



THE CARAKSAY
BROTHERHOOD
BOOK 7

SAVAGE JUSTICE

INTERNATIONAL BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

ASHE BARKER

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ASHE BARKER BOOKS

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Warning : This book contains sexually explicit content which is suitable only for mature readers. If such content upsets you, please do not purchase this book

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Nico is no typical hero. He's a skilled marksman, an assassin with a past shrouded in the murky world of organised crime. But when he witnesses a child being abducted, his sense of duty overrides his reluctance to get involved. The stakes escalate when the same child appears on his doorstep in the dead of night, desperately seeking his help.

Molly, a successful professional artist and a fiercely protective mother, doesn't condone Nico's way of life, but she is profoundly grateful for his unexpected intervention when her children's lives are at risk. She has made a vicious enemy, shattering the tranquility of her carefully ordered world. She's out of her depth, in need of protection and despite all his faults, Nico offers that.

With danger lurking in every corner, she must lean on Nico and his deadly skills for the safety of her family. As tensions rise and threats escalate, Molly grapples with trust and her own code of ethics—can she rely on these violent men to shield her loved ones? Should she?

Amid the chaos, an unexpected connection blossoms, adding a new layer of complexity to an already tense situation. Can Nico and Molly navigate this tumultuous path and emerge with their lives and their hearts intact?

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CHAPTER 1

Nico

“YOU NEED TO BUY WHAT?”

“Something liquorice flavoured.”

“What sort of a something?” I send a bemused glance Tony’s way. “You don’t even like the stuff.”

“But Jenna does. It’s her latest craving, and a step up from crunching ice cubes.”

“Ice cubes?” I’m at a loss.

“Yes, but that was last week. Megan thinks it may be due to iron deficiency, so I’m stocking up on brown rice and beans as well.”

“Sounds revolting. How’s young Robbie taken the news that he’s going to be a big brother?”

Tony grimaces. “Not well. He was convinced we’d be sending him away now we’re going to have a baby of our own. I sat down with him yesterday and tried to explain. Not sure he bought it.”

“Poor kid. He’s had a lot of upheaval and disappointment in his life.”

The boy’s only seven years old and had a difficult start in life. His mother pretty much ignored him for the first few years he was in her so-called care. Now, she’s doing a ten stretch for prostitution and dealing in stolen goods, and no other extended family has come forward offering to care for him. Jenna and Tony fostered Robbie, and it’s been uphill work, trying to convince a child who has never known a day’s stability in his life that he’s a permanent addition to their household.

Their patience has paid off, though. He's been with them for about a year, and after a slow start he's thrived in their care. I swear he's grown a foot in height, but that's nothing in comparison to the personality transplant they seem to have achieved. He's gone from being quiet and withdrawn, a silent little boy scared of his own shadow, to a bright, curious, confident child. To call him outgoing would be pushing it, but he's certainly blossomed.

I guess the penny will drop eventually, that he's staying, but in the meantime, he has to get his head around the prospect of a new baby due in just four months.

"Pull up over there. I'll nip into that newsagent's for a bag of humbugs or whatever."

"Humbugs? Christ..."

I swallow my disgust and signal to pull in to the kerb just as a bunch of children in school uniform descend on the shop. "Looks like you'll have a wait while that lot rummage through the penny tray."

"Penny tray? What century are you living in, arsehole? There's nothing for less than fifty pence nowadays." He opens the passenger door and exits the SUV. "I'll growl at them and get to the front of the queue."

"You do that." I settle back to wait.

In groups of twos, and threes the schoolchildren trickle out clutching cans of fizzy drinks, chocolate bars, and the occasional bag of crisps. They congregate at the bus stop just in front of where I'm parked, chattering loudly, pushing and shoving one another. I'm relieved when the bus arrives and they all pile on. The peace is heavenly.

The bus moves away just as a girl on her own emerges from the shop. She runs for the bus, but it's already trundling off down the road. She stands for a moment watching it go, then plonks herself on the now deserted bench seat in the bus shelter.

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel. So much for growling and scaring the kids. I suppose I should be grateful Tony didn't just produce his Glock and wave that about. I'm considering a blast on the horn to hurry him up when a white van pulls into the empty bus bay a couple of yards ahead of me. Some delivery guy wanting a pack of cigarettes, probably. Serve him right if the next bus comes along and blocks him in.

The driver gets out and wanders around to unlock the rear door of his van. *Ah, a drop-off.* He opens one of the double doors but makes no attempt to unload anything. Instead, he strolls away from the vehicle.

Moron. He's asking to be robbed. A few years ago, I might have obliged him myself...

He makes a beeline for the girl at the bus stop, stops to talk to her. Asking for directions, maybe?

She shakes her head.

He says something else and gestures to his van.

The girl shakes her head again, harder, and this time gets up and sets off walking down the road.

The man follows the couple of paces it takes to bring her level with the open rear door, then without warning he grabs her, lifts her off her feet, and hurls her in the back of the van. He slams the door shut and sprints around to the driver's door.

Holy fuck! Now I do blast the horn. Anything to attract attention, anyone's attention, but no one else saw what just happened. All they know is there's some idiot who must have got a new horn for Christmas.

Tony exits the shop at a dead run. I see him coming and throw open his door.

"Get in."

"What the fuck's going on?" He almost rolls on top of me as I lurch out into the road to a chorus of screeching brakes and road rage.

"Fucker in front just snatched a kid."

He gapes at me and grabs for his seat belt. "You sure?"

"Course I'm fucking sure. A girl, at the bus stop. About ten, I'd say, with long blonde hair in a ponytail. He spoke to her, and she started walking away. He snatched her and bundled her in the back of his van."

The van in question is just turning right, about a hundred yards ahead of us. I put my foot down.

Tony stops asking questions. Instead, he pulls out his phone and speed dials our boss, Jack Morgan. He repeats what I just told him.

"Yeah, we're chasing. The bastard is still in sight. Okay, will do." He hangs up. "We're to intercept and recover the kid whatever way we need to. No police, but he doesn't mind if we leave the fucker for them to pick up later."

Makes sense. We never directly engage with the police if we can avoid it. We handle shit ourselves and generally do a better job. There's less red tape using our methods. But once this is all over, and assuming we can get to her in time, the kid will definitely tell her parents what happened. And her family

will definitely phone the cops, so they're going to get involved. But by then, we'll be long gone, our civic duty done.

"He's heading out of the city," Tony observes unnecessarily.

I can see where we're going, and I don't like it. We're passing a load of empty industrial sheds, ideal territory for concealing a prisoner. We should know, we've used such places ourselves often enough.

"He knows he's got company," Tony breathes.

"Yeah." The van is weaving between the sheds, trying to lose us. Not a chance, I'm sticking to him like glue. "There's a rifle under the seat. Pass me it."

"You can't shoot at them. What about the kid?" Nevertheless, he's already reaching for the weapon.

"I'll take out the rear tyres."

"On the move?" He checks that the gun is loaded. "I know you're a good shot, but maybe I should—"

"On the move if I have to. Pop the sunroof."

I'm not just a good shot. I'm a marksman, a trained sniper. Cut my teeth in the army doing tours of Afghanistan and Iraq before I decided to try my luck in Civvy Street. This should be a doddle.

I hit the gas hard, and the SUV surges forward, gaining a good twenty yards or so. I pick my moment, a long, straight channel between two corrugated concrete walls, and stamp on the brakes. The SUV almost stands on its nose, but I'm up, waist height through the sunroof, and levelling the rifle sight. A moment to lock on to the target, to assess the distance, the wind speed, the continuing motion of the white van. Then, I squeeze the trigger.

The nearside rear tyre explodes. The van careers to the left, then to the right as the driver wrestles for control.

I take aim again, and this time hit the offside tyre. The van spins so it's now facing us. The driver is clearly visible, still fighting to keep his vehicle moving.

He realises it's no good and flings open the door. He's down and running.

I track him with the rifle, my finger on the trigger. It would be such a simple matter, and the bastard deserves it...

"I'll get him. You see to the kid." Tony leaps out of the SUV and charges after the van driver. He's gaining on him with every stride, so it's not going to be much of a chase. Tony does an hour in the gym pretty much every day, whereas the man he's following looks like he's a stranger to a bench press,

though not a pork pie, probably.

I drop the rifle on my seat and exit the vehicle as well. I grab a crowbar from the boot, standard enforcer equipment, and approach the van.

“Hey,” I call out, knocking lightly on the rear door. “Don’t be scared. I’m going to get you out of there.” The poor kid must be terrified. She has no idea who I am or what’s coming next.

There’s the sound of scuffling from within, and I think I hear a sob. *Christ.*

I get to work with the crowbar, wedge one end in the seam between the two doors, and haul on it. The metal creases and buckles, but the lock doesn’t give way.

Fuck. I reposition the crowbar, digging deeper, and wrench it around. The lock snaps, and the door flies open.

The girl is there, huddled beside the wheel arch. She’s shaking. Tears stream down her face. She shuffles away from me with a whining sound.

I’m no good with kids, but some sort of instinct kicks in. Trying to get hold of her will only make things worse. I throw the crowbar aside and back off, my hands outstretched.

“My name’s Nico. I saw what happened at the bus stop. I saw that bas—that man grab you. You can get out of there now, if you want.”

She shakes her head.

“That man can’t hurt you. We won’t let him. We need to take you home. Would you like that?”

Her mouth works, but no words come out.

“Your mummy will be wondering where you are. Shall we go and find her?”

She stares at me for several more seconds, then nods.

I hold out my hand. “You’re safe now. Come on out of there.”

She edges forward and has just reached the doors when there’s an ear-splitting scream. Obviously, Tony has his man and he’s dealing with him. The girl freezes, her eyes like saucers.

“That’s what happens to bad men who attack little girls at bus stops,” I explain. “Shall we take you home now?”

To my amazement, she smiles. And nods. She holds out her arms to me, and I lift her down.

I drop to my haunches. “Did he hurt you?” I don’t think he could have. He didn’t have the time or opportunity, she was in the back of the van and he

was driving. Even so, I feel compelled to ask.

She rubs her arm. "I banged my elbow."

"Does it hurt a lot?"

More head shaking. "I lost my bag. I dropped it when... when..."

"I saw." She'd been holding a rucksack when he'd grabbed her. It had fallen to the pavement. "I expect someone will have picked it up for you. Shall we go and see?"

"Okay."

"Would you like to sit in my car for a moment, just until my friend gets back?"

If she says 'no', I'm at a loss. But I'll understand and I won't force the issue. We'll have to fall back on the police after all, though I can't see how we could leave her here on her own for them to find. I don't relish the prospect to explaining the gunshot damage to the van tyres, not to mention whatever injuries Tony has inflicted on the driver.

Talking of which, he saunters back from around a corner, flicking dust off his jeans.

I raise one eyebrow.

"Broke his legs. Both of them. He'll be going nowhere," he whispers, for my ears only. "And I took his phone off him so he can't call for help." He beams at my small companion and offers her his hand. "My name's Tony. What are you called?"

She places her small hand in his. "Lucy."

"Well, Lucy. You've had quite an adventure, but you'll be wanting your tea now, I expect."

"I want my mummy." She's starting to whimper again. Shock, no doubt.

"Let's go and find her, then. Where do you live?"

Lucy rattles off the name of one of the more affluent streets on an outlying upmarket estate in the city. I know the area well, I used to deliver newspapers there when I was a kid, and as a teen I liked to cruise the neighbourhood looking for high-end cars to nick.

Lucy makes no protest about hopping in the back seat of the SUV. I consider sitting next to her but decide that might be a bit overwhelming. I settle for checking her seat belt, then getting back in the driver's seat.

Tony had the good sense to stash the phone he confiscated in the glove box and put the rifle out of sight while I was occupied with Lucy, so we're soon on the road and heading back into Glasgow.

“We’ll be more or less passing Caernbro Ghyll on the way. Could you drop me off?” Tony asks me.

“Got somewhere you need to be?” I ask.

“Jenna’s been feeling off it. I promised I wouldn’t be late. And as I don’t even have the bloody humbugs...”

“Language,” I mutter with a nod towards our passenger in the back. “Fair enough.”

The journey passes in silence, more or less. Lucy seems okay, though I can’t imagine she’s anything other than traumatised. She doesn’t show it, just watches the passing scenery, her nose pressed to the tinted window.

I pull up in front of the huge wrought-iron gates that guard the property at Caernbro Ghyll. The mansion was once the family home of the Savages, our employer, but since the main base had been relocated to the Hebridean island of Caraksay, the house now serves as the mainland headquarters for the Savage empire. It offers storage and office space, state-of-the-art detention and interrogation facilities, and accommodation for those of our soldiers who choose to live there. Which includes both me and Tony.

I open the gates using the remote control in my glove compartment, then drive up to the house.

Tony jumps out, then leans back into the rear window to say goodbye to Lucy.

“It was nice meeting you, Lucy. You take care now.” He gives her a cheery wave and sprints up the front steps, two at a time.

“Does your friend live here?” Lucy asks me as we drive back towards the gates. “It’s very posh.”

“He does. So do I. It’s a big house, but not really that posh. It’s divided into a lot of flats.”

“Oh.” She falls silent, then, “My mummy would paint it.”

“Sorry. What?”

“My mummy paints houses. She’d paint your house if you ask her to.”

“What, like the windows and doors? A decorator?”

“No. All of it. Like in a picture.”

“Ah. She’s an artist?”

Lucy shrugs and is quiet once more.

