



**ONE
VICTIM.**

**FOUR
ACCUSED.**

TAKE IT BACK

**'Razor-sharp...
much more than a
courtroom thriller'**

Christina Dalcher,
Sunday Times bestselling
author of VOX

WHO IS TELLING THE TRUTH?

KIA ABDULLAH

Praise for *Take It Back*:

‘With razor-sharp insight into the lives of her characters, Kia Abdullah gives readers much more than a courtroom thriller. A timely reminder that the tentacles of scandal are long – and they touch everyone’

**Christina Dalcher, *Sunday Times*
bestselling author of *VOX***

‘Intense, shocking and so real you can literally feel its heartbeat . . . the best book I’ve read this year’

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‘Kia’s novel is an excellent addition to the court-based criminal dramas we’ve come to love. It’s made even more shocking by its basing itself in one of the most challenging environments; rape and diversity. It’s a great read and draws you in with fast pacing and real characters’

**Nazir Afzal OBE,
Former Chief Crown Prosecutor, CPS**

‘I was blown away by *Take It Back*. From the explosive premise to the shockingly perfect ending, I loved every word’

Roz Watkins, author of *The Devil’s Dice*

‘Brave and shocking, a real welcome addition to the crime thriller genre. Kia’s is a fresh voice and a thrilling novel’

Alex Khan, author of *Bollywood Wives*

Kia Abdullah is an author and travel writer. She has contributed to *The Guardian*, BBC, and Channel 4 News, and most recently *The New York Times* commenting on a variety of issues affecting the Muslim community. Kia currently travels the world as one half of the travel blog *Atlas & Boots*, which receives over 250,000 views per month. **kiaabdullah.com**

Take It Back

Kia Abdullah



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

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For Peter

CHAPTER ONE

She watched her reflection in the empty glass bottle as the truth crept in with the wine in her veins. It curled around her stomach and squeezed tight, whispering words that paused before they stung, like a paper cut cutting deep: colourless at first and then vibrant with blood. *You are such a fucking cliché*, it whispered – an accusation, a statement, a fact. The words stung because Zara Kaleel's self-image was built on the singular belief that she was different. She was different to the two tribes of women that haunted her youth. She was not a docile housewife, fingers yellowed by turmeric like the quiet heroines of the second-gen literature she hated so much. Nor was she a rebel, using her sexuality to subvert her culture. And yet here she was, lying in freshly stained sheets, skin gleaming with sweat and regret.

Luka's post-coital pillow talk echoed in her ear: 'it's always the religious ones'. She smiled a mirthless smile. The alcohol, the pills, the unholy foreskin – it was all so fucking predictable. Was it even rebellious anymore? Isn't this what middle-class Muslim kids *did* on weekends?

Luka's footsteps in the hall jarred her thoughts. She shook out her long dark hair, parted her lips and threw aside the sheets, secure in the knowledge that it would drive him wild. Women like Zara were never meant to be virgins. It's little wonder her youth was shrouded in hijab.

He walked in, a climber's body naked from the waist up, his dirty blond hair lightly tracing a line down his chest. Zara blinked languidly, inviting his touch. He leaned forward and kissed the delicate hollow of her neck, his week-old stubble marking tiny white lines in her skin. A sense of happiness, svelte and ribbon-like, pattered against her chest, searching for a way inside. She fought the sensation as she lay in his arms, her legs wrapped with his like twine.

'You are something else,' he said, his light Colorado drawl softer than usual. 'You're going to get me into a lot of trouble.'

He was right. She'd probably break his heart, but what did he expect screwing a Muslim girl? She slipped from his embrace and wordlessly reached for her phone, the latest of small but frequent reminders that they could not be more than what they were. She swiped through her phone and read a new message: 'Can you call when you get a sec?' She re-read the message then deleted it. Her family, like most, was best loved from afar.

Luka's hand was on her shoulder, tracing the outline of a light brown birthmark. 'Shower?' he asked, the word warm and hopeful between his lips and her skin.

She shook her head. ‘You go ahead. I’ll make coffee.’

He blinked and tried to pinpoint the exact moment he lost her, as if next time he could seize her before she fled too far, distract her perhaps with a stolen kiss or wicked smile. This time, it was already too late. He nodded softly, then stood and walked out.

Zara lay back on her pillow, a trace of victory dancing grimly on her lips. She wrapped her sheets around her, the expensive cream silk suddenly gaudy on her skin. She remembered buying an armful years ago in Selfridges; Black American Express in hand, new money and aspiration thrumming in her heart. Zara Kaleel had been a different person then: hopeful, ambitious, optimistic.

Zara Kaleel had been a planner. In youth, she had mapped her life with the foresight of a shaman. She had known which path to take at every fork in the road, single-mindedly intent on reaching her goals. She finished law school top of her class and secured a place on Bedford Row, the only brown face at her prestigious chambers. She earned six figures and bought a fast car. She dined at Le Gavroche and shopped at Lanvin and bought everything she ever wanted – but was it enough? All her life she was told that if she worked hard and treated people well, she’d get there. No one told her that when she got there, there’d be no *there* there.

