulge of her belly was clearly visible. Ned had told me that he had just found out about her pregnancy while I could see that she was at least six months big.

"Yes?" She said. Barefooted, I could see that her ankles were a bit sore.

"Well, hi. I am looking for Ned Vancouver. Is he here right now?" She pushed her long blond hair out of her face, smiled before replying.

"Not right now, but he will be back in a second. May I know who you are?" My dark sunglasses may appear hostile to her. *'Oh no! She's pregnant and I am highly contagious! Get out of here, dork!'* I took a look at my watch and said "Oh no, I've got an urgent meeting in half an hour. Doesn't matter, I'll be back in two hours or so. Do you mind telling him that I dropped by to see him? Thanks, bye." I rushed back to the elevator.

"Hey, if you are coming back, then why the message?" She stepped out of her apartment. Thankfully the elevator doors closing onto me stopped me from having to answer. I had to accept the evidence. I was not civilised any more. These three years I spent away from my family, from my friends. Only meeting people on special occasions such as Christmas and funerals. Quite disconcertedly I went to more funerals than I was invited to Christmas dinners. The distance I kept between my new neighbours and me, my unwillingness to befriend Miss Welling, the girls' headmistress. My hostility towards my impotent bosses, no rule that one out, those men should be kept in cages at the zoo. Anyway, I came to the sudden throbbing realisation that I had spent three years being awfully unliveable. Being someone I was not, out of fear and spite. Out of slothfulness I became a secretary. I am better than that, how did I end up becoming a lousy secretary? No offence to those making a living out of picking up the phone and delivering coffee every morning. But three years ago, taking up that job, even to earn some easy cash, was unimaginable. I had completely changed and I did not like what I had become. I was nearly a housewife with two kids before having had time

to enjoy sex to the max. During the last three years I had sex only four times. His name was Arnold and frankly speaking, he was no good at it. He was not the type who would go about looking for his own pleasure but he didn't either have the attractive muscular body one would get excited just by looking at it. He was all saggy and old. *'Oh my god, I have gone out with old penises!'* Well then I had nothing against them, they were safe and did not look for long time relationships. They even cared to bring along their own condoms, something rare in my youth. The last time I had sex with someone I was drunk. I woke up alone in a bedroom of Arnold's house naked underneath the sheets. I didn't even remember whom it was with until Joey, the baker, pinched my ass at the village fancy-fair and said: "You were so hot that night, babe. How about another night out, huh?" I was so disgusted with myself that day, I felt like a swine. Well Joey really looks like a pig, and even drunk I don't know how I could have brought myself to fuck him! Jesus, how I wish I could erase those horrible moments from my life, resumed my sex life to masturbating myself in the bathroom while the girls were asleep. Still, thankfully, I cannot to do that, it sounds too pervert to my own ears. With the girls around, I feel old, frigid, and unfashionable. Well they did make some good changes in me; I stopped smoking, I became more liable, I learned how to cook and sew. I do loads of reading; I haven't been able to find the important thing about it yet except from the fact that it is quite enjoyable. I was thinking about having a dog. That sounds funny, it's like I was going to give birth to a dog. I love dogs but it always sounded like too much responsibilities, something that I learned to love as well. And Manger! I had been so ungrateful towards him. I should have listened to him. Then I would not have to slither and ask for forgiveness. He was on the phone with someone and on noticing me he lowered his voice and began mumbling incoherently. I got behind the wheel and instantly powered the engine. Manger looked disinterested, as if he knew I would come back and we would then be on the rails again to the Clinic. Well, for once, he was right. After a while I gave up trying to understand what he was saying on the phone, he ended all his sentences with an inward groan and constantly nodded his head like an invertebrate. I concentrated on the road and tried to do minimum efforts with my eyes, they were hurting like hell with a tear flowing every minute. I wish I were in bed with a wet towel over my eyes and a piece of chocolate slowly melting in my mouth. Manger cut short my reverie and brought me back to the cruel reality, my eyes were swollen and my mouth needed a wash.