It’s just a few minutes’ drive to Lucy’s neighbourhood, about three miles from Caernbro Ghyll. I turn into the main thoroughfare through the leafy estate and cruise slowly past the detached suburban homes, looking for the

correct turn-off. "Is it this one?" I ask when I spot what I think is the right street.

"Yes. That's my house." She points to an attractive, modern dormer bungalow sporting a neat lawn and a swing in the front garden.

I twist around in the seat. "Do you want me to come in with you and tell your mummy what happened?"

She chews on her lower lip. "I don't know. Do you think she'll be cross?"

"Yes, but not with you. She'll be cross with that man. She'll want to tell a policeman all about it, and that would be the right thing to do. He needs to be caught and locked up for what he did."

"He'll have run away by now. They'll never catch him."

Not with two broken legs. "He won't have gone anywhere," I assure her. "Tell your mum to tell the police they can find him at the North warehouse on Dockland Way. Can you remember that?"

She repeats the address back to me.

"Good stuff. So, do you want me to come in?" Maybe I ought to, just to make sure someone is at home and she's in safe hands. I unfasten my seat belt.

"No. It's all right. There's my mummy now." She points to a woman standing in the open doorway of the bungalow, a baby in her arms. She's peering suspiciously at my vehicle parked outside her house.

I get out and walk around to open the rear passenger door to let Lucy out. "Off you go then."

She jumps to the pavement, waves to me, and trots off down the path. By the time she reaches her mother, she's weeping again.

I briefly contemplate staying, explaining, but it's all just too complicated, and I can't risk becoming embroiled in the inevitable police investigation. I cut my losses, get back in the car, and do a U-turn.

CHAPTER 2

Molly

“WHO WAS THAT MAN? What were you doing in his car? How many times have I told you...?”

My barrage of fear-fuelled, angry questions dies in my throat when Lucy dashes up the path and throws her arms around my waist. She’s hugging me as though she never expected to see me again, and her shoulders are shaking. She’s crying. No, sobbing. Really sobbing, wretched, heartbroken gulping sobs.

I drop to a crouch, bringing my face level with hers. “Sweetheart? Baby, what’s happened?”

“There was... There was...” She can’t get the words out.

“Okay, slow down. You can tell me. What’s happened to make you so upset?”

“There... There was a man...”

My stomach sinks through the ground. “What man? The man in the car just now?”

She shakes her head. “Not him. Another man, by the bus stop...”

“Did this man scare you? Do something to upset you?” *What man? What the fuck has happened to my darling baby?*

She nods. “He... he put me in his van, and—”

Oh God! I fight off the wave of nausea that threatens to engulf me. I have to stay focussed.

“His van? You mean the car that was outside just now?”

“No. A white van. He locked me in and drove off.”

Dear sweet Jesus. I wrap her in my arms, baby Noah sandwiched between us. I’m going to be sick, I truly am.

“Are you sure? But... how...?” Countless awful images swirl in my head, each more terrifying than the one before.

“Mummy, we need to tell the police where he is.”

“What? Where who is? You mean this man? The one who put you in his van?”

“Yes, Mummy. The police need to go and get him.”

Too fucking right they do! Where’s my phone?

I gather some semblance of coherence and succeed in at least getting to my feet. “Let’s go inside. I’ll phone the police and you can tell me everything...” *Is this even real?*

I locate my phone perched on the fireplace and dial nine-nine-nine.

“Police,” I trot out, in answer to the crisp question about which service I require. I’m put through to the control room, and I briefly recite what Lucy has told me.

“My daughter, she’s ten, got abducted. She’s home now, but she says a man put her in his van and— Yes, she’s all right. No, I don’t think an ambulance is needed. No, she’s still wearing the same clothes. Witnesses? I’m not sure. Yes, okay.”

I reel off our address. A patrol car is on the way to us.

I sit Lucy down on a chair at the kitchen table and place myself opposite. Noah is asleep in my arms, but I reach across to take my little girl’s hand. “Okay. The police will be here soon. Slowly, tell me exactly what happened.”

Her voice is shaky but strangely resolute. “I missed my bus...”

“Okay.”

“So, I sat in the bus shelter to wait for the next one.”

“Right.”

“A van stopped, and a man got out. He asked if I wanted to earn ten pounds. He said I could buy something nice with it.”

I manage to school my features into something resembling calm, though my blood is starting to boil. “And what did you say?”

She glowers at me, affronted. “I said ‘no’.”

“Good girl. Then what happened?”

“He said all I had to do was help him clean out the back of his van. It wouldn’t take long. I told him I couldn’t, I needed to go home. But he kept

on. He said it would only take a minute. I didn't like him. He had a nasty face and a cruel voice. And he was smelly."

"Smelly? What did he smell of?"

She thinks for a moment. "Petrol. He smelt like our garage used to, at the other house. And his hands were dirty."

I nod and try to remain calm even though my stomach is in knots. "What happened next?"

"I got up and started walking home. He followed me and..." She pauses, and her face crumples.

I squeeze her hand. "It's okay, you're safe now. Can you tell me what he did?"

"He picked me up and threw me into the van."

"Oh, dear Lord..."

"Then, he locked the door and drove off."

"Where did he take you. Did he touch you? Do anything to you?" Those horrific images swarm back, and nausea once more threatens to overwhelm me.

"He stopped. Someone was outside the van, knocking on the side."

"Who?"

"Another man. The one you saw. He broke the door and let me out. He had a friend with him, and the friend ran after the man."

"Did he catch him?" I breathe.

"I think so. I heard him scream, then the friend came back on his own."

My head is spinning. "What happened after that?"

A pounding on the door interrupts Lucy's tale. I manage an encouraging smile for her, and go to let the police in. A man and a woman in plain clothes are on my doorstep. The woman flashes a warrant card in front of me and introduces herself as Detective Inspector Judith Russell, and her colleague as Detective Constable James Jackman.

"Come in. Lucy's in the kitchen." I lead them through.

"You must be Lucy." Constable Jackman sits next to her.

He has a nice face, a kind sort of a face. Aged somewhere in his fifties, he has a grandfatherly vibe going on, and I sense Lucy warming to him straight away.

I couldn't say the same for Inspector Russell. A career copper, she's all business, shooting quick-fire questions at my little girl. I know she has a job to do and means well, but I'm relieved when she asks if she can look round

Lucy's bedroom. I can't imagine she'll find anything of use up there, but while she makes herself busy poking about under the bed, Constable Jackman gets to work.

"You've been very brave, Lucy." He gives her a warm smile. "I bet I wouldn't have been as brave as you."

"I was scared..."

"Yes, but that makes you even braver. Anyone can be brave when they're not scared."

"I stopped being scared when the other men came. They were nice to me. They said they'd bring me home. And they did. Mummy saw."

"Okay. And, who were they, these other men?"

"I don't know."

"How many other men were there?"

"Two. They were kind. Except, they weren't kind to the man in the van."

The detective constable's brow creases. "What did they do to him?"

"I don't know. I didn't see. But... I think they hurt him. I didn't care, he was nasty and he deserved it."

Neither me nor the police officer argue with that.

"We need to go and look for this man. Can you tell me more about what he looked like? Did you see where he went?"

I cut in with the details about the smell and the filthy hands. "I wondered if he might be a mechanic," I offer.

Detective Jackman makes a note in his notebook. "Can you remember anything about the van? You said it was white?"

Lucy nods.

"What was inside it?"

"Me."

"Anything else?"

She shakes her head. "It was empty."

"Did you see the number plate?"

"No, but I think it'll still be there. By the warehouse. The wheels were broken."

"I'm sorry. When you say 'broken'...?"

"The tyres were flat. I think that must be why he stopped."

"Okay. And—"

"The North Warehouse. On Dockland Way. That's where the van is. And the man."

We all gape at Lucy, including Inspector Russell who has abandoned her fruitless search of Lucy's room.

"Are you sure?" Detective Jackman asks gently. "Did you see a sign?"

"No. That's what the man said, the one who brought me home. He said to tell the police to go to the North Warehouse on Dockland Street, and the man would be there."

Inspector Russell is on her radio issuing instructions. I gather a police team is to be despatched immediately. Meanwhile, she wants us all to relocate to the police station where they can do the forensic tests.

"Is that absolutely necessary?" I protest. Lucy has been through enough already.

"I'm afraid so, Mrs Lowe. If you could bring a change of clothing for her..."

"But, the baby..." Noah has been relatively quiet up to now, but he'll need feeding in the next hour or so.

"Is there anyone we could call to look after him for you?"

"No. There's no one."

"Well then, if you could also bring what you'll need for him, we'll find you a nice comfortable place to wait."

I bow to the inevitable. "All right. Give us a few minutes..."

THE FAMILY INTERVIEW room down at the police station is actually quite nice. Low sofas in bright primary colours. Toys to play with, cushions and playmats, and a free vending machine dispensing hot and cold drinks. Lucy disappears into a cubicle and changes her clothes. Constable Jackman puts everything she was wearing in a plastic evidence bag and sends the stuff off to the forensic laboratory.

I give Noah his bottle while Lucy goes over her story again.

Someone produces an album full of photographs, and Detective Jackman asks her to pick out anyone who looks like the man who abducted her. Lucy thumbs through the mugshots dutifully but insists he's not in there.

"What about either of the men who helped you? Are they in there?"

"No," she snaps. "Why would they be?"

The detective gentles his tone. "I know they were kind to you, but I think they may not be very nice men either."

"Why would you say that?" I demand. "They probably saved my

daughter's life."

"We found the van, just where Lucy told us it would be. And the man."

"So? That's good, isn't it?"

"The rear tyres had been shot out. And the perpetrator has two suspected broken legs. He's in hospital, under guard, awaiting major surgery."

"Broken legs? I..."

"He says it was done deliberately."

Lucy nods. "I told you I heard the screaming..."

I reach for Lucy's hand. "It's okay, sweetheart."

The constable continues. "So, you see, these are dangerous men, and we need to speak to them. They may have been in the right place at the right time, but they used a firearm and extreme violence. Do you know their names, Lucy?"

Lucy shakes her head but doesn't meet his gaze. Or mine.

"Lucy? Are you sure?" I prompt her.

"I don't know who they were," she insists. "I'm tired now. I want to go home."

"Of course, sweetie, but—"

"Is there anything you can tell us that might help identify these men?" Inspector Russell isn't giving up. "Did you actually see the gun?"

"No. Just the bar that he used to break the door. He dropped that on the ground."

"Yes, we found it. Unfortunately, there were no usable prints on it. Did they wear gloves?"

Lucy shrugs. "Maybe. I can't remember." More averting her gaze, more shifting in her seat.

And I know for certain. My daughter is lying to the police.

"Lucy, are you quite sure? It's important you tell us everything you can remember. You're not in any trouble, we just want to know the truth."

"I'm telling you the truth. I want to go home." She starts to cry all over again.

"Can we leave it for now?" I ask. "Maybe I could take her home, and if she remembers anything more, I'll call you."

"Really, we could do with going back to the scene, with Lucy, while it's still light. She can talk us through everything that happened..."

"I know that, but surely..."

"It won't take long. And we'll drop you off at home after."

I can see there'll be no compromise on this, and I don't blame them. Evidence needs to be collected while it's fresh. I wrap my arm round Lucy. "Well, okay then. Let's just get it over with."

THE FORENSIC TEAM and two dog handlers are already at the scene when we arrive. The van is still there, skewed across a rough track between two buildings. I immediately see what they mean about the tyres. They're shredded, and the rear door is buckled from being forced open. The door still swings on its hinges.

Lucy, me and Noah are in the back seat of the police car. We get out, and Lucy makes her way to the van. She peers inside.

"That's where I sat, by the wheel. I thought... I thought I..." Her voice breaks.

I give her a hug. "It's over. You're safe."

"What if they hadn't been there? Those men?"

I shudder. If they hadn't been there, this would have all ended very differently. Bullets, crowbars, broken legs. None of that matters to me. They saved my baby, and that's all I care about. I turn to Inspector Russell.

"Can we just get it finished, whatever you need to do. This is upsetting Lucy. I need to get her home."

"We'll be as quick as we can, Mrs Lowe. So, if Lucy could just run through the incident once more..."

She does, bless her. My little girl trots out the same tale yet again, this time pointing to the precise locations. "This is where their car was parked. Over there is where the man ran to, and the other man chased him. He dropped the crowbar just there."

The forensic team take photographs. They crawl about on the ground peering at tyre tracks and taking casts of footprints. They examine the van, extracting fibres and specks of Christ knows what and bagging it all up in their little plastic packets.

At last, they concede that they have all they can find here. Still, they persist. "Are you quite sure you can't remember anything about the other two men? What did they look like?"

"They were tall, and they had dark hair," is the best Lucy can come up with. Or that's all she's saying.

I chip in what I recall from my brief sighting of one of them outside my

house. “Perhaps thirty or so. Shoulder-length hair. Athletic build. No, I didn’t see his face or his eye colour. He was wearing a leather biker jacket and jeans. I didn’t notice his shoes.” I don’t add that he was sort of attractive, in a ‘bad boy’ sort of a way. That’s not relevant, after all. “It was the vehicle that drew my attention. It was black, with tinted windows. And big, one of those fancy four-wheel-drive monsters. No, I didn’t think to check the number plate. I was too stunned when I spotted my daughter getting out of it.”

Detective Jackman beckons a uniformed officer over. “Constable Leeming will drive you home. We’ll be in touch. And you need to phone me if you remember anything else, any detail, however small. Here’s my card.”