When she lost her father six months after their estrangement, something inside her slid apart. She told herself that it happened all the time: people lost the ones they loved,

people were lost and lonely but they battled on. They kept on living and breathing and trying but trite sentiments failed to soothe her anger. She let no one see the way she crumbled inside. She woke the next day and the day after that and every day until, a year later, she was on the cusp of a landmark case. And then, she quit. She recalled the memory through a haze: walking out of chambers, manic smile on her face, feeling like Michael Douglas in *Falling Down*. She planned to change her life. She planned to change the world. She planned to be extraordinary.

Now, she didn't plan so much.

*

It was a few degrees too cold inside Brasserie Chavot, forcing the elegant Friday night crowd into silk scarves and cashmere pashminas. Men in tailored suits bought complicated cocktails for women too gracious to refuse. Zara sat in the centre of the dining room, straight-backed and alone between the glittering chandelier and gleaming mosaic floor. She took a sip from her glass of Syrah, swallowing without tasting, then spotted Safran as he walked through the door.

He cut a path through soft laughter and muted music and greeted her with a smile, his light brown eyes crinkling at the corners. 'Zar, is that you? Christ, what are you wearing?'

Zara embraced him warmly. His voice made her think of

old paper and kindling, a comfort she had long forgotten. ‘They’re just jeans,’ she said. ‘I had to stop pretending I still live in your world.’

“‘Just jeans’?” he echoed. ‘Come on. For seven years, we pulled all-nighters and not once did you step out of your three-inch heels.’

She shrugged. ‘People change.’

‘You of all people know that’s not true.’ For a moment, he watched her react. ‘You still square your shoulders when you’re getting defensive. It’s always been your tell.’ Without pause for protest, he stripped off his Merino coat and swung it across the red leather chair, the hem skimming the floor. Zara loved that about him. He’d buy the most lavish things, visit the most luxurious places and then treat them with irreverence. The first time he crashed his Aston Martin, he shrugged and said it served him right for being so bloody flash.

He settled into his seat and loosened his tie, a note of amusement bright in his eyes. ‘So, how is the illustrious and distinguished exponent of justice that is Artemis House?’

A smile played on Zara’s lips. ‘Don’t be such a smart-arse,’ she said, only half in jest. She knew what he thought of her work; that Artemis House was noble but also that it clipped her wings. He did not believe that the sexual assault referral centre with its shabby walls and erratic funding was the right place for a barrister, even one who had left the profession.

Safran smiled, his left dimple discernibly deeper than

the right. ‘I know I give you a hard time but seriously, Zar, it’s not the same without you. Couldn’t you have waited ’til mid-life to have your crisis?’

‘It’s not a crisis.’

‘Come on, you were one of our strongest advocates and you left for what? To be an *evening volunteer*?’

Zara frowned. ‘Saf, you know it’s more than that. In chambers, I was on a hamster wheel, working one case while hustling for the next, barely seeing any tangible good, barely even taking breath. Now, I work with victims and can see an actual difference.’ She paused and feigned annoyance. ‘And I’m not a *volunteer*. They pay me a nominal wage. Plus, I don’t work evenings.’

Safran shook his head. ‘You could have done anything. You really were something else.’

She shrugged. ‘Now I’m something else somewhere else.’

‘But still so sad?’

‘I’m not sad.’ Her reply was too quick, even to her own ears.

He paused for a moment but challenged her no further. ‘Shall we order?’

She picked up the menu, the soft black leather warm and springy on her fingertips. ‘Yes, we shall.’

Safran’s presence was like a balm. His easy success and keen self-awareness was unique among the lawyers she had known – including herself. Like others in the field, she had succumbed to a collective hubris, a self-righteous belief that they were genuinely changing the world. You could

hear it dripping from the tones of overstuffed barristers, making demands on embassy doorsteps, barking rhetoric at political figureheads.

Zara's career at the bar made her feel important, somehow more valid. After a while, the armour and arrogance became part of her personality. The transformation was indiscernible. She woke one day and realised she'd become the person she used to hate – and she had no idea how it had happened. Safran wasn't like that. He used the acronyms and in-jokes and wore his pinstripes and brogues but he knew it was all for show. He did the devil's work but somehow retained his soul. At thirty-five, he was five years older than Zara and had helped her navigate the brutal competitiveness of London chambers. He, more than anyone, was struck by her departure twelve months earlier. It was easy now to pretend that she had caved under pressure. She wouldn't be the first to succumb to the challenges of chambers: the gruelling hours, the relentless pace, the ruthless colleagues and the constant need to cajole, ingratiate, push and persuade. In truth she had thrived under pressure. It was only when it ceased that work lost its colour. Numbed by the loss of her father and their estrangement before it, Zara had simply lost interest. Her wins had lost the glee of victory, her losses fast forgotten. Perhaps, she decided, if she worked more closely with vulnerable women, she would feel like herself again. She couldn't admit this though, not even to Safran who watched her now in the late June twilight, shifting in her seat, hands restless in her lap.