"Guess you are not that lost." He said. I had forgotten that I was supposed to depend on him to give the directions of the clinic.

"I wanted to see where you would be heading first after three years of absence to your hometown. Jenkins Village is very different from here, I wonder how you managed to survive in the wild for so long." His tone was neither sarcastic nor accusing. I remained silent; I was not going to say another word before the arrival of my lawyer. "So, now you are prepared to treat that conjunctivitis. What made you change your mind? Seeing Sigel?" That was enough, I was going to break, another tear rolled down my cheek burning me. I wiped it quickly away. I cleared my throat and said, "How the hell are you involved with everyone I know? First it's Sam, and now my brother's wife? I don't want to drive anymore." I pulled up the car to the side of the car and unintentionally we were in front of a café. I knew I was sounding idiotic, silly, childish and whatever else. But right now I wanted my bed and to hug my old teddy bear. The girls were silently watching us quarrel. To think that I have a sister-in-law. I got down, rounded the car, and let the girls out, leaving Manger behind, we entered the café and sat at an empty table. There were no waitresses and I was frustrated. I did not know what to do. I did not know how to order, I did not know what to order, I did not know how to manage Manger. Why do I always associate my troubles with food? Manger came inside, looking quite furious, he pushed his way pass two old man and took a seat next to me, his leg brushed against mine. He crushed me with his body and I stared at him indigently. He took hold of my arm firmly and roughly before saying, "I don't like the way you are always running on me. Leaving me behind in the car, giving me options. Either to follow or to stay behind. So listen closely, I have to drive you to the Dove Clinic and that is what I am going to do, okay? By force or by your own willingness I don't care, I have a job to do and I will do it. I am aware that you are hungry, so I'll leave you fifteen minutes to have breakfast, and then I will drive you. Is that understood?" I ignored the pressure on my arm, approached my face towards him hoping that my morning breath would have some fatal feat on him, pursed my lips in a pleasurable fashion and said "Okay." It was his time to stare. He should have realised by now that I was not like everyone else. He had the bad habit of anticipating my next move and failing at it. Sometimes he made me feel audacious and at others unarmed and frail, needing his help. He stood up signalled a woman and placed some money on the table.

"I'll be back in fifteen minutes. Try and wash your mouth before that." And he was gone. I tried to act angry but only managed to remain calm until he got out of the little restaurant. Then I laughed along with the girls.

"I really need to brush my teeth, you know?" We took turns to smell each others morning breaths. I ordered some pancakes and fruit juice for the girls. I only wanted to sleep, and that was not in the menu. When we had finished, for once without any damage to the restaurant table, I stared at Manger's money angrily,

"We don't need his money!"

"Can I keep it then?" Eli asked. I had talked aloud and they were both gazing at me with my famous doggy eyes.

"No," I replied.

"But you said that you didn't need it!" Eli protested.

"I said that we did not need it; that I could afford to buy us breakfast. What did you have in mind for all that money anyway?" I rubbed my eyes gently under my sunglasses.

"Why are you wearing sunglasses Aunt Sal? The sun is not shining in the restaurant." That was Kelly. She was not yet properly awakened but her little eyes darted around the place at significant speed.

"I know baby but my eyes hurt with light." I was not going to tell her that she was going to have nightmares if she happened to see my eyes.

"She has got that eye disease. You know, that one that made Andy be sent back at home? Disco eyes." Eli replied knowingly. If she was not my niece I would be scared of that girl, how old is she anyway?

"Cool." Kelly replied.

"We want to play the games at the back." Eli said again. There were two electronic machines, they looked quite outdated, but they are not yet even being used in Jenkins Village.

"Yeah why not."

Manger arrived in the middle of thier game. He took a bag from the woman who he had first signalled and accosted us.

"Your fifteen minutes are over girls. We have to get going." He was in a better mood but still firm. I noticed his jeans pocket bulging. He picked up his money still on the table and before I could protest he had paid the bill.

"I thought that your job is to drive us there and not to chaperon us. I didn't even think that you cared whether we are still alive reaching there." I was nasty, but he was even worse.