I pocket the card and follow Lucy into the back of the patrol car. Noah is asleep in my arms and doesn’t stir the entire way home. Thank Heaven for small mercies. Lucy is deathly quiet, too, and I’m less happy about that but I let her be.

“I’m going to bed,” she announces, as soon as we get home.

“Wait.” I settle Noah in the Moses basket and gesture for Lucy to come and sit with me on the sofa. “I know you, and I know when you’re not telling the truth.”

She spins around to face me. “It did happen. It did. Don’t you believe me?”

“Of course I believe you. Every word of it. It’s what you’re not telling me that has me wondering.”

“I don’t understand. I told you—”

“Who were those men? I know you know more than you’ve told the police.”

“I didn’t—”

“Lucy.” My voice is laced with a note of caution. “If you don’t want to tell me, then say so. Don’t lie to me.”

She hangs her head. “I don’t want them to get in trouble. The policeman said they weren’t nice, so I thought...”

“I get it. You liked them. I can understand that. Did they tell you not to say who they were? Did they threaten you?”

She shakes her head. “Nico said I was to tell you what happened, and the police. And he made me learn the name of the warehouse.”

“Nico? Was that his name?”

She nods. “You can’t tell anyone.”

“I should tell the police.”

“No! They didn’t want to talk to the police.”

I’ll bet they didn’t.

“Please, you have to promise.” She grasps my arm. “It’s a secret.”

I draw in a deep breath, then slowly nod. One good turn deserves another, after all.

“Okay. A secret.”

CHAPTER 3

Molly

“THIS IS MY FAVOURITE BOOK,” Lucy whispers, clutching my arm to pull the book closer so she can see the words on the page for herself. “It’s got me in it.”

“It certainly does,” I agree. I know this is one of the reasons she loves *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* so much, as well as the fact it’s a cracking good yarn. I must have read it to her four times already, and it never gets old. I swear, she knows the story word for word.

It’s been a month since the vile encounter with the man in the white van, and she still has occasional nightmares about what happened. It’s not every night now, just once or twice a week. Even so, if I could get my hands on the lowlife who scared her like that...

I grit my teeth. He’s in custody at least, and the law will take its course. Eventually.

“Can we get to the bit where Edmund kills all the wicked creatures?” Lucy yawns and snuggles back against her Barbie pillow.

“We can’t read that much tonight,” I point out. “Lucy’s only just found her way through the wardrobe. Shall I go on and we’ll see how far we get before you fall asleep?”

She nods happily, so I continue with the story. By the time Narnia Lucy encounters the faun, her namesake is fast asleep.

I slip an old supermarket receipt between the pages to mark our place and set the battered paperback down on the bedside table. I know full well that

when she wakes up in the morning Lucy will be reading ahead, and tomorrow at bedtime I'll pretend not to have noticed and we'll pick up from where we left off.

I get to my feet and creep to the door, closing it quietly behind me.

I open my own bedroom door before I go back downstairs. I want to check on Noah, also fast asleep in his cot at the foot of my bed. It's not yet nine o'clock. I can get in a good couple of hours in my studio before I turn in for the night.

I suppose to call my cluttered conservatory a studio is something of an overstatement, but who cares? It's where my workshop is set up, and the light's good in there. Not at this time in the evening, admittedly, but usually. And artificial light will do for what I want to do this evening.

I'm just starting a new project, so this is the design and scoping stage. Sketching, measuring, selecting the right medium for the work, sourcing materials. The fun part comes later, when it's time to actually craft the piece.

I'm working on a commission from an architect based in Bristol, a guy I know and do quite a lot of work for, on and off. He's remodelling an office block and wants an original piece for the foyer. The client deals in arcade gaming machines, so the subject matter needs to be in keeping. I'm thinking some sort of superhero, but it will need to be bespoke. I don't want to be sued by Marvel. I'm leaning towards an animal theme, maybe a stag or an eagle...

I lose track of time as I try out various ideas, sketching figures and facial details to see what seems to fit. Even though I reject pretty much everything at this stage, it's not wasted effort. The ideas always stick, and I often come back to them at a later date, in a completely different context. I have boxes and boxes of half-formed ideas and concepts just waiting for me to say 'Ah-hah, I have the very thing...'

I glance up and catch sight of the clock on the wall. *Fuck, it's after one in the morning.* I need to be up early tomorrow, Lucy's due at her swimming club by nine, and it takes at least an hour to get both kids ready.

I stretch and set my charcoals aside. I've done well, the ideas are crystallising, and by tomorrow my plans will have settled. I just need to sleep on it, let the images form in my subconscious somehow, and I'll be ready to pour it all out into a sculpted form. I daresay there are psychiatrists somewhere who make a fortune out of understanding and explaining the creative process. Good luck to them. I just know how it works for me. Gather ideas, any and every idea, sweep them together into a pile, leave them to

fester, then, bingo! The right answer pops up, and I know I'm onto winner.

That's why folks pay good money for my work. That's why my exhibitions always sell out. That's why my bank balance stays healthy and my kids want for nothing. Added to which, I love what I do.

Okay, I used to love teaching, too, and that's had to fall by the wayside recently, but I can still work and earn a good living. Mustn't complain.

I wander through to the kitchen. I usually like to take a cup of tea up to bed with me, so I hit the switch on the kettle and take my tea caddy from the cupboard. I prefer real tea, the loose-leaf stuff. I tip a couple of spoonfuls into the teapot, another concession to tradition. No mashing it in a mug for me, thank you. The kettle clicks off automatically, and in the ensuing silence I lift it by the handle.

And I hear it.

The faint sound of a door opening, then closing.

Lucy? I cock my ear, listening for her footsteps on the landing above me. Nothing.

I pour the water into the pot and drop the lid on, then I go to the kitchen door and call up the stairs, "You okay, sweetheart?"

There's no response, but I don't fret. I'm going up in a moment anyway. I half turn to reach for the fridge when my world goes dark.

I open my mouth to scream, but no sound emerges. It's as though my vocal cords have been cut. I can't breathe, I'm suffocating. I claw at my face, and my fingers encounter rough sacking, thick, smelly hessian, covering my mouth and nose.

Terror surges through my veins. I'm fighting in earnest, fighting for my life and my children's lives, thrashing and kicking and squirming, jabbing with my elbows, my heels, bucking as hard as I can to be free.

It's hopeless. My attacker is twice my size and built like a brick wall. He flings me against the fridge, then over the table in the middle of the kitchen. My teapot crashes to the tiled floor, and the splash of near-boiling water splatters my bare feet. He forces me to my knees and drags my hands behind my back. He secures them with something, then shoves me right to the floor and ties my ankles, too. Then he rolls me onto my back and grabs my chin through the hood.

"Where is he?"

The tone is guttural, a vicious snarl from a voice I don't recognise.

I try to answer, but still my throat is frozen. I croak something

incomprehensible.

“Answer me, bitch. Or do I need to find him for myself?”

Who? What...?

He slaps me across the cheek. I see stars, despite the cloying darkness. I’m going to pass out, I know it, from fear and lack of oxygen. I gasp, fighting for air, battling to make some sort of sense of this.

“I want the brat, that’s all. You know you can’t keep him so you might as well give him up.”

My baby. He’s after my precious baby... I manage to make a sound of denial, of refusal, which earns me a fist to my face again.

“Fair enough. I’ll get him myself.”

Suddenly the weight on my chest lifts. There are footsteps, a heavy, clunking tread, moving away. He thumps up the stairs, and I fight to get to my feet. I have to stop him...

I roll over, then struggle to get to my knees but can’t manage any more. I throw back my head and let out the first real sound I’ve made since the attack began, an unearthly howl of utter, helpless anguish. My baby is in danger, and I can’t do a thing to help him, to protect him.

I should have known this day would come, but I ran from it. I ran and I hid, and I thought I could keep us all safe. I was a fool, and now look.

I wince and cry out again at the sounds from upstairs. There’s a crash, then the slamming of a door. Another door. Then the pounding of footsteps as he clatters back down the stairs.

“Where is he, you cunt?”

“Who? I don’t—”

“The baby. What did you do with the fucking baby, bitch?”

“The baby? I...” Bewilderment overwhelms me. Surely, he must have found him. Noah was in his cot, not hidden. And what about Lucy? Is she all right?

“You need to tell me what you did with that fucking kid. Who has him? Some relative? Friends? Where the fuck is he?”

“I don’t know...” *And if I did, I wouldn’t be telling you.*

He seizes me by the shoulders and hauls me back onto my feet, then shakes me like a rag doll. I swear my brain rattles in my skull, and by the time he lets go of me I drop to the floor again, my knees turned to jelly. I curl into a ball and try to shrink away but can’t escape the boot landing in my ribs. Shooting pain erupts in my right side, I’m really struggling to breathe now,

and it all seems like just too much effort. Gratefully, I let myself drift into unconsciousness.

When I come round, I'm upright, on a chair. I have no way of knowing where I am as the hood is still over my head. He's still here; I can hear him moving about.

I remain silent. As long as he thinks I'm out cold, he might leave me alone. I'm desperately worried about Lucy and Noah, but I take the view that wherever they are, it's better than being in the clutches of this madman. I can only think that somehow Lucy managed to get Noah and make a run for it.

Clever, brave girl. And maybe she can find help, send someone to save me.

Otherwise...

"You're awake. Took long enough. Do you think I have all night to fuck about here, with you?" He grabs the hood and hauls my head back until I think he means to snap my neck. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," I groan, the sound muffled beneath the heavy sacking.

"Lying bitch."

His voice has risen to a near screech. Surely someone will hear him. Then I remember the family next door are on holiday and the old lady on the other side is deaf as a post. No one is coming to help me.

"It's true. I never—" My stuttering attempt to speak meets an abrupt end when he slaps me again. I promptly pass out once more.

When I come round again, I'm on the floor. My head feels as though it's stuffed with cotton wool, and there's a roaring sound in my ears. I drift in and out of consciousness and wonder how long it takes to actually die of terror.

Please, God, let it be quick. And let this animal never find my babies.

"I'm going to ask you once more, then I'm going to lose my temper. You won't like that. Where did you stash the brat?"

I don't answer.

Roughly, he pulls me to a sitting position. "Last chance."

"Fuck you," is the best I can manage through the fuzzy blur which has become my reality.

He lets go of me, and the next thing I hear is the distinct sound of running water. So, we're still in my kitchen...?

He drags me to my feet and shoves me backwards. My bound ankles slide along the floor, and something solid hits me in the small of my back. He forces me back still further, bowing my body over the whatever it is until my

feet leave the floor and I'm dangling. The running water is very close now. Is he about to drown me in my own kitchen sink?

The utter shock of water hitting my face and cascading around my head quite literally takes my breath away. I'm drowning, gasping for air and finding only cold, wet sacking. My mouth fills with water, and it tastes foul, stale. My nostrils, too, as water forces its way in, everywhere.

Panic grips me. I'm fighting, kicking and squirming, twisting this way and that in a vain attempt to escape the torrent choking me. My head is upside down, the water is everywhere, I start to pass out and I'm glad of the respite.

"Now will you tell me?"

I'm on the floor again, shivering, gulping in moist air as my body refuses to give up, clutching at any last wisp of oxygen. I shake my head. "C-can't..."

"Okay. We go again." He hauls me upright and bends my spine backwards over the sink.

"Please," I beg. "No, please—"

The cold water hits me again, and if anything, this is worse than before. I'm spluttering, gasping, fast losing the battle for air. My limbs are heavy, there's no fight left in me anymore. I allow my boneless body to submit to the inevitable and go limp in his arms.

CHAPTER 4

Nico

“How’s THE training going with Frankie?”

I glance across at my boss in the passenger seat. Ethan Savage rarely asks idle questions. He’s going somewhere with this.

I try for a non-committal response. “Okay, I suppose. He’s enthusiastic.”

Ethan snorts. “I’m wanting a soldier, not a Labrador puppy. Can he hit a fucking target?”

“Some of the time,” I concede.

Ethan growls in his throat. “Some of the time’ won’t get him out of trouble. And it’ll be no good to the men relying on him.”

I try again. I genuinely like the boy. Frankie Sillitoe is our latest recruit, just seventeen years old and mine to train in the noble art of marksmanship. Sadly, it’s a lost cause. We’re six weeks in, and he’s technically competent and that’s about it. Young Frankie can load and unload his weapon with the best of them. He can manage to note the wind speed and general direction but somehow entirely fails to take any of that into account when he pulls the trigger. I suspect he’d struggle to hit a barn door at three paces. Reluctantly, I have to share that feedback with the boss.

“I think Jed was right,” I offer by way of mitigation. “Frankie’s better suited to a desk job.” The boy is an IT wizard, a hacker extraordinaire. A firearm is wasted on him but put him behind a laptop and he soars. “Maybe he could concentrate on making us money on the dark web.”

Ethan furrows his brow. “I want something more... structured for him.

He's a loose cannon, lots of skill, and enthusiasm as you say, but no real idea how powerful that can be. He's a bull in a china shop, a danger to himself and us."

"He's young," I remind him needlessly. "He'll grow out of it."

"I'm thinking of sending him back to school," Ethan replies. "He could get some qualifications, mix with others like himself."

I do a double take. Frankie dropped out of formal education at fourteen. He has no educational qualifications to his name, and I can't see him sitting through double maths if his life depended on it. Frankie may be brilliant in his own way, but he's a stranger to quadratic equations.

Ethan goes on. He's clearly been inspired by tonight's fairly successful bit of business. We've just concluded a deal to supply high-end stolen cars to a firm in Eastern Europe. Japanese models, mainly. It's a lucrative trade, and one which we've so far failed to crack. This latest alliance should boost the Savage finances considerably, not that we were exactly short. But business is business, and every little helps.