He leaned forward, elbows on the table. 'Jokes aside, how are you getting on there?'

Zara measured her words before speaking. 'It's everything I thought it would be.'

He took a sip of his drink. 'I won't ask if that's good or bad. What are you working on?'

She grimaced. 'I've got this local girl, a teenager, pregnant by her mother's boyfriend. He's a thug through and through. I'm trying to get her out of there.'

Safran swirled his glass on the table, making the ice cubes clink. 'It sounds very noble. Are you happy?'

She scoffed. 'Are *you*?'

He paused momentarily. 'I think I'm getting there, yeah.'

She narrowed her eyes in doubt. 'Smart people are never happy. Their expectations are too high.'

'Then you must be the unhappiest of us all.' Their eyes locked for a moment. Without elaborating, he changed the subject. 'So, I have a new one for you.'

She groaned.

'What do you have if three lawyers are buried up to their necks in cement?'

'I don't know. What do I have?'

'Not enough cement.'

She shook her head, a smile curling at the corner of her lips.

'Ah, they're getting better!' he said.

'No. I just haven't heard one in a while.'

Safran laughed and raised his drink. 'Here's to you,

Zar – boldly going where no high-flying, sane lawyer has ever gone before.’

She raised her glass, threw back her head and drank.

*

Artemis House on Whitechapel Road was cramped but comfortable and the streets outside echoed with charm. There were no anodyne courtyards teeming with suits, no sand-blasted buildings that gleamed on high. The trust-fund kids in the modern block round the corner were long scared off by the social housing quota. East London was, Zara wryly noted, as multicultural and insular as ever.

Her office was on the fourth floor of a boxy grey building with stark pebbledash walls and seven storeys of uniformly grimy windows. Her fibreboard desk with its oak veneer sat in exactly the wrong spot to catch a breeze in the summer and any heat in the winter. She had tried to move it once but found she could no longer open her office door.

She hunched over her weathered keyboard, arranging words, then rearranging them. Part of her role as an independent sexual violence advisor was filtering out the complicated language that had so long served as her arsenal – not only the legalese but the theatrics and rhetoric. There was no need for it here. Her role at the sexual assault referral centre, or SARC, was to support rape victims and to present the facts clearly and comprehensively so they could

be knitted together in language that was easy to digest. Her team worked tirelessly to arch the gap between right and wrong, between the spoken truth and that which lay beneath it. The difference they made was visible, tangible and repeatedly affirmed that Zara had made the right decision in leaving Bedford Row.

Despite this assurance, however, she found it hard to focus. She did good work – she knew that – but her efforts seemed insipidly grey next to those around her, a ragtag group of lawyers, doctors, interpreters and volunteers. Their dedication glowed bright in its quest for truth, flowed tirelessly in the battle for justice. Their lunchtime debates were loud and electric, their collective passion formidable in its strength. In comparison her efforts felt listless and weak, and there was no room for apathy here. She had moved three miles from chambers and found herself in the real East End, a place in which sentiment and emotion were unvarnished by decorum. You couldn't coast here. There was no shield of bureaucracy, no room for bluff or bluster. Here, there was nothing behind which to hide.

Zara read over the words on the screen, her fingers immobile above the keys. She edited the final line of the letter and saved it to the network. Just as she closed the file, she heard a knock on her door.

Stuart Cook, the centre's founder, walked in and placed a thin blue folder on her desk. He pulled back a chair and sat down opposite. Despite his unruly blond hair and an eye that looked slightly to the left of where he aimed it,

Stuart was a handsome man. At thirty-nine, he had an old-money pedigree and an unwavering desire to help the weak. Those more cynical than he accused him of having a saviour complex but he paid this no attention. He knew his team made a difference to people's lives and it was only this that mattered. He had met Zara at a conference on diversity and the law, and when she quit he was the first knocking on her door.

He gestured now to the file on her desk. 'Do you think you can take a look at this for the San Telmo case? Just see if there's anything to worry about.'

Zara flicked through the file. 'Of course. When do you need it by?'

He smiled impishly. 'This afternoon.'

Zara whistled, low and soft. 'Okay, but I'm going to need coffee.'

'What am I? The intern?'

She smiled. 'All I'm saying is I'm going to need coffee.'

'Fine.' Stuart stood and tucked the chair beneath the desk. 'You're lucky you're good.'

'I'm good because I'm good.'

Stuart chuckled and left with thanks. A second later, he stuck his head back in. 'I forgot to mention: Lisa from the Paddington SARC called. I know you're not in the pit today but do you think you can take a case? The client is closer to us than them.'

'Yes, that should be fine.'