"Well, you don't think a lot, do you?" And he was gone again. It was his time playing games with me. When we reached the car, the engine was

already powered. We climbed in silence. I fastened my seatbelt and looked for a tissue in my handbag. My eyes felt teary again, it was painful to look to the sides, and I was glad I was not driving. We would have probably ended in a wall. Suddenly, Manger pulled off my sunglasses like an enraged animal, with his left arm he pinned my shoulders to the seat, I was unable to move. He was nearly all over me. I aimed my my right knee towards his pelvis, but he was quick at avoiding the blow. He shoved up his right arm and I saw a small object in his hand. Some kind of dropper, he nearly ripped my left eye open, let a drop fall in, then the right one. I screamed in fright more than in pain. The liquid was cold and my eyes began to water. "Phew, it had been hard to find a pharmacy but it was even harder to administer the medicine." How thoughtful, he had gone out to buy something for my eye. He moved back to his seat and rubbed his right arm then fired the engine. He reminded me of these old tired hubbies who smoke a cigarette after having sex with their evenly old wives to remove that purulent taste from their mouths. I put my sunglasses back on and closed my eyes. I had to admit that the drops were very relieving to my eyes.

"Aunt Sal? Are you okay?" Eli asked sheepishly.

"You knew what he was planning?" I asked trying to keep my calm.

"He had to. You hate taking medicines; you would never have accepted if it were not forced on you. Anyway I am sure you are going to feel much better now." She replied. Kelly assisted her by nodding. I could not protest; I had no argument and felt too lame and tired to bother. I took a glimpse at Manger. His attention was on the road again, ignoring my presence.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Behind my black sunglasses I watched him drive. His eyes looked tired and he rubbed them time and again to keep them open. It was conspicuous that he was stressed out. Something was bothering him and somehow i felt sure that it was not the chewing gums that Kelly had stuck on the car's sofa. We had been driving for ten minutes now, the girls were quietly watching the panorama. I was waiting for Eli to begin to question me about the surroundings. She should be remembering living around here by now. In fact the girls shared a rented flat with their mother at the beginning of the town. We have already passed in front of the old rusty coloured building but they have not given any sign of recognition, thankfully. I sincerely wished that they could forget everything wrong or painfull that had happened in their lives.

"Manger, how long will it take?" He rubbed his eyes again and was about to reply when I continued. "I think that you should stop rubbing your eyes like that."

"And why should I listen to you?"

"Well, if you don't you might catch conjunctivitis because you haven't washed your hands after touching my eyes."

"Oh, shit." He pulled away his hand from his face and rested them firmly on the steering wheel.

"So?"

"So, what?"

"When will we reach there?" He glanced at his watch before replying.

"In about ten more minutes." I relaxed and waited. What is Mr Patterson awaiting of me, I have no idea. Anyway, I will refuse any gift in the form of money coming from him. He might think that my sister is some kind of parcel that his son has bought three years back. How old is he anyway? Eighty? Perhaps he is already dead? Who knows... Maybe he is waiting to kill me, his personal revenge. He might be hiding a gun between his bedsheets. He will blow my brains out and take pleasure torturing the girls.

"Stop it!" I murmured to myself. I looked at Manger to reassure myself of his goodwill. How could such a charming looking man, who is so good with children, who pays the bills, who cures conjunctivitis and whose eyes have changed colour, hide anything bad. Changed colour?

"Manger? Weren't your eyes supposed to be blue?" His eyes were grey, far from green, let alone blue. "You've been wearing contact lenses all the while? For how long? Why did you take them off? You chose the right time to give me doubts!"

"I'm sorry but it's part of my job. It is safer for my family, my clients and myself that I remain undercover. It's unbelievable how the colour of one's eyes can change his whole appearance." That is what I was discovering.

"You are wrong, it's only now that I am wearing coloured lenses. When I met Mr Patterson for the first time I was wearing them and since his eyes are failing him, I thought that it would be better if I were to wear them again. I am sorry to hear that you still do not trust me."