Ethan expands on his notion. "Megan and Casey could tutor him, get him through his GCSEs, at least enough to meet the entry requirements. I know a couple of people. I could get him a place at Strathclyde University. He'll always be a misfit, but at least he could be a well-educated misfit. He'd be more use to me, then."

"You want him to get a degree?" I'm still not sure I'm quite catching his drift. A university education isn't normally on the essential requirements list for a job as a mobster.

"At least one. I think he might enjoy it. It'd keep him out of mischief for a couple of years, and when he's finished, he'll at least know what's what. The puppet who looks up and sees the strings."

I let out a low whistle. "Fuck, boss. It's a lot. Are you sure?"

"No, but I am sure he's no use to me or himself as things stand. He can do better. A bit of formal training will do him good, hone his talents, give him direction."

He could be right, though young Frankie isn't the most obvious academic. Still, what do I know? My education was completed on the streets and in the Parachute Regiment.

I nod and signal to make the turn into the main gates at Caernbro Ghyll. "I can see that. I hope Frankie can, too. Will you talk to him?" I ask.

"As soon as I— What the fuck?"

I see it at the same time as he does, the small figure dressed in white, flitting in front of the car. I slam on the brakes and bring the vehicle to a shuddering halt.

“Did I hit her?”

“Don’t think so...” Ethan is already climbing out of the car.

I follow, and we both charge around to scan the road in front.

“There.” I spot her, a small slim girl, a child, hunched by the gatepost, shielding her eyes from the dazzling light cast by our headlights.

“It’s a kid,” Ethan mutters. “What the fuck is a kid doing out here on her own?”

“She’s not on her own,” I reply. “Look there.”

Ethan’s gaze follows to where I’m pointing, the tiny, wriggling bundle just visible at the foot of our outer wall.

“Holy fuck.” Ethan closes the distance between himself and the girl and crouches in front of her. “Did you get lost, honey?”

I pick up the baby. He’s awake and simply stares up at me from within the cocoon of his snug blanket. I stroll over to join the other two.

The girl shakes her head in answer to Ethan’s question. I peer at her; she seems familiar.

“I’m looking for him,” she says, pointing to me.

Ethan squints up at me. “Do you know her?”

I start to deny it, then it hits me. “Lucy!”

She stands up straight, to her full height of four feet nothing. “I need you to come to my house and help my mummy.”

“Your mummy?” I’m at a loss. “What’s wrong with your mummy?”

“She’s at my house. The bad man is there.” She reaches for my hand. “You have to come quick. I think he’ll hurt her.”

“What is this?” Ethan demands. “You know this kid?”

“She’s the one Tony and I rescued a few weeks back. The abduction?”

He slowly nods. “I remember it. Jack filled me in.” He drops to his haunches again. “Are you saying that man has come back?”

“No. Not him. A different man. He broke in our house and tied my mummy up.”

“Jesus.” Ethan straightens, all business suddenly. He reaches for his phone. “Do you know where they live?”

“Yeah, I took her home. It’s not far...”

He selects a number on his speed dial. It’s answered immediately. “Jack?

I need men at the gate. We have a... a situation. Oh, and Ruth, too. Yes, wake her up.” He ends the call and turns his attention to Lucy again. “Someone is coming to take care of you and your brother. They’ll take you inside and you’ll be nice and warm. And safe. Nico and I will go to your house. Is that okay?”

“You promise? You’ll go straight away?”

“We will.”

I hand the baby to Ethan. I’m already sprinting back to the vehicle to turn it around. I can see lights appearing in the house, and there are men charging down the drive to join us. Jack, Tony, Aaron, followed by half a dozen soldiers. Ruth, Jack’s wife, is there, too. And Jenna, Tony’s girlfriend. The huge iron gates slide apart, and reinforcements pour out into the road.

Two more vehicles appear, and the men pile in.

Ruth asks no questions, simply wraps her arms around the shivering child and ushers her through the gates. Jenna takes the baby from Ethan and follows them. He jumps back into the passenger seat next to me. Tony and Aaron are in the back.

I put my foot down, leading the convoy the couple of miles to the smart estate where I dropped Lucy off a few weeks earlier. “It was a bungalow,” I mutter, “on the main road. One of those with an upstairs. There was a swing in the garden...”

It’s a ten-minute drive, but we cover it in five. I spot the house and pull up close by. The others glide to a halt behind me.

The place is in darkness from the front, but there’s the dim glow of a light somewhere at the rear. On instinct, we leave a couple of men at the front, but most of us head for the back. We spot the broken dining room French window at the side of the house.

“Looks like that’s where he got in,” I murmur to Ethan who is right behind me.

He nods grimly and draws his weapon. I do the same.

The rear door is locked, but the light is coming from that room. The blinds are closed, and I can hear the sound of gushing water within. A burst pipe or a leak, perhaps.

I briefly contemplate knocking but remember the broken window and the terrified child. By mutual consent, Ethan and I level our shit-kickers against the door and set to booting it in. It gives way on the second blow and bursts open.

I don't know what I expected to see, but it wasn't this. A woman is bent backwards over the sink, held there by a hulking brute of a man, her face under the gushing cold tap. A thick hood is over her head, and she's bound, helpless. Limp. She looks to be unconscious. Or dead.

Fuck. Are we too late?

The man whirls around to face us, his features contorted into a snarl. Ethan makes short work of him, planting a bullet in his gut. He topples, screaming, to the tiled floor.

While others check the rest of the house, I make a dash for the woman and pull her from the torrent. I lower her to the floor and tug the hood from her head. Her eyes are closed. She lies motionless in my arms.

"Is she breathing?" Aaron drops to his knees next to me.

"Not sure." I lean in but can detect no sign of life. "Jesus Christ," I cover her mouth with mine and blow four short quick puffs of air into her lungs.

"Again," Aaron urges.

I repeat, then settle into a steadier rhythm. I'm dimly aware that our men are dragging the big guy out. He'll be transferred to the kill room at Caernbro Ghyll, assuming he survives the journey there. My attention is focussed on the lifeless woman before me, Lucy's mother.

"Come on," I urge. "Breathe. You need to breathe. Lucy needs you. You can't die, not now."

"Do you want me to take over for a while?" Aaron offers.

"No, I've got this." I lean in again and almost miss the faint quiver of response. Her chest moves, just a little, but enough. "She's back."

"Well done, bro." Aaron slaps me on the back. "That was close."

We watch, and her breathing slowly strengthens. Her pallor brightens, colour returns to her features. Her lips had been blue, but they fade to a healthier pink again as the circulation is restored.

"I've asked Megan to fly over. She'll be at the mansion within the hour. Let's get her back there." Ethan is standing over us. "I've got a team on their way here to clean up and make the place secure."

I nod my agreement. Lucy's mum needs medical attention, but a regular hospital is out of the question. We don't need the hassle of explaining the gunshot wound, or the waterboarding or our involvement generally. The Richmond Clinic don't ask questions, but that's too far away, so our in-house doctor is the best alternative. Megan is based on Caraksay, but it's a shortish hop by helicopter. By the time we get back to Caernbro Ghyll, she'll be more

or less here.

The woman is breathing fairly well but showing no sign of regaining consciousness. That might be a blessing. Whilst I was occupied giving her the kiss of life, Aaron has sliced through the cable ties which bound her wrists and ankles. I wince at the vicious, blood-stained weals left by the sharp plastic.

She's petite, and I have no difficulty lifting her even though she's a dead weight. By the time we emerge into the chilly night air our other vehicles have departed. It's just me, Ethan, and Aaron, and the woman whose name we don't even know.

"I'll drive," Ethan announces.

I lift her onto the rear seat, then slide in next to her. "Right. Let's go."

The journey back is taken at a somewhat more sedate pace, and our passenger is starting to stir by the time we crunch up the gravel drive and come to a halt in front of the entrance. She opens her eyes when I ease her back into my arms to exit the car.

"Who...?" she murmurs.

"It's okay, you're safe now." I carry her up the steps, then into the entry hallway.

Lucy comes barrelling out of the drawing room, Ruth at her heels.

"Mummy! Mummy..." She's crying pitifully, the terrifying events of this night obviously catching up with her.

It's not lost on any of us that she's a child of just ten who was so traumatised by whatever was going on at home that she ran three miles in the middle of the night, to a stranger's house, seeking help.

"Wake up, Mummy. Wake up. Please, wake up. What happened to her?"

The woman in my arms reaches for her little girl. I let her feet drop to the floor but keep my arms around her, holding her upright so she can give Lucy a hug.

"She refused to go to bed until you got back," Ruth explains. "The little boy is upstairs. It's lucky Jenna and Tony bought a cot already. I borrowed it and put it in a guest room. I thought they might be best if they're all together."

"Yes. Good thinking," Ethan agrees. "Let Megan have look at her when she arrives but leave everything else until the morning. Tell Megan to patch up the guy downstairs, too, at least enough to keep him alive until we have a chance to talk to him."

“Sounds like a plan. Shall we get your mummy somewhere more comfortable, Lucy?”

Despite tonight’s traumas, she’s a sensible kid and sees the wisdom in what’s been suggested. Lucy disengages herself enough for me to lift her mother into my arms again and head for the main stairs. Ruth leads the way.

The woman is fast regaining her senses, and naturally enough has questions. “Who are you? What is this place? That man... is he...?” She shudders. “He tried to kill me.”

“We saw. But you’re safe now. Lucy came and fetched help. You’ve no need to worry about him.”

“The police. We need to...”

“We’ll deal with all of that. You just need to get some rest, recover. This is your room. See, the baby is here already.”

The sight of the sleeping infant has a calming effect. As soon as I set her down, she totters over to the cot, grabs the side and clings to it, gazing down at the child within.

“Thank you,” she murmurs. “Thank you, thank you...”

“I’ll help her into bed and keep an eye on her from here if you want to get some sleep,” Ruth offers.

I’m about to refuse but bite my tongue. I suspect Ruth’s gentle, patient presence is more what’s needed right now. “Thanks,” I mutter, though it feels wrong, somehow, to relinquish either of them into the care of another.

I do it, though. I leave them in one of the guest bedrooms and make my way down to the kitchen where the rest of the men are assembled.

“We could interrogate him tonight,” Aaron is suggesting. “He might bleed out by the morning.”

“Fair point,” Ethan agrees. “I’ll leave that with you, then.” He turns to me as I enter the room. “She all sorted for the night?”

“Seems to be. Ruth’s with her.”

“Has she said anything?”

“No, and I didn’t ask. I don’t even know her name.”

“Molly,” Jenna puts in. “Molly Lowe. Lucy told us that much while you were out. She also told us what happened.”

“Okay?” I help myself to a mug of coffee from the jug on the hotplate. “Go on, then.”

“Lucy was in bed, asleep. Seems she was woken up by the sound of glass breaking downstairs. She got out of bed and went to look. She watched from

the top of the stairs and saw the man climb in through the window, and she was listening outside the kitchen door when he grabbed her mother. She told us he was asking for the baby. Noah. And Molly was refusing to answer.”

“What about Lucy’s father? Where was he when all this was happening?”

“There’s no dad on the scene. It’s just the woman and her two kids.” She sweeps her gaze among us all. “Thing is, Lucy didn’t seem surprised by the break-in, as if strange men turn up in the middle of the night, demanding babies every day.”

“What are you saying?”

“Just that it seems odd. Don’t you think so?”

I have to agree that it is. Bloody queer.

Jenna goes on. “It seemed as though she was expecting it. Anyway, when the attack started, she ran back upstairs and got the baby out of his cot, then made a run for it through the broken French window. She came here because she thought you might be able to help.”

“Why not the police?”

“Not sure. She clearly had more faith in you.”

“How did she know where to come?” Ethan wants to know.

“I gather you must have dropped Tony off here,” Jenna clarifies, “while she was in the car before. She remembered.”

“Bright kid,” Ethan snarls. “Even so, that was careless.”

He’s right. My bad. “Sorry, boss.”

“She’d just arrived when you found her. It’s lucky you came back when you did.”

That’s true. A minute or so later and it would have been too late for her mother.

I’m still trying to get my head around all of this. “I’m amazed no one saw her. I mean, she made her way along a main road, a small child on her own with a baby, at nearly two in the morning. Why did no one stop?”

“She told me she hid every time she heard a car. She was scared it might be him.”

“Fucking hell,” I breathe. “Poor kid.”

Aaron downs the dregs of his coffee. “I’m going for a word with that fuckwit downstairs. Fancy coming?”

“Right behind you, bro.” I wouldn’t miss it for the world.

CHAPTER 5

Nico

THE GROANING REACHES us long before we arrive at the cell where Tony and Jack dumped our other guest. I pause at the door to peer through the small, grilled window. He's on his side on the stone floor, a pool of blood slowly spreading to cover the flags. I can't see him being with us for much longer.

"I'll find out if Megan has arrived yet." I check my phone but can't get a signal down here.

"Not to worry. Ethan'll send her down as soon as she's checked out Molly and Lucy."

Aaron keys in the number to unlock the cell door, and I follow him inside.

The man starts screaming as soon as he sees us. "Help me. I need help. A doctor..." He grasps his stomach as though he can somehow prevent the loss of further blood and guts just by holding it all in.

"Later," I snap. I crouch beside him and appraise the damage, as far as I can see.

Abdominal wounds are the worst. Invariably fatal unless treated, and even then, it's touch and go. Megan is good, but I suspect this guy has had it, whatever bunny our medic might manage to pull out of the hat. Best crack on, then.