‘Great. She – Jodie Wolfe – is coming in to see you at eleven.’

Zara glanced at her watch. ‘Do you know anything about the case?’

Stuart shook his head. ‘Abigail’s sorted it with security and booked the Lincoln meeting room. That’s all I know – sorry.’

‘Okay, thanks. I’ll go over now if it’s free.’ She gestured at the newest pile of paper on her desk. ‘This has got to the tipping point.’

Carefully, she gathered an armful of folders and balanced her laptop on top. Adding a box of tissues to the pile, she gingerly walked to ‘the pit’. This was the central nervous system of Artemis House, the hub in which all clients were received and assigned a caseworker. It was painted a pale yellow – ‘summer meadow’ it had said on the tin – with soft lighting and pastel furnishings. Pictures of lilies and sacks of brightly coloured Indian spices hung on the wall in a not wholly successful attempt to instil a sense of comfort. The air was warm and had the soporific feel of heating left on too long.

Artemis House held not only the sexual assault referral centre but also the Whitechapel Road Legal Centre, both founded with family money. Seven years in, they were beginning to show their lack of funds. The carpet, once a comforting cream, was now a murky beige and the wallpaper curled at the seams. There was a peaty, damp smell in the winter and an overbearing stuffiness in the summer.

Still, Zara's colleagues worked tirelessly and cheerfully. Some, like she, had traded better pay and conditions for something more meaningful.

Zara manoeuvred her way to the Lincoln meeting room, a tiny square carved into a corner of the pit. She carefully set down her armful and divided the folders into different piles: one for cases that had stalled, one for cases that needed action, and another for cases just starting. There she placed Stuart's latest addition, making a total of twelve ongoing cases. She methodically sorted through each piece of paper, either filing it in a folder or scanning and binning it. She, like most lawyers, hated throwing things away.

She was still sorting through files when half an hour later she heard a gentle knock on the door. She glanced up, taking just a beat too long to respond. 'May I help you?'

The girl nodded. 'Yes, I'm Jodie Wolfe. I have an appointment?'

'Please come in.' Zara gestured to the sofa, its blue fabric torn in one corner, exposing yellow foam underneath.

The girl said something unintelligible, paused, then tried again. 'Can I close the door?'

'Of course.' Zara's tone was consciously casual.

The girl lumbered to the sofa and sat carefully down while Zara tried not to stare.

Jodie's right eye was all but hidden by a sac of excess skin hanging from her forehead. Her nose, unnaturally small in height, sat above a set of puffy lips and her chin slid off her jawline in heavy folds of skin.

‘It’s okay,’ misshapen words from her misshapen mouth. ‘I’m used to it.’ Dressed in a black hoodie and formless blue jeans, she sat awkwardly on the sofa.

Zara felt a heavy tug of pity, like one might feel for a bird with a broken wing. She took a seat opposite and spoke evenly, not wanting to infantilise her. ‘Jodie, let’s start with why you’re here.’

The girl wiped a corner of her mouth. ‘Okay but, please, if you don’t understand something I say, please ask me to repeat it.’ She pointed at her face. ‘Sometimes it’s difficult to form the words.’

‘Thank you, I will.’ Zara reached for her notepad. ‘Take your time.’

The girl was quiet for a moment. Then, in a voice that was soft and papery, said, ‘Five days ago, I was raped.’

Zara’s expression was inscrutable.

Jodie searched for a reaction. ‘You don’t believe me,’ she said, more a statement than a question.

Zara frowned. ‘Is there a reason I shouldn’t?’

The girl curled her hands into fists. ‘No,’ she replied.

‘Then I believe you.’ Zara watched the tension ease. ‘Can I ask how old you are?’

‘Sixteen.’

‘Have you spoken to anyone about this?’

‘Just my mum.’ She shifted in her seat. ‘I haven’t told the police.’

Zara nodded. ‘You don’t have to make that decision now. What we can do is take some evidence and send it to

the police later if you decide you want to. We will need to take some details but you don't have to tell me everything.'

Jodie pulled at the cuffs of her sleeves and wrapped them around her fingers. 'I'd like to. I think I might *need* to.'

Zara studied the girl's face. 'I understand,' she said, knowing that nerve was like a violin string: tautest just before it broke. If Jodie didn't speak now, she may never find the courage. She allowed her to start when ready, knowing that victims should set their own pace and use pause and silence to fortify strength.

Jodie began to speak, her voice pulled thin by nerves, 'It was Thursday just gone. I was at a party. My first ever one. My mum thought I was staying at my friend Nina's house. She's basically the daughter Mum wished she had.' There was no bitterness in Jodie's tone, just a quiet sadness.