"I did not mean it that way..."

"And what did you mean, if I may ask?"

"Yes you may ask. I meant that, Mr Patterson is a threat to us, and you are working for him. We trusted you and followed so if it turns out that Mr Patterson has trapped us there, will we be able to count on you for help? And then your eyes have changed colour. So I began to wonder whether I

know you or not?" I was agitated because I lacked words. I did not know how to explain myself, I lacked the practice. It has been three years now that no one has asked me to explain myself. Everything I did was planned beforehand, I would run away if something went wrong. While Manger seemed to ask for spontaneous response. Something that completely disarmed me. His warm big hand clasp over mine. His eyes bore into mine long enough for him to say,

"Whatever colour my eyes are, I am still that same person." The warmth of his hand was gone and I was left with a feeling of utter loneliness. I nodded to myself and stared outside, a tear slid down my left cheek. *'Only five more minutes to spend with him. I should just shut up and enjoy!'*

"Are you married?" I asked.

"What?" He was taken aback by the question.

"I've just realised that I do not know *that* much about you. So I still have to find out by how much I can trust you." I said matter of factly. *'Also, after five minutes you will leave my life for good, let me be able to say that I know you enough.'*

"I thought that by now you must have been fixed on that. No I am not married. My turn..."

"What 'turn' are you talking about? Don't you know enough about me yet?"

"Stop being so aggressive. I did not mean to pry into your private life. And I did not. I only know what everyone else does if they have read every newspaper article that had been printed about you. So lets begin again on neutral terms. Would you want to go back to your old life? Being Miss Sally Vancouver again?"

"I don't think so." I glanced at the girls before continuing. They had fallen asleep again, by now I should understand that Manger and I would make a very boring couple! "No, Sally Vancouver does not have kids. She had a criminal record for not having paid a couple of fines. She has a messed up life, no car, and yet she had her parents by her side." I murmured the last part, still he heard.

"I am sure that they miss you a lot and that they wish you back..."

"They hate me, and frankly who could blame them?"

"You were terrified, anyone would have gone into hiding. You had no idea that Gregory would go after your family."

"I should have thought twice." My voice broke down and I silenced myself. There was no use to cry even if i was dying to let it all out. Anyway what did he care? A day ago I was his fugitive, and now he wants to befriend me. No one is safe enough.

"Sally, it is no use blaming yourself for something that you had no means to stop. You are simply stopping yourself from living. I mean look at yourself. You are scared to remain alone in a car. The idea of meeting new people terrifies you. Do you want to remain in a shell for the rest of your life?" I swallowed painfully, it was hard to meet his gaze. I was lost for words again in front of so much accusations. I had no idea that he had noticed that much about me. The car had stopped and it was getting smaller every second that tickle by.

"What...do you care?" I managed, I swallowed again, gathered my anger and continued. "Your job is finished now. Why do you wish to trouble me further? After today, we will not meet again. I am only part of your job." That hit home hard. His face that was full of concern a while back was impassive again.

"You are right, what do I care?" He said his gaze moving from my face to the building in front of us. Suddenly I felt lame again. I did not want to fight back, I wanted to slither and ask for forgiveness. I wanted to beg him to remain a little longer with us. He was not finished yet.

"We may not meet again, therefore I will tell you something. Before I met you, I was sure that you were some selfish person who took off as you were scared to face life. Now I realise that you are scared to face yourself. Everyone has changed around you. Your parents have long forgiven you, in fact they have never blamed you. Look at how well you have sorted these little angels. Do they blame you? No, they love you. You are not only punishing yourself but them too. Do you think that they enjoy living constantly in your fear of being found? There is no threat left... Face it, Sally you are sacred to look at yourself for more than minutes in a mirror. "

"That's bullshit. There is nothing exciting about my appearance, so why should i spend hours watching myself in a mirror? You have no idea of how I felt after my sister's death. And who the hell gave you the right to criticise me? Why don't you just mind your own business and drive, huh?"

My heart was beating at high speed, I was embarrassed and at the same time angry.