"What were you doing at Molly Lowe's house?" I start as I mean to go on. Direct and to the point.

He squirms on the floor, trying to roll away. I grab him by the shoulder

and drag him back. “Answer the fucking question.”

He peers up at me from bloodshot eyes. “What does it have to do with you? It was a bit of business, that’s all.” Despite his injuries, he’s belligerent and uncooperative. That needs to change.

“Business that involves waterboarding an innocent woman in her own home. Terrifying children? What sort of business would that be?”

“Mind yours,” he snarls, then screeches out loud as another wave of pain seizes him.

“Stand up,” Aaron instructs him.

“Are you fucking joking?” the man retorts. “I need an ambulance. Get me to a fucking hospital.”

“Sorry, not happening.” Aaron seizes his arm and hauls him to a sitting position.

I grab the other arm. “You were told to get up. Get fucking up,” I spit.

Between us, Aaron and I manage to drag him fully upright. We brace him against the cell wall and watch dispassionately as the rate of blood loss increases.

“I’d say he’s got about twenty minutes,” I observe casually.

“Nah. Fifteen at best. I’ve seen these gut shots before.” Aaron cocks his head to one side. “Best stand back. This is going to be messy.”

“Fair enough.”

I take a step away, just as Aaron swings a punch that lands right in the man’s solar plexus. He lets out an agonised cry and collapses back to the floor.

“Ouch,” I offer sympathetically, at the same time as I wrestle him back up again. “Shall we get some introductions out of the way? What’s your name and who do you work for?”

“Fuck you,” he coughs, spitting blood.

“Oh dear.” I give Aaron a nod.

He lines up a second punch.

“No! Wait. I... I...”

“You were just about to tell us your name, fucker.”

“Johnny Dunbar,” he wheezes.

“There. It’s easy once you get going. Who pays you to torture women?”

He shakes his head and begins to slide down the wall. We both seize him and pin him in place.

“I work for myself...” he rasps.

“So, Johnny Dunbar, self-employed asshole, what were you doing at Molly Lowe’s house in the middle of the night?”

“It was a job, just a... just a job.”

“Not good enough. Who paid you? And exactly what was this job?”

His head lolls. Bloodstained drool dribbles from his lips and down his stubbled chin. I grasp his jaw and force his head back. “I reckon it would be easy enough to drag your fucking intestines out through that hole in your gut. Messy, though. Shall we try that?”

He makes an animalistic sound of pure anguish. It might be pitiful. I might even relent and let him die quietly, but the image of him leaning over that sink, cold water gushing into Molly Lowe’s throat and nose, is stuck in my brain and has dispelled any finer feelings I might have been able to drum up. This bastard deserves what’s coming.

“Guts or the truth. You decide what gets spilled. But do it fast.”

“I can’t...” he croaks. “Just a job, just business.”

“Fuck that. It’s a simple question. Is it worth all of this? Really?”

“He’ll kill me.”

He’s more scared of whoever’s been paying him than he is of us. We can’t have that.

“I’ll be the one killing you. The only question is, how fast and how painful I decide to make it. So, who paid you to go after Molly Lowe?”

He seems to be thinking, or maybe he’s just stalling for time. Then, “He wants his kid, that’s all. She should just hand him over...”

“Who does? Who wants the kid?” He must mean the baby. Noah. This tallies with what Lucy told Jenna.

“G-Glodowski,” he stutters eventually. “Borys Glodowski.”

I slant a glance at Aaron, who shrugs. “Who the fuck is Borys Glodowski?”

Dunbar’s eyes roll back. His mouth hangs slack, drooling. I slap his face but get no response. We’ll get nothing else out of him.

“He’s gone,” Aaron observes. “Or as near as doesn’t matter.”

“Looks like it.”

We step away and allow his lifeless corpse to slither to the floor, just as Megan appears at the door of the cell.

“It’s okay, Doc. Your services aren’t required after all.”

“NEVER HEARD OF HIM.” Ethan is as much in the dark as we are regarding the mysterious would-be baby-snatcher. “Let’s try Google.”

He types in the name and furrows his brow. “Art dealer, based in London. Linked to the disappearance of several important items from galleries in the US and Europe but nothing proven. I’ll get Casey or Frankie to dig around.”

“Why would a bent art collector be interested in abducting a baby in suburban Glasgow? It must be a different Borys Glodowski.”

“Not a common name,” Ethan argues. “Let’s see what Molly has to say in the morning. Meanwhile, is it just me who thinks this could have something to do with the first abduction attempt, the one you two derailed? Two kidnap attempts on the same family in a matter of weeks? Too much of a coincidence, surely.”

“Shit,” I breathe. “Shit, you’re right. Should have seen that.”

“You know what I think about coincidences,” he growls. “What do we know about that other douchebag, the one whose legs Tony broke? Is he out of hospital yet?”

I help myself to coffee. “If he is, he’ll be tucked up nice and cosy in HMP Barlinnie. Child abduction is serious stuff, he’ll have been remanded in custody.”

“True enough. Aaron, who do we have in there just now who could have a word?”

Aaron scratches his head. “Last I heard, George Delaney was in Barlinnie. Maybe he could have a little chat with him on our behalf.”

“That’d work. Jenna’s dad. When is she likely to visit him next?” This is directed to Tony.

“She goes about once a month as a rule so probably not for a couple of weeks, but I could get her to bring it forward.”

“Do that.”

“Or, better still, I have his phone. That arsewipe in the white van.”

“You do?” Ethan kooks impressed.

So am I.

“Remember, I took it from him that day, to stop him calling for help before the police could get there? I still have it somewhere. Give me five minutes...” He leaves the kitchen to locate the device and returns shortly after. “Here it is. Battery’s flat.”

We produce a Samsung charger and plug it in. It takes a couple more minutes before there’s enough charge in there to fire it up, but the device is

security protected, so we can't get any further.

"This is a job for young Frankie. I'll take it over to him tomorrow." Aaron pockets the device. "Is that all we can do for tonight? I'd like to get a shower. I'm covered in that fucker's blood."

EVEN THOUGH WE'VE all been up half the night, some of us still have work to do the next morning. It's Saturday, but a working day all the same. The deal over the Japanese motors needs signing, and the money has to change hands. A meeting is set up for eleven a.m. at a nightclub we run in the centre of Glasgow. The Blue Diamond is hopping between about ten at night and four in the morning, but in the middle of the day it's deserted. The perfect place for a private rendezvous. Ethan and I are due to leave by about half past nine, but we have time for a hit of caffeine before we go.

My boss is already in the kitchen when I arrive, suited and booted for the day's business. The percolator is gurgling nicely. I check the sliced loaf on the table for signs of mould, find it's okay so drop a couple of slices in the toaster. "Want some?" I ask Ethan.

"No, I'm fine." There's an empty cereal bowl in front of him. Ethan Savage likes his cornflakes. "Any sign of life up there?"

"You mean Molly? No, not yet."

He shrugs. Talking to her can wait. Tony chooses that moment to join us, his foster son, Robbie, at his heels.

"Ethan!" Robbie squeals.

Robbie adores Ethan Savage almost as much as he adores Tony and Jenna. His passion is chess, an interest he and Ethan share. They play together whenever Robbie is at Caraksay, and it seems Robbie sees no reason why they shouldn't play at Caernbro Ghyll, too. He produces a set from one of the kitchen drawers and sets up the board.

Ethan checks his watch. "Okay. Twenty minutes. If you haven't beaten me by then we'll photograph the board and set up again when I get back."

"You won't last twenty minutes," Robbie crows. "I'm white."

I'm not convinced that Ethan isn't letting him win. Ten minutes in, and Ethan is down two bishops and a rook, with his king being threatened by the white queen and a knight.

"Check," Robbie declares, and not for the first time.

"Fu—" Ethan mutters, shifting his king one space to the left.

“Check again.” Robbie swoops in with his second knight. “Checkmate next time.”

Ethan scowls at the board. “Bloody hell. He’s right.”

“Told you.” Robbie is delighted with himself. “I’ll set them up again.”

“Okay, you do that.” Ethan glances past Robbie to the open door. “Good morning, Lucy.”

The little girl, still in her now rather grubby nightdress, is standing in the doorway.

Robbie turns to glare at her. “Who are you?” he demands. Robbie is somewhat lacking in social graces and is definitely not the most tactful kid on two legs.

“This is Lucy. She’s staying with us for a while.” Ethan gestures to a spare chair. “Do you want some breakfast, Lucy?”

She sits down but remains silent. I decide to drop more bread in the toaster anyway.

Tony pours a glass of orange juice for Robbie and puts one in front of Lucy, too. She sips it slowly, watching the chess game unfolding.

“Do you play chess, Lucy?” Ethan asks.

She shakes her head.

“Would you like to learn?”

She shrugs, which Ethan interprets as a ‘yes’.

“Come sit next to me, then and I’ll explain what we’re doing. Robbie, can you tell Lucy what each piece does?”

Delighted to be the fount of such wisdom, Robbie launches into the task. “This is a pawn. It moves one space forward. And this is a rook, or a castle. It moves in straight lines, like this...” He demonstrates. “The bishop moves diagonally, like this, and the knight goes two forward and one to the side. Or one forward and two to the side...”

Ethan chuckles at her baffled expression. “It’s not so complicated, once you get used to it. Shall we show you how we play?”

She nods and moves closer to him. I don’t know how he does it. It’s effortless, but he has some sort of rapport with frightened children. The game continues, but each time he moves a piece, Ethan explains to Lucy what he’s doing and why.

“I’m moving my queen so it’s between his castle and my king. To stop him putting me in check again. Check means that if I don’t do something about it, he’ll take my king next move, and then I’ve lost.”

She frowns in concentration, chewing on her buttered toast and hanging on every word.

“See, he’s having a go with his bishop now. But if I move my knight there, now I can take his bishop next move.”

“But what if he moves it away?”

“Then I’ll take his queen. Like this.” He demonstrates, much to Robbie’s disgust.

The tables are soon turned. Robbie attacks in earnest, and before long Ethan is forced to concede. Robbie is gloating, and Lucy seems awestruck.

Ethan knocks his king over and gets to his feet. “I have to go. Robbie, will you play with Lucy? But remember, she’s just learning so give her a chance.”

“Girls can’t play chess,” the boy observes disparagingly.

Ethan ruffles his tousled hair. “Never underestimate a girl, Robbie. Especially this one. Lucy’s the bravest girl I know, and you’re the smartest boy, so you should get on fine.”

Robbie sets up the pieces again and takes a white pawn in one small fist and a black one in the other. He holds both out to Lucy. “You choose. White always goes first.”

Molly chooses that moment to appear in the doorway, her baby in her arms.

CHAPTER 6

Molly

IT'S the familiar sound of Noah demanding his breakfast that wakes me. He's not crying, not quite yet. That comes next, but for now he's whining and chuntering, still half asleep himself.

I prise my eyelids apart, then jerk to full wakefulness. I'm in a strange room, an unfamiliar bed. I sit bolt upright, swing my gaze about, taking in the classy decor, the expensive furniture, the elegant comfort surrounding me.

And I remember. Oh God, that man. The sink, the water, the sheer unadulterated terror when I was sure I was going to die.

The memory of the attack is blistered onto my memory, but somehow, miraculously, I didn't die. How? Why not? I have some hazy recollection of another man. Several men, and a car. A strange house. *This* house? They must have brought me here, but I don't know why.

And Lucy. Lucy was here when we arrived, and so was Noah. They were both safe. I distinctly remember, he was in a cot, sleeping. He still is. And Lucy was in the bed with me.

I turn to look at the space where she should still be tucked up. I even peer under the pillow as though she might be hiding there. Fear mounting, I slide out of bed and check the adjacent room, to find only a luxurious bath and shower.

My daughter has disappeared.

I pluck Noah from his cot and cradle him against me. I tell myself not to panic, she won't be far away. She was probably hungry. She's always

hungry.

And so is my son. I need to find him something to eat as well as locate my little girl. I vaguely recall the woman who I spoke to last night telling me Noah had been fed, so I have to assume they have the makings of a formula bottle here. And maybe a nappy. I wrinkle my nose at the ominous aroma emanating from my baby's nether regions.

The woman was kind, and gentle. I liked her, I think. And the other one, more efficient, business-like. She was a doctor. She examined me and gave me something to help me sleep. Christ, it was good stuff. It knocked me out cold for hours. But I'm awake now, and there are things to be done. Finding my daughter is at the top of my list.

I place Noah in the centre of the huge bed and locate my clothes from last night. I don't remember getting undressed, but my things have been neatly folded and placed on an ottoman below the window. I pull them back on, a pair of green khaki chinos and a loose-fitting shirt, my usual attire for working.

Yes, that was it. It's coming back clearly now. I was in my studio. The children were in bed, and I'd been planning my latest project, sketching out some ideas. It was getting late. Really late. I'd decided to call it a night, so I went into the kitchen to make myself some tea. I remember boiling the kettle, and pouring water into the teapot, and then—

Christ! The hood over my head, out of nowhere. I couldn't breathe. It was dark, totally black. I could hear him, but I couldn't see him.

I sink onto the bed, shaking. He would have killed me, I'm sure of that. He came close, but something stopped him. Or... someone.

Who? Why? How?

I draw in several breaths, steady myself. Noah is whimpering in earnest now, getting louder, demanding that his little belly be filled. I clutch him to me and try the door.

It opens. I'm surprised, though I don't see why I would be. I'm not a prisoner, am I? And Lucy got out okay.