'Nina made me wear these low-rise jeans and I just felt so stupid. She wanted to put lipstick on me but I said no. I didn't want anyone to see that I was ... trying.' Jodie squirmed with embarrassment. 'We arrived just after ten. I remember because Nina said any earlier and we'd look desperate. The music was so loud. Nina's always found it easy to make friends. I've never known why she chose me to be close to. I didn't want to tag along with her all evening – she's told me off about that before – so I tried to talk to a few people.' Jodie met Zara's gaze. 'Do you know how hard that is?'

Zara thought of all the corporate parties she had

attended alone; how keen she had been for a friend – but then she looked at Jodie’s startling face and saw that her answer was, ‘no’. Actually, she *didn’t* know how hard it was.

Jodie continued, ‘Nina was dancing with this guy, all close. I couldn’t face the party without her, so I went outside to the park round the back.’ She paused. ‘I heard him before I saw him. His footsteps were unsteady from drinking. Amir Rabbani. He— he’s got these light eyes that everyone loves. He’s the only boy who hasn’t fallen for Nina.’

Zara noted the glazed look in Jodie’s eyes, the events of that night rendered vivid in her mind.

Jodie swallowed. ‘He came and sat next to me and looked me in the eye, which boys never do unless they’re shouting ugly things at me.’ She gave a plaintive smile. ‘He reached out and traced one of my nails with his finger and I remember thinking at least my hands are normal. Thank you, God, for making my hands normal.’ Jodie made a strangled sound: part cry and part scoff, embarrassed by her naivety. ‘He said I should wear lace more often because it makes me look pretty and—’. Her gaze dipped low. ‘I believed him.’

Jodie reached for a tissue but didn’t use it, twisting it in her hands instead. ‘He said, “I know you won’t believe me but you have beautiful lips and whenever I see you, I wonder what it would be like to kiss you.”’ Jodie paused to steady her voice. ‘He asked if I would go somewhere

secret with him so he could find out what it was like. I've never known what it's like to be beautiful but in that moment I got a taste and ...' Jodie's eyes brimmed with tears. 'I followed him.' She blinked them back through the sting of shame.

Zara smarted as she watched, dismayed that Jodie had been made to feel that way: to believe that her value as a young woman lay in being desirable, but that to desire was somehow evil.

Jodie kneaded the tissue in her fingers. 'He led me through the estate to an empty building. I was scared because there were cobwebs everywhere but he told me not to worry. He took me upstairs. We were looking out the window when ...' Jodie flushed. 'He asked me what my breasts were like. I remember feeling light-headed, like I could hear my own heart beating. Then he said, "I ain't gonna touch 'em if they're ugly like the rest of you.'" Jodie's voice cracked just a little – a hairline fracture hiding vast injury.

Zara watched her struggle with the weight of her words and try for a way to carry them, as if switching one for another or rounding a certain vowel may somehow ease her horror.

Jodie's voice grew a semitone higher, the tissue now balled in her fist. 'Before I could react, his friends came out of the room next door. Hassan said, "This is what you bring us?" and Amir said he chose me because I wouldn't tell anyone. Hassan said, "Yeah, neither would a dog."'

Jodie gripped her knee, each finger pressing a little black pool in the fabric of her jeans. Her left foot tap-tapped on the floor as if working to a secret beat. ‘Amir said, “She’s got a pussy, don’t she?” and told me to get on my knees. I didn’t understand what was happening. I said no. He tried to persuade me but I kept saying no ...’ Jodie exhaled sharply, her mouth forming a small O as if she were blowing on tea. ‘He—he told his friends to hold me.’

Zara blinked. ‘How many were there?’ she asked softly.

Jodie shifted in her seat. ‘Four. Amir and Hassan and Mo and Farid.’

Zara frowned. ‘Do you know their surnames?’

‘Yes. Amir Rabbani, Hassan Tanweer, Mohammed Ahmed and Farid Khan.’

Zara stiffened. A bead of sweat trickled down the small of her back. Four Muslim boys. Four Muslim boys had raped a disabled white girl.

‘I—’ Jodie faltered. ‘I wasn’t going to tell anyone because ...’ her voice trailed off.

‘You can tell me.’ Zara reached out and touched the girl’s hand. It was an awkward gesture but it seemed to soothe her.

‘Because if a month ago, you had told me that any one of those boys wanted me, I would have thought it was a dream come true.’ Hot tears of humiliation pooled in her eyes. ‘Please don’t tell anyone I said that.’

A flush of pity bloomed on Zara’s cheeks. ‘I won’t,’ she promised.

Jodie pushed her palms beneath her thighs to stop her hands from shaking. ‘Farid said he wasn’t going to touch a freak like me so Hassan grabbed me and pushed me against the wall. He’s so small, I thought I could fight him but he was like an animal.’ Jodie took a short, sharp breath as if it might stifle her tears. ‘Amir said he would hurt me if I bit him and then he ... he put himself in my mouth.’ Jodie’s lips curled in livid disgust. ‘He grabbed my hair and used it to move my head. I gagged and he pulled out. He said he didn’t want me to throw up all over him and ...’ A sob rose from her chest and she held it in her mouth with a knuckle. ‘He finished himself off over me.’