I'm barefoot, but that doesn't seem to matter. The carpet in the hallway outside is lush and soft, tickling between my toes. I make my way along until I reach a wide, sweeping staircase. I remember this, too, remember being carried up these stairs. I descend with care, listening for any sounds, any sign that I'm not alone here.

I reach the bottom and find myself in an expansive entrance hall. The

floor is tiled in black and grey, the walls eggshell blue with decorative plasterwork picked out in gold leaf. It feels like a stately home, the sort of place featured in *Hare and Hounds*.

Doorways lead off from both sides of the hall. I peep into the closest room, some sort of drawing room with sofas and a huge wall-mounted television. There's no one here. I step out and quietly close the door. "Okay," I murmur to Noah, "let's search a bit further."

The next door I try is locked, so I move on. Another door opens onto a grand dining room, though from the debris strewn across the huge mahogany table I suspect it is more of a conference room nowadays. I see empty coffee cups, chewing gum wrappers, a few pens and a desk calculator, and a half-empty bottle of Chivas Regal whisky. Clearly, the maid hasn't turned in just yet.

I close that door and continue on. And I hear voices. Male voices, echoing along the corridor to my right. I might have gone the other way and avoided them, but the clink of crockery draws me in. I venture forward until I reach another open door, this one leading to a kitchen.

And I see Lucy. The relief is near overwhelming. She's seated at the huge oak table in the centre of the room, beside a man in a sharply tailored suit. A ridiculously handsome man, I have to admit, though why I should register that irrelevant fact is beyond me right now. Opposite them is a boy, about Lucy's age, and there are two other men lounging against worktops. They're both hot as hell, too, especially in the expensive business suits they are both wearing. I never believed much in lady porn, until now.

Christ, what is this place?

"Checkmate!" The boy at the table grins.

I register that they were playing chess, and I gather he's just won.

But Lucy doesn't play chess. Neither do I.

"Well done. I have to go. Robbie, will you play with Lucy?" The man at the table gets to his feet. "But remember, she's just learning so give her a chance."

There follows a brief exchange where the boy seems to think he's too grand to play with a mere girl. The man sets him right, but there's kindness in his manner, and both children seem mesmerised. For a moment, so am I.

Then, he sees me lurking in the doorway, and the spell is broken.

One of the men by the worktop straightens to greet me. "Good morning, Molly. Are you hungry? We have toast. Or cereals."

I shake my head and resist the urge to back away. I need food for my baby. “Nothing for me, thank you. But I wonder, is there anything that I could give my baby? He’s hungry, and—”

“Ruth made this bottle up.”

I whirl at the new voice from behind me. I never heard this man coming. Tall, blond, as beautiful as the rest, he holds out a bottle of lukewarm baby milk.

“She thought he’d be waking about now, so she mixed an extra one. You weren’t in your room, so...”

“Thank you,” I murmur. “I didn’t expect...”

“Our baby girl is about the same age as him,” he offers by way of explanation. “Six months?”

“Noah’s seven months,” I agree. “He’s just starting on solids, but...”

“You can have my seat.” The man who had been playing chess gestures to the empty chair, just as one of the others places a round of toast and a mug of coffee there. “Make yourself comfortable.”

I sink into the chair. “I’ll just feed Noah, then we’ll be off. I don’t want to put you to any trouble.” Which loosely translates as: *I’m fucking scared. I need to get out of here...*

The four men exchange a look. I can’t decipher it, but I get the distinct sense they know something I don’t. I’d ask, but I’m pretty certain I don’t want to know the answer. I settle for plugging the bottle teat into Noah’s mouth. “I hope Lucy hasn’t been making a nuisance of herself.” Not entirely fair, I know that. Lucy is never a nuisance.

She’s quick to set me straight. “I had toast and juice. And I’ve been learning to play chess, Mummy. Ethan taught me.”

Ethan, is it?

“That’s nice, love. Maybe you can show me later.”

“Ethan will show you,” she declares confidently. “But he has to go out just now, so we’ll play with Robbie until he gets back.”

“Lucy, we have to go home. We—” I break off at the sight of her stricken face. “Sweetheart, we can’t stay here. We don’t live here.”

“I know, but, what if *he*’s still there?”

“I don’t think...” I glance around me for confirmation.

“He’s... gone.” The man who gave me the toast delivers that shred of comfort. “He won’t be back. But it still isn’t safe for you to go home.”

“Why not?” I demand. “I can improve my security. Buy more locks.” I

definitely intend to do that, whatever they tell me. “I could get a better alarm installed.”

No one speaks, but I can tell Lucy is far from convinced by anything I’ve said.

I try another tack. “I don’t know who you are, but I’m thankful for what you did. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t been there and I don’t want to seem ungrateful...” I’ve yet to get my head around precisely *why* they were at my house last night, but I’m not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Something occurs to me suddenly. “Are you police?”

“No, Mummy. This is Nico. I told you about him.”

“Nico? I don’t... Oh.” I turn to stare at the man behind me and recognise him at last. “He’s the one who brought you home. That day...”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs Lowe,” he rumbles.’

Lucy chatters on. “Yes. And Tony was there, too. I told you about him as well. He caught the man and...”

“Yes. I know.” *Broke both his legs to stop him getting away.* “But I don’t understand. Why were you there, at my house? I mean, I’m glad you were, but...”

Nico supplies the explanation. “Lucy came to find us. She asked for our help, so we came.”

My head is spinning. I try to cobble together something coherent in all of this. “Lucy? Lucy came and...? But how did she know where...?”

“I knew where Nico lived,” she announces proudly. “He told me, when he dropped Tony off. I remembered, and I came here last night, with Noah. I hid from all the cars that passed me and I waited for Nico to come home. And when he did, I told him about the man at our house.”

“Oh my God. You came all this way, on your own...”

“It wasn’t far. I ran.”

“It’s about three miles,” Nico says. “She was really brave. She thought your intruder meant to take Noah and she wasn’t going to let him.”

I hug my baby to my chest.

Nico pulls up a chair and straddles it. “Was she right, Molly? Was he after the baby?”

“I... I don’t. I mean, he couldn’t...”

“Was he?”

I catch sight of Lucy’s anxious little face, staring at me, willing me to tell the truth, to trust someone. Anyone.

I can't let her down, can't let all she went through last night be for nothing. So, I nod. "Yes, I think so. I—"

"Robbie? Will you take Lucy up to our apartment to teach her chess? Jenna's up there, and she'll be wondering where you got to." The other man, Tony, ushers the two children out of the kitchen then returns to join us. "They're great kids, but there's some stuff it's best they don't hear."

I can only gape at him. "Lucy knows all about..."

Nico takes up the conversation again. "She doesn't know that we brought the man back here and questioned him before he died."

"Died?" I gasp. "He's *dead*?"

"Very. It wasn't a pleasant end, but no more than he deserved. His name was Johnny Dunbar. Does that mean anything to you?"

I shake my head.

"What about Borys Glodowski?"

I feel the blood drain from my face. "B-Borys?"

"You do know him, I assume?"

I briefly consider lying. This is my business after all, my problem. Except, they made it theirs when they intervened last night. And if they already know this much...

"He... he's Noah's father."

"Ah." Nico rests his arms on the back of his chair. "Go on."

"I met him through my work. I'm an artist, he's a dealer. We had an affair. It wasn't serious. At least, not to him. We saw each other on and off for a few months, then I found out he was married. That was it. I dropped him. He didn't care, it had run its course anyway. If I'd known he had a wife I would never have... Well, I was younger then. And stupid. And, as it turned out, pregnant."

"You told him about the baby?"

"No, actually. But we run in a small circle, know a lot of the same people, show in the same galleries. Our affair had been fairly common knowledge. It was just a matter of time before someone tipped him off. What I hadn't realised was that he and his wife had been married for ten years and had no children. Borys wanted this one, but he didn't want me. He saw no problem with that. I was already a lone parent, surely, I wouldn't want another. So, the solution was simple, at least in his head. He offered to buy the baby from me and seemed genuinely astonished when I turned him down flat. He upped his offer from ten thousand to fifty thousand euros, then a hundred thousand. I

still refused, so he tried threats. He'd ruin my career. No one would ever buy my work again."

Nico frowns, cocks his head to one side. "Could he do that?"

"No, not really. I'm quite well known. And respected, as a sculptor and portrait artist. People buy my work, and I do okay. I ignored him, called his bluff. Then, the baby arrived, and Borys tried to steal him from the hospital. Luckily that's easier said than done. There's all sorts of security, and the staff wouldn't just hand him over. Obviously."

I pause to sip my coffee, which has gone cold. Tony pours me a fresh cup. I'm glad of the breather, but now I've started I just want to get to the end of my tale.

"We came home. My next-door neighbour was there. She'd been looking after Lucy while I was in hospital. She told me Borys had been hanging around outside the house, in his flashy car. He stayed, parked at the end of my drive, staring at the windows. It got so we couldn't leave the house. He would ring up at all times of the day and night, demanding that I hand Noah over and threatening me with the courts. Said he'd get custody and I'd never see my baby again."

"Sounds like a real charmer."

"If he'd been even remotely reasonable, we could have worked something out. I mean, a child needs his dad, right? I'd have happily let him see the baby, be a part of his life. But Borys wanted everything. He wanted Noah to himself, to hand him over to his childless wife like some sort of birthday treat. It was just weird. Creepy. No way was I going along with that, but I couldn't get him off my back. It was upsetting Lucy. She couldn't bring friends home anymore. Enough was enough. I went to the police and reported him for stalking."

"What did they do?"

"Not a lot. They asked me to keep a diary, but until he actually did something violent, they couldn't help. I'd never denied that Borys was Noah's father, and they seemed to think he was just trying to assert his rights. But he had no rights. He was just... just..."

"An entitled bastard who won't take no for an answer?" Nico suggests helpfully.

"Exactly. Eventually, I'd had enough. I decided to move, to disappear. At that time, we lived in Newcastle, but I wanted to get away, somewhere new. So, I bought a house in Glasgow, the one you saw. I furnished it from scratch

again and just left everything we owned behind. I couldn't risk him getting wind of what I was doing. No packing cases or removal vans. We sneaked out in the middle of the night. I simply put my kids in the car and came here. That was three months ago."

"Has he been in touch since?"

"No. At least..."

"Not until yesterday, when he sent his little helper to sort out the problem," Nico puts in helpfully.

"That's about it. I guess I'll need to up and go again. Pity, I liked that house, and Lucy was settling in at her new school. The problem is my work is well known. It's difficult to be anonymous, to keep a low profile. I suppose I'll have to, though, at least for a while. Until he gets bored."

"Or something happens to change his mind. Something that might convince Glodowski he needs to have other priorities."

"Such as?" How could anyone have priorities more pressing than their own child?

"He might fancy staying alive."

I gape at him in stunned silence. "What? What do you mean?"

Nico casts a glance at Ethan, who simply nods.

"What I mean is, we could point out the consequences if he continues to harass you."

"Consequences?"

"If he wants to stay alive and carry on selling dodgy art on the dark web, then he needs to wind his neck in as far as the baby's concerned."

"You'd threaten him?"

"Just the once. Then, if he doesn't take notice, we'll end him."

I'm aghast. Horrified. I can't believe what I'm hearing. Have I slipped into some parallel universe where the normal rules don't apply? Apparently so, from the deadpan expressions on all their faces. "You can't do that. It... it's..."

"We know what it is. Your choice. Keep on running until one day he manages to snatch your child or let us deal with him."

"No! No, I can't agree to that. I mean, warn him off, yes. But the rest... No."

Nico shrugs. "Have it your way. But you must see you can't go back to your house. Dunbar probably already told Borys where you are. He'll have another go, send another hitman to do his dirty work."

“I don’t have anywhere else. Like I said, I can get a new alarm. Buy a Rottweiler.”

“Or you could stay here until you sort out something more permanent.”

I shake my head, hugging a squirming Noah to my chest. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not? You’re safe. Your children are safe. You can work if you want to. What’s the problem?”

Is he deluded? “What’s the problem? I’ll tell you what the problem is. People don’t just move in with perfect strangers. Strangers who talk about killing people as though it’s normal, as though it happens every day.”

Their expressions never waver. I swing my gaze from one stony-faced man to the next, looking for something, Anything. Some shred of recognition that what they’re proposing is unreal, even slightly outrageous and more than a little unhinged.

Nothing. They mean it. They are deadly serious.

“What sort of people are you?” I whisper.

It’s Ethan who answers. “We’re people who get shit done. As you say, this is none of our business, but we’re involved now. We can sort this, and we will if you let us.”

I’m struggling to find words. “Why? Why would you? Why do you even care?”

He lifts one dark eyebrow. “Why would we not? A better question is, what will you do, once that bastard has your boy? And he will. Eventually. His sort never stops. Will you just give up, or will you be back, begging us to help?”

“I’ll never give up!”

“Right, then.” He shrugs into his expertly tailored suit jacket. “We’ll leave it with you.”

The room empties. I’m left staring at the door.

CHAPTER 7

Nico

THE STENCH of weed is heavy in the silent nightclub. I suppose the cleaning crew will descend on the place at some stage today, but whether they'll be able to eradicate the aroma is another matter, and I don't suppose it makes any difference one way or the other. It will be the same again by tomorrow.

It's not a smell I like. Hypocritical, I know, but there you have it. It's been years since I imbibed and I find the lingering scent vaguely nauseating. I'm glad this meeting is winding up and we'll soon be back out in the fresh air, or as close to fresh air as inner-city Glasgow ever gets.

"It's been a pleasure doin' business wi' ye, Mr Savage."

The thick Glaswegian tones of our latest ally grate on my ears. His accent is so strong, at times I struggled to follow what he was saying as we went over the finer points of our transaction.

"Not yet, it hasn't," Ethan corrects him. "You've yet to prove your worth to me, Mulligan."

"I willnae let ye down, sir," he is quick to promise.

Albert Mulligan is a well-known villain of this parish with his sticky fingers in a lot of pies. He runs a string of girls, manages a few of our drug lines, and fences the proceeds of robberies. Albert is nothing if not versatile. He's dealt in stolen motors for years and done a few stretches inside for his trouble but he takes all of that in his stride. He sees the free board and lodgings courtesy of His Majesty as a perk of the job.

Recently, he's gone upmarket in the motor trade, leaving the battered

Fiestas and clapped-out Volkswagen Golfs to the kids and turning his attention to the higher-value merchandise we favour. He claims to be able to lay his grimy paws on as many Beamers and Discoveries as we can handle, and what's more he'll see the vehicles safely divested of any tracking devices and stowed in containers for shipment abroad. He's absorbing all the risk in exchange for a generous payout. Well, not too generous, obviously. We're only giving him a fraction of what those cars are worth on the Eastern European black market, but he's happy and clearly basking in the kudos of working for us.

As he should. We choose our associates with care. Mulligan is an accomplished thief, and we can use his talents, but in return he benefits from a level of protection. Our links with the police and other authorities will smooth his way and make further sojourns at His Majesty's pleasure less likely. We offer a guaranteed market for his goods and a price he can rely on. And we always pay up once the goods are supplied. Not before.

His eyes gleam when Ethan beckons Tony forward.

"Give Mr Mulligan a down payment," he instructs. "Just enough to keep him interested. And keen."

"We agreed on a hundred grand, Mr Savage," comes the sullen protest. "An' ten fer every set o' wheels I put yer way."

"No, Mulligan. *You* mentioned a hundred grand. And you'll have that and more if you deliver as promised. Right now, though, you've given me fuck all."

"Aye but—"

Tony grabs him by the greasy hair and smashes his face into the table. The crunch of bone is almost as sickening as the stench of stale cannabis. Still with his fist in Mulligan's hair, Tony drags his head back up, and Ethan gives a dramatic wince at the sight of his smashed nose and missing incisor.

"There now. That should help you focus. I expect the first shipment by next Tuesday, then a dozen motors a week after that. Once I'm satisfied that you're good for it, I'll authorise the payment. Are we clear?"

He swipes blood from his nose, though it continues to gush. "But, sir," he whines, "I got expenses..."

Fucking idiot. Doesn't he know when to stop?

Tony slams his chin down onto the table, dislodging two more teeth.

"Are we clear, Mr Mulligan?" Ethan enquires once more.

"Y-yes, sir. Verra clear," he mumbles, blood now drooling from his

mouth as well. "Next Tuesday. Right."

Ethan gets to his feet and offers Mulligan a polite nod. The man doesn't get up himself; I doubt if his legs would hold him right now. He nods like one of those plastic dogs you see in the back of a cheap Ford Focus and babbles something to the effect that we can rely on him.

He'd better be right. He won't get a second chance if he fucks up.

"I don't trust that slimy little pillock," Jack snarls as we make our way towards the exit. "He's greedy. And careless."

"True," Ethan agrees. "But there's nothing to link us to him. We'll see what he comes up with then go from there."

"I know, but..." Jack's response is interrupted by the trilling of his phone. He answers the call. "Hi, bro."

"Aaron," he mouths, then returns to the call. "Okay. Good. Yeah, we're done here. On our way back." He hangs up. "Aaron's headed back to Caernbro Ghyll. He has Frankie with him. Apparently, the kid hacked into the phone."

"You always said he'd come in useful for something." Ethan uses the remote key to open the car doors, and we pile in. "What do we know so far?"

It's me who takes up the story. "I spoke to the guy I know in the CPS." My networks are nowhere near as extensive as Ethan's, but I do have a contact in the Crown Prosecution Service who proves useful from time to time, in exchange for a regular supply of free product. "Our man goes by the name of Jonas Bairstow, aged thirty-three. Discharged from hospital three weeks ago and currently banged up with the paedos and cop killers at Barlinnie. Solitary confinement, for his own safety."

"Hmm. Might be hard for George to get to him, then," Ethan muses. "Does he have previous?"

"Not for child abduction. A few GBH convictions and an armful of traffic offences. He was driving whilst disqualified, so they're throwing that at him as well."

"Do we know what he's pleading?"

"Not guilty. He's claiming he was assaulted and robbed. And that the kid's lying."

"Bastard. It's going to court, then." Ethan starts the car. "We could do with getting our hands on him. Any chance your friend at the CPS could swing bail?"

"I doubt it, boss. That'd be above his pay grade."

“Fair enough. I’ll talk to our tame superintendent and see if the police might soften their objections. Let’s get him a good lawyer, too. Find out if Lynne Meadows is available, she’s the best. We need that bastard back on the streets, at least briefly, until we can pick him up.”

FRANKIE IS in the kitchen when we arrive back at the mansion, helping himself to scrambled eggs and toast. I don’t recall ever seeing that lad without food in his mouth. He grins up at us when we troop in. The Samsung phone is on the table.

“Passcode is nine four seven three,” Frankie tells me when I pick it up. “I reset it.”

I’m in immediately and straight to the emails.

“Dude’s name is Jonas Bairstow,” Frankie offers. “Seems to go by Bear.”

“Okay,” I murmur as I scroll through a trail of junk emails proclaiming the merits of various medications guaranteed to improve erectile function. Our man also seems to have more than a passing interest in phone porn and gambling sites, as well as an inclination towards gory and violent YouTube videos. Nothing to suggest an unhealthy obsession with ten-year-old girls, though.

I check his text messages and don’t find much of interest, unless you count a regular rendezvous with a lady by the name of Luscious. Apparently, he was in the habit of spending his Tuesday evenings with her at a hotel near Celtic Park, and she is somewhat puzzled by his sudden silence. Clearly not a lady who reads the newspapers.

I move to WhatsApp and hit the jackpot.

“There’s a whole stream of messages between Bairstow and Borys.” I pass the phone around for the others to see. “It’s all there. Arrangements, negotiating terms for the job, instructions, timing. Borys even provides a picture of Lucy.”

“So, we were right. It was planned, premeditated. Not some random snatch.” Ethan dumps his suit jacket over the back of a chair and loosens his tie. “Do the messages give a hint as to why?”

“Not specifically, but it’s clear that Glodowski was pulling the strings. He’s instructing Bairstow to track Molly and her family down. I suppose he must have been some sort of private investigator. Then he was supposed to

take Lucy and keep her locked up somewhere. We have to assume she'd have been a hostage. Leverage to get his hands on the boy."

Ethan's jaw firms. "I want eyes on Glodowski, whatever Molly says. He won't know yet how last night's little stunt went down, so we can be sure he'll be trying to make contact with Dunbar for a progress report. Do we have Dunbar's phone?"

Tony shakes his head. "He didn't have one on him when we got him to the kill room."

"It's probably still at Molly's. Go back and check the place out, would you? While you're there, you might as well pick up some of their belongings. Clothes, kids' toys, that sort of thing."

"Will do, boss."

"I'll go with him?" I offer.

Ethan narrows his eyes. "It won't take two of you to pick up a few clothes and fling them in a bag. You're more use to me here."

Tony grabs his jacket and leaves while I settle back into my chair. "How so, boss?"

"I could use your powers of persuasion." He levels his gaze on Frankie. "Have you finished inhaling food?" he enquires.

Frankie drags his sleeve across his mouth and emits a less than discreet belch.

Ethan winces. "Right, then." He reaches into his inside jacket pocket and produces a stack of folded documents which he places on the table. "I want you to have a look through those."

Frankie reaches for the pile and peers at the top sheet. "What's this?"

"A UCAS form. You have to fill this out to get a university place. And that's the guide to completing it. It's all online, but I downloaded it."

Frankie appears nonplussed. "What do you need me to do with it?"

"Fill it in."

"Why? Is someone goin' to school?"

"You are."

He shakes his head. "Oh no, I'm done with all that. Been there, got expelled to go with the T-shirt."

"You got sod all else, though. You're a bright lad, or so they tell me. I know school didn't work out for you the first time, but it will be different now. To start with, you can choose what you study. Computers. IT. Technology. Electronics. Whatever floats your boat." Ethan extracts a sheath

of brightly coloured papers from the pile. “This is the range of courses. Start by looking at that and see what takes your fancy.”

Frankie regards the form and related notes with all the suspicion he might reserve for a coiled python. “Me? At one of them posh universities? No way.”

“Yes way. You agreed to get trained to be in my organisation. This is your training.”

“I thought you meant guns and drug trafficking and that sort of shit.”

“Horses for courses, Frankie. This is what you’d be good at.”

He shakes his head. “I ain’t got no qualifications. They’d never let me in.”

Do I sense a slight softening of his attitude?

Ethan evidently thinks the same way.

“You need five GCSEs and two A levels, which you’d walk if you put your mind to it. Megan and Magda could tutor you. Casey, too.”

“A levels? Me?” Frankie couldn’t appear more gobsmacked if Ethan had suggested he flap his scrawny arms and fly to the moon.

“Again, you can choose your subjects. Go for stuff that interests you. You probably know most of it already.”

Frankie is speechless. He looks to me as though I might provide the breath of sanity apparently missing from this conversation. And I realise what Ethan meant by being of more use here. Frankie and I get on, he’s not so much in awe of me and he might listen.

“The boss is right,” I chip in. “You’re great at the tech, you’d ace a course in electronics. Do they do A level ballistics?”

“I doubt it,” Ethan replies. “But there’s software development, programming, Artificial Intelligence. And you can do all of it online.”

Frankie gazes from Ethan to me, then back again. “You dudes are actually serious,” he breathes.

We both nod.

“Me? Doing studying and shit?”

“You, doing studying and shit,” Ethan confirms. “You’ll read through all this, then?”

His nose wrinkles, and he prods the stack of papers with his finger. “I suppose I could have a look for nothing.”

Ethan ignores the obvious lack of conviction in his tone. “Good. Choose what you want to do, and we’ll make a plan to get you there, whatever it

takes.”

Frankie swallows, hard, and brushes moisture from behind his glasses. “I never... I mean, I always thought... I didn’t expect...”

Ethan rarely cracks a smile, but he manages one for Frankie. “Start expecting, Frankie. You work for me now, and *I* expect a lot of *you*.”

Frankie’s voice is thick with emotion when he mutters, “I won’t let you down, boss.”

“I know you won’t.” Ethan leans forward to slap him between the shoulder blades. “And thanks for the phone thing.”

“Anytime, boss.”

MOLLY REACTS to the sight of her clothes in black bags on the bed in her guest room pretty much as I anticipated. She hits the roof.

“What? Why? I never asked you to do this. I told you I wasn’t staying and now I have to cart all this lot back again.”

I draw in a steadying breath. For a beautiful woman, Molly Lowe can be exasperating. Can she not see the danger she’s in? If she doesn’t care about her own safety, what about her children?

“We explained,” I begin patiently. “Borys will—”

“Borys is *my* problem,” she snaps, pacing the room and stopping every few yards to glare daggers at me. “I’ll move. Again.”

“He’ll track you down. Again,” I counter.

“You can’t know that for sure. I’ll go abroad.”

I’m losing patience. “Molly, for fuck’s sake, get a grip. He won’t give up. He has plenty of money to throw at this. There’ll be another Dunbar, another Bairstow. He’s tried twice already.”

“Twice? What do you mean? What does Dunbar have to do with it?”

I realise she probably hasn’t connected the most recent attack to Lucy’s abduction so I fill in the blanks. “We’ve been doing some digging and we now know that Borys paid Dunbar to snatch Lucy. She was probably intended as a hostage, a swap for Noah.”

She pales. “Why would you say that? How do you...?”

“We hacked into his phone. It’s all there, the messages between Borys and him. Do you want to see?”

She subsides into a chair, shaking. “No, I... Oh God. I thought... I knew Borys was a devious bastard, but I never imagined he’d go after Lucy.”

“Well, now you do. He’s dangerous.”

“Yes, but...”

“But?”

“But... I can’t rely on you. I don’t even know you. I’m used to looking out for myself.” She’s crying now, making no attempt to stem the tears. “What am I going to do?”

“Let us help.” My tone has softened. “You don’t need to face this on your own. If not for yourself, then for Lucy and Noah.”

She manages a shaky nod. “I’ve no choice, do I? Okay, we’ll stay here. But I’ll pay you for our accommodation. I don’t need charity.”

“Whatever.” I’ll take what I can get as long as she accepts the reality of her situation. “Tony got some stuff for Lucy as well. Her PlayStation and some books. I’ll check with her what else she wants and arrange for that to be picked up, too.”

“She’ll appreciate that.” Molly gets to her feet again. “Ruth’s caring for Noah. I really should go and get him. And Lucy.”

“Lucy’s engrossed in a game of chess with Robbie. I saw them in the dining room when I came up. Noah’s sleeping. You’ve time to sort out your clothes. Or just take some time off.”

She shoots me a watery but wry smile. “You don’t have kids, do you, Nico?”

“No, but there are enough around here and at Caraksay for me to get the picture.”

She peers inside one of the black bags and pulls out a pair of jeans. “Caraksay? What’s that?”

“An island in the Outer Hebrides. Our headquarters.”