Zara’s features were neutral despite the churning she felt inside. ‘What were the others doing?’ she asked gently.

Jodie shook with the effort of a laboured breath. ‘I— I couldn’t see. They were behind me.’ She clasped her hands together in her lap. ‘Hassan pushed me and I fell to the ground. He tore my top and undid my jeans and then ... he started.’ Jodie’s features buckled in anguish. ‘He— he came on my face, like Amir.’

Zara closed her eyes for a moment, stemming the weakness knotting in her throat.

Jodie’s words came faster now, as if she needed them said before they broke inside. ‘Hassan turned to Mo and said, “she’s all yours”. Mo said he didn’t want to but they started calling him names and saying he wasn’t man enough, so ... he did it too.’ Jodie’s voice cracked, giving it a strange, abrasive texture. ‘Mo has sat next to me in

class before. He's helped me, been kind to me. I begged him to stop, but he didn't.' She swallowed a sob, needing to get through this.

Zara listened as the words from Jodie's mouth fell like black spiders, crawling over her skin and making her recoil. The sensation unnerved her. Part of Zara's talent as a caseworker was her ability to remain composed, almost dispassionate, in the face of the painful stories told between these walls. Today, the buffer was breached.

'Jodie.' Zara swallowed hard to loosen the words. 'I am so, so sorry for what you went through.' Her words, though earnest, rang hollow, echoing in a chamber of horror. 'We're nearly there. Can you tell me what happened after?'

'They just left me there.' Her words held a note of wonder. 'I wiped everything off me using some old curtains. I tucked my top into my jeans so it wouldn't keep splitting open and then I walked home.'

'Did you see anyone on the way? Any passing cars or revellers from the party?'

Jodie shook her head. 'I stayed off the path. I didn't want to be seen.'

'Were you injured at all? Bleeding?'

'No.' Jodie took a steady breath, appeased by the simplicity of this back and forth questioning.

'What time was it when you got home?'

'I walked for fifteen minutes so around twelve I think.'

'Did you tell your mum?'

‘Not that night. She was in bed and I let myself in. I went to my bedroom and then I cleaned myself up.’ Jodie pointed at her backpack, a bare and practical navy so she couldn’t be teased for signs of personality. ‘I’ve brought the clothes I was wearing.’

‘Washed?’

‘No. I didn’t want to be stupid like you see on TV.’

Zara blinked. ‘Jodie, nothing you did or didn’t do could be called stupid. Please understand that.’

The girl gathered her perfectly formed hands in her lap but gave no sign of agreement.

‘Did you tell Nina or anyone else what happened?’

‘How could I?’ Jodie’s voice was soft but bitter. ‘How could I tell her that a boy who doesn’t even want *her* wanted me? How would she ever believe that?’

Zara looked up from her notes. ‘Hey,’ she said, drawing Jodie’s gaze from her lap. ‘No matter what happens, I want you to know that I believe you.’ Zara studied her for a moment, noting the dozen different ways in which she kept control: the tensing of her jowls and the squaring of her jaw, the curl of her fists and feet flattened on the floor. ‘I believe you,’ she repeated.

Fresh tears welled in Jodie’s eyes. ‘So you will help me?’

‘Yes, I will help you.’ Zara watched her wilt with relief. ‘Is there anything else I need to know? Anyone else who was involved?’

‘No. That’s everything.’

Zara drew two lines beneath her notes. She watched Jodie dab at her dripping nose and wondered how a jury would view her. A rape trial usually hinged on power – one person stripping it from another – but in this case, it would be difficult not to consider desire. Zara believed Jodie – had seen too much devious behaviour, met too many appalling men to doubt the young girl’s story – but felt a deep unease at the thought of her facing a jury. Could they imagine four young men wanting to have sex with Jodie even in some twisted gameplay?

Zara reached for her box of tissues and handed a fresh piece to Jodie.

She took it with a quivering hand. ‘What happens now?’

Zara’s lips drew a tight line, a grimace in the guise of a smile. ‘We would like to conduct a medical exam. All our doctors here are female. After that, if you’re ready, we can help you make a formal statement with the police.’

Jodie blanched. ‘Can we go to the police tomorrow? I want to think about it for one more night.’

‘Of course,’ said Zara gently. ‘We can do the exam, store the samples and see how you feel.’

Jodie exhaled. ‘Thank you for being on my side,’ she said, each few syllables halting before the next.

Zara offered a cursory nod.

‘No, I mean it.’ Jodie hesitated. ‘I told you it was hard to be at that party alone. The truth is it’s hard to be anywhere – *everywhere* – alone.’

Zara leaned forward. ‘You won’t be alone in this – not

for any of it.’ She gestured to the door. ‘If you want me in the exam room, I can sit with you.’

Jodie considered this but then shook her head. ‘I’ll be okay.’

Zara led her to the exam room and left her with the forensic medical examiner, a brisk but matronly Scotswoman who ushered Jodie inside. Zara shut the door with a queasy unrest. A small, delinquent part of her hoped that Jodie would change her mind, that she would not subject herself to the disruptive, corrosive justice system that so often left victims bruised. The law stress-tested every piece of evidence and that included the victim – probing, pushing and even bullying until the gaps became apparent.

Beneath her concern, however, she knew that Jodie needed to pursue this. A horrifying thing had happened to her and only the arm of the law could scrub the stain clean and serve justice.

*

Erin Quinto watched the strange little girl walk to the exit with Zara, her metronomic shuffle almost jaunty in its motion. With unheard words, they said goodbye and Zara headed back to the pit.

‘What’s *her* story?’ asked Erin.

Zara sighed. ‘You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.’

‘Oh yeah, I’m just a babe in the woods, me.’ Erin laughed, deep and throaty, and followed Zara to her office.

Inside, she reached into her jacket and pulled out a manila file. ‘I’ve got something for you guys.’ She placed it on the desk. ‘Can you give this to Stuart when he’s back? It’s the San Telmo financials he was after.’

Zara raised a brow. ‘Of course. I don’t want to know how you got them but thank you.’ She watched Erin, her angular features and lanky limbs clearly poised in thought. With her cropped hair, leather jacket and big dark eyes, she looked like a comic book anti-hero: an anime goth designed to drive a certain type of man wild.

Fittingly, beneath the dark hair and piercings, she was as wily as a snake. It was why Stuart had hired her as an investigator to freelance for Artemis House. It was five years ago and he was in the midst of his first big battle: Lisa Cox against Zifer Pharmaceuticals. The company’s sparkling new epilepsy drug, Koriol, had just hit the market. Alas, no one was told that depression was a rare but possible side effect. When Lisa Cox stepped in front of a moving train, she miraculously escaped without injury. The media went wild, Big Pharma went on the defensive and the Medicine Regulatory Authority denied all wrongdoing. When Lisa decided to sue, she was smeared as a money-hungry whore with little regard for herself or the three children she would have left behind. Lisa lost her job and almost lost her home. She was an inch from surrender when Erin – young, laconic, beautiful – strode into the Whitechapel Road Legal Centre and handed Stuart a file. Inside were memos between regulatory officials and Zifer

acknowledging the drug's dangerous side effects. Stuart couldn't use the documents legally but a well-timed leak prompted an investigation that not only exonerated Lisa but made her a very wealthy woman.

Stuart immediately offered the mysterious young Erin a job. She refused to take it and instead offered her freelance services pro bono, and now here she was pushing classified documents across a cheap fibreboard desk.

Zara placed the folder in her bottom-right drawer, the place she reserved for sensitive material.

Erin watched her, then asked, 'Seriously, what's the girl's story?'

Zara locked her drawer and set down the key. In a measured tone, she relayed Jodie's story, recalling the horrors of the story she'd told.

When Zara finished, Erin leaned forward, elbows on the desk, and said, 'Tell me what you need me to do.'

Zara handed her a piece of paper. 'Find out everything you can about these boys.'

Erin scanned the handwritten note. 'Wait.' She looked up. 'They're Muslim?'

'Yes.'

'Jesus. You're telling me that four Muslim boys raped a disabled white classmate?' Erin whistled softly. 'The tabloids will have a field day when this gets out – not to mention the Anglican Defence League. Those right-wing nutjobs will besiege anyone that's brown.'

Zara nodded tensely. 'That's a concern, but we can't

be distracted by what could happen or might happen. We need to approach this with a clear head.'

Erin's features knotted in doubt. She smoothed the note on the desk and traced a finger across the four names. 'What if I tried talking to one of them?'

Zara held up a hand. 'No, don't do that. Leave it to the police.'

'Screw the police.' Erin's voice was heavy with scorn. 'You think they're going to get to the heart of this?' She didn't pause for an answer. 'Look, the way I see it, these boys did the crime or they didn't. Either way, the police are going to fuck it up. You think they can get more information out of these bastards?'

Zara thought for a moment. 'Fine,' she ceded. 'Please just wait until the formal statement. We've overstepped the mark before and we can't do it again.'

Erin's eyes glinted in the sun. 'Tell me which one refused to take part.'

'Farid, but it wasn't out of sympathy.'

Erin smiled. 'Yes, but maybe he'll confess to save his skin. When are you going to the police?'

'Wednesday. Tomorrow.'

'Perfect. I'll scope him out on Thursday.' Erin slipped the piece of paper into her leather jacket and readied to leave. 'Four Muslim boys. Well, no one can accuse *you* of upholding the status quo.'

'Yeah,' Zara said dryly. 'Rock 'n' roll.'

*

The bells of St Alfege Church cut across the quiet, sending birds fleeing across the early evening sky. Canary Wharf shone in the distance – Zara’s favourite feature of her tidy Greenwich flat. She watched from the balcony and raised a joint to her lips. A blanket of warmth clouded around her, loosening the painful knots in her shoulders. Her head felt light but her limbs were heavy, almost sensual in effect. She leaned forward and laid her head on the wrought-iron railings, welcoming relief.

Just as her mind quietened, the doorbell cut through the breeze. Cursing, she snuffed out the joint and stepped back inside. Her flat on the top floor of a converted warehouse was large and bright with creaky old ceiling beams and exposed brickwork. The giant cream corner-sofa sat next to her desk, a sturdy structure of reclaimed oak. Opposite, stood a large bookcase stuffed with legal textbooks next to floor-to-ceiling windows. At the far end of the enormous room was her rarely used kitchen, a modern mix of chrome and glass offset by her giant wooden dining table. In a sea of minimalism, the only signs of personality were her antique lawyer lamp – a graduation gift from her sisters – and five large posters on the western wall depicting headlines from what Zara considered the greatest legal achievements of all time. She padded past them now and opened the door to find Luka outside with two bags filled with takeout.

He smiled sheepishly. ‘You said you missed lunch so I brought you some food.’ His gaze fell to the joint cooling in her hand.

She drew it back. 'I've had a bad day.'

'I didn't say anything.' He gestured inside. 'Can I come in?'

She held the door ajar.

Luka set the food on the breakfast bar and started to unpack. 'So why did my beautiful girlfriend have a bad day?'

She baulked. Six months and she still wasn't used to 'girlfriend'. They were meant to be casual. He was meant to be a distraction, a mindless and uncomplicated diversion, and yet here he was buying her comfort food and calling her his girlfriend.

She waved a hand. 'It's just something at work.'

Luka stopped. 'What happened? Are you okay?' His concern only reminded her that she had told him too much, pulled him too close.

'Don't worry,' she said. 'It's fine.'

He met her gaze, his eyes a stormy green, frustrated by her caginess. She wanted to reach out and touch him, to somehow soften her sharp edges, but opted instead to do nothing. She moved to the dining table and he followed, sitting next to her instead of opposite. *We're closer this way*, he had once said. His hand rested on her knee, a subtle non-sexual gesture. She moved her leg so that he fell away. *Don't forget*, it warned. She poured a large glass of wine and offered it to him.

He waved it away. 'I can't. I'm training for the climb.'

She set the glass on the table, noting the irony of a white

man refusing a drink from a Muslim woman. She pushed it towards him. ‘You’ve still got a few weeks before you leave.’

He reached forward and wiped a crumb off her lip. ‘Yes, I do.’ His fingers rested there a moment too long. ‘I’ll miss you.’ He paused. ‘You know what’s happening between us, don’t you, Zara?’

She looked at him, eyes narrowed ever so slightly. It was her Ralph Lauren stare: part anxious, part vacant, detached but intense. Was she still playing or not? Even she couldn’t tell anymore.

His dark blond brows knotted in a frown. ‘I know what this is and what this isn’t but ... ’ He watched her stiffen. ‘I know you don’t feel the same but I need you to know.’

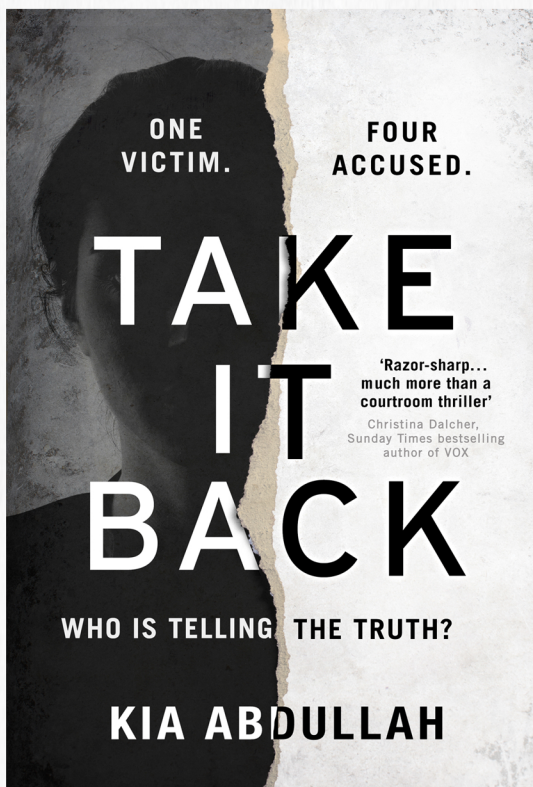
‘Luka—’

‘You don’t have to say anything.’ He leaned forward and pulled her into his arms.

Against her instinct, she let him hold her. If she was going to use him as a salve, at least she could let him heal.

‘I love you,’ he whispered.

She swallowed hard, as if rising emotion could be curbed at the throat. She held him tight, knowing full well that it was time to let go.



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