She folds the jeans and drags another pair out, folds them, too. “Isn’t this your base?”

“For some of us, yes. But Caraksay is where Ethan lives, and his family. It’s very remote. And very safe.”

“I see.” She starts stuffing her belongings in drawers.

“In fact,” I’m thinking aloud now, “it could be the best place for you. There’s no way that Borys could reach you there, even if he knew where you were.”

“You think I should move to the Outer Hebrides?”

From her expression, you’d think I’d just suggested she chew the head off a hamster. “You could do worse. I’ll have a word with Ethan.”

“I don’t think—”

My patience snaps. “For fuck’s sake, wake up and smell the sodding coffee. You’re not dealing with a normal, rational man. Borys is fucking mental. He’ll do anything to get what he wants. What more does he need to do before you get that through your skull?”

She slams the drawer shut and whirls on me. “There you go again, ordering me about as though I’m one of your... your...”

“Soldiers?”

“If you like.”

“No, honey. You’d make a crap soldier. You can’t take orders for a start, and you have no sense of self-preservation. You’d be long dead by now if we hadn’t stepped in, and your kids would be Christ knows where.”

I feel rather than see the blow coming. Her hand sweeps through the air in a direct line with my cheek. I move fast, block the slap, and seize her wrist. Undeterred, she swings with the other hand, so I grab that, too. I pin both hands behind her back, easily enclosing her wrists in my fist. To prevent further attacks, I drag her body in close, her chest pressed to mine. Her struggles become more frenzied, more ferocious as she fights against my hold. It’s an unequal struggle, but I’m prepared to let her continue until she either sees the futility of it or wears herself out. When she goes still, I cup her jaw in my free palm and tip her face up.

“Don’t make me force the issue, Molly.”

“Is that your answer for everything?”

I pretend to consider, then, “Yeah. I reckon so. If all else fails.”

“I’m so sick of you pushing me around. Why don’t you—?”

I’ve heard enough. I stop the tirade before she even gets started, in the only way that comes to mind. I cover her mouth with mine.

I sense rather than hear the gasp, the sharp intake of breath. I expect her to seal her mouth, try to keep me at bay. If she’d tried to twist away, slip out of my grip, I might even have allowed it.

She doesn’t. Maybe she’s too stunned, too shocked at my sudden turnabout. Maybe she’s scared, even, though I like to think I’d have an inkling if that was it. I may not be Mr Sensitivity, but I generally understand fear and how to create it, and this isn’t it.

This is... something else entirely. Chemistry, perhaps. Or maybe fate, if you believe in that sort of thing, which I don’t, as a rule.

But I’m prepared to give it a chance.

I slant my head to deepen the kiss, all the while anticipating some sort of pushback, a protest.

Nothing.

If anything, she responds. Her tongue tangles with mine, dances between my lips, caresses my teeth. My free hand is in her hair, dislodging the loose ponytail so her brunette curls tumble about her shoulders. I remember my first sight of her, on her doorstep, anxiously waiting for her little girl to come home. I'd been struck then by her hair, long and wavy and glossy. From force of habit, I'd vaguely imagined getting my hands in it, tangling it, spreading it across my pillow...

Shit. I'm getting ahead of myself here.

I release my grip on her wrists, and she immediately brings her hands around to grasp the front of my T-shirt. Her fingers curl in the fabric, and she comes up on tiptoe to get better access to my mouth.

Never one to miss an opportunity, I reassess my position, taking her a few paces backwards, towards the bed. The backs of her knees connect, and we spill onto the mattress, never breaking the kiss.

We roll across the duvet, my knee between her thighs. She rubs against the denim, grinding her pussy on my thigh and moaning deep within her throat. I respond by sliding my hand beneath her blouse and tugging it free of her waistband. Moments later, I've unbuttoned it, exposing her pretty, lacy bra.

The underwear is nice, but I want rid. I reach behind her to unhook the fastener, and her delightful breasts spring free. Only then do I break the kiss and create a trail of nibbles and bites down her neck, her clavicle, and eventually I draw her plump nipple into my mouth, and I suck.

Molly arches off the bed with a strangled cry. Her fingers tunnel through my hair, and she seems to clutch at me as though she thinks I might change my mind.

Not. A. Chance.

I move to the other breast and suckle there, too.

She's bucking and writhing beneath me, clawing at my T-shirt until she manages to shove it up to my armpits. I do the rest then return to the feast.

Her fingers are still busy, unfastening my jeans. I let her do her worst, then raise my hips slightly to allow her to shove the denim down. My boxers go as well, and my cock nudges her thigh.

She reaches for it, but I shift away. I prefer to run this shit-show my way.

I grab the hem of her light summer skirt and raise it to her waist.

The knickers, now displayed, match the bra. They're sheer and slick, white silk and lace. The telltale damp patch confirms her arousal.

"We need these gone? Right?" I curl my fingertips around the elastic at the top.

"Yes," she gasps.

I do the honours, drawing the lacy concoction down her legs and away from her feet. I take advantage of the brief respite to kick my jeans and underwear off. I do the same with my socks and trainers. I'm naked. She's as close as doesn't matter.

I kneel up and take in the sight. Clothing awry, her breasts and pussy beautifully displayed. I fist my cock and nudge her thighs apart.

"Nico, I..."

I pause. "If you want to say 'no', do it now." *Please, God, have mercy...*

"I don't..."

Shit.

"I don't want to say 'no'. I just..."

"Then, don't. Open wide for me, sweetheart."

"I wanted you to know I'm on the pill. And clean."

"Good. Me, too. Not the pill bit..." I draw the flat of my palm across her slit, from her arse to her clit. It comes away soaking.

Molly closes her eyes and moans, lifts her hips as though to offer me more. I accept her offer. I gently part the lips of her pussy and slide one finger into her channel, as deep as I can go.

"Oh God, that feels... Aaaagh!"

Her inner muscles tighten around my digit. I add a second and pump in and out, watching each stroke with a sense of awe, of wonder. Her pussy quivers around my touch, and her clit swells to peep out from beneath its little hood. I slide the pad of my thumb over the needy, plump bud and savour the tremble of delight that shudders through her.

"Liking that?" I whisper.

"Yes," she croaks.

I do it again, swiping the sensitive button from one side, then the other, sometimes featherlight, then more pressure, then barely there at all.

Molly goes wild, squirming and gasping, arching and thrusting against my hand. Her breath quickens, she's panting now as I ramp up the intensity. I'm in no hurry, I can watch this display all day, but for Molly there's a clear

sense of urgency.

“Please,” she gasps. “I need...”

“I know what you need, girl.” I lean in to nibble her ear. “You can come when I’m ready.”

“No, now.”

“Soon,” I tell her, pinching her greedy clit between my thumb and index finger. “Wait. Calm down.”

“I can’t,” she groans, and thrusts harder.

“You can.”

I reduce my touch to the merest whisper, barely brushing my thumb over the tip of her clit to encourage her to do the work. It’s a good strategy. She raises her hips and grabs my wrist to hold my hand in place while she grinds unashamedly against it. Moments later, she has her reward.

Her body convulses. The ripples of her pleasure roll the length of my fingers, squeezing and clutching as her orgasm washes through her body. Her eyes are closed, her body tense and tight, every nerve ending, every muscle and sinew clenching hard then releasing in a euphoric cascade.

She goes limp. Her eyes are still closed, but her mouth curls in a hint of a smile. Her features are a mask of relaxation, sated wellbeing.

I’m glad. So far, so good.

She lies below me, spread wide, her own juices coating her inner thighs. I withdraw my fingers from her pussy and position my cock at her entrance.

“Molly, look at me.”

Her forehead furrows.

“Molly, open your eyes, sweetheart.”

Her eyelids part to reveal a hint of the deep blue behind.

“It’s still not too late to say ‘no’.”

“What?”

“I need to know we’re on the same page here.” *Please, God...*

“Page?”

“I’m going to fuck you. Tell me if you don’t want that.” *Or better still, don’t. But I have to ask.*

“Yes,” she murmurs. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Good enough. I drive forward to bury my cock balls-deep inside her slick channel.

She sighs, a profound, satisfied inhale, then raises her legs to wrap them around my waist. Her body is soft and pliant, stretched around mine like a

fucking glove. A perfect fit.

I withdraw almost to the tip, then plunge back again, savouring the sensation, the friction. As if she senses what I want, what I need, she contracts her inner walls around me, her pussy caressing my shaft with every exquisite stroke.

In moments, she's soaring again. Rocking in time with my thrusts, attuned to my rhythm, she chases her climax and finds it. She lets out a heady cry at the moment of greatest pleasure, which is enough to trigger my response. My balls contract, then empty, pumping ribbons of semen into her channel.

It goes on and on. She milks me dry. I collapse onto her then shift my weight to one side so she can breathe. At least, I think she can. She hasn't complained.

And I certainly won't be.

CHAPTER 8

Molly

WHAT HAVE I DONE? Dear Christ, what came over me?

He came in you, you daft cow.

My inner Sunday school teacher is in full flow, admonishing me for my transgressions. My slutty ways. And she has a point. Despite evidence to the contrary, namely two children and not a wedding ceremony to my name, I don't do this sort of thing.

Not usually, and recently not at all.

Borys was an exception to my habitual drought, and see how that's turned out?

I perch on the edge of my bed and reflect on what just happened. One moment I wanted to kill him, the next I was ripping his clothes off as fast as he could strip me of mine. Except, I did a better job. The remnants of my outfit remain draped about my body. He was naked.

Wonderfully, gloriously naked.

My belly clenches at the memory. Nico has a breathtaking body, and his cock is...

Utterly fabulous? Would that be a good description?

You're a shameless hussy. No better than you ought to be. Your mother was right, you should have stayed at that all-girls' school. No good ever comes of it...

The Sunday school teacher is off again. I shudder, determined to get her judgemental voice out of my head. *I'm a grown woman, I'll do what I like.*

But even so...

What must he think? I was all over him like a dose of measles. The poor guy never stood a chance. He's probably down there now, in the kitchen or dining room, telling his mates all about the sad single mother who was just gagging for it. He gave her what she wanted, though. Rude not to...

Get a grip.

I lurch to my feet and stagger to the en suite bathroom.

So what if he is boasting? It takes two and all that. It's not the first time I've made bad choices in men and I daresay it won't be the last.

I turn on the shower and drop my dishevelled clothing on the floor before stepping under the jet. Warm water cascades down my back. I turn and tip up my face to get the full impact of the flow. The feeling is exhilarating, cleansing. Liberating.

I use the fancy shower gel provided for guests and some rather nice shampoo with built-in conditioner. I don't usually rate that stuff, but this one actually works. I finger comb my hair then rinse it, turning back and forth under the stream until my body feels refreshed.

Well, more or less. The vague tingling between my legs is a constant reminder that he was there. It's not painful just... persistent.

I amble back into the bedroom and tip out the last couple of black bags. Somehow during our impromptu workout, they must have been tossed onto the floor. I select a nice button-up dress in a bright shade of lilac, some clean underwear, and a pair of flesh-coloured sandals. I check the mirror for any hint of a 'just-fucked' look and find nothing untoward. Satisfied that I'll pass muster, I set off to do what I should have done an hour ago. I go in search of my children.

"MUMMY, am I going to school today?"

I shove a handful of hair out of my eyes and drowsily force my eyelids apart. Lucy is sitting up in bed next to me, her arms wrapped around her knees.

"I'm not sure," I mumble. "Do you want to? And how come you're awake so early?" I peer to the foot of the bed where the borrowed cot has been placed. Baby Noah is still sleeping.

Since this mansion is just a couple of miles from our old neighbourhood, it would be perfectly feasible for Lucy to attend her usual school, but I'm not

sure our self-styled guardians would agree. I share their reservations. It would be all too easy for some other hired thug to snatch her as she comes out at the end of the day. She'd have to be taken there, dropped off, then picked up again. We'd have to have a word with her teachers about never leaving her alone, and that would mean bringing yet more people into our private affairs. And however careful we were, I'd be on pins the entire time she was out of my sight.

I need to get things in perspective, I realise that. I can't keep my daughter under lock and key, but as long as Borys is out there, waiting, watching...

"Not really," she replies. "It's double English today."

I sit up next to her and drape my arm around her and resign myself to a spot of home-schooling. "Let's give it a miss for a little while, then. We'll do something here, together."

She brightens. "Like what?"

I think fast. "We could make a collage."

"Oo. Like, with cutting and sticking?"

"Yup. But we'll make it with everything except paper. No magazines. We'll use fabrics, and leaves from the garden, and wrappers and—"

"Wrappers are paper," she reminds me seriously. "That's against the rules. We'll use pasta, and rice. And flour. We could dye it all."

She's clearly warming to the theme, and so am I. There's nothing I enjoy more than doing something artsy with my kid. Well, almost nothing.

"Now you're talking, kid. Let's go see what we can find in the kitchen."

I consider picking Noah up and taking him with us, but he seems perfectly content where he is. The men found my baby monitor on one of their visits to my old house, so I switch it on and tuck it in my pocket. This house is huge, I'd have no way of hearing him if he were to wake and start crying, though I suppose it's likely someone else would. They seem to take a communal approach to childcare here, even the men.

We've been here for three days now, and I'm becoming resigned to the situation. Why wouldn't I be? It's comfortable. There's lots of space for Lucy to roam around, and people willing to help with Noah. The other women who live here, Ruth who's married to the one called Jack, and Jenna who lives with Tony, are both pleasant and welcoming. Jenna has a job outside the mansion, but Ruth is always here so I have someone to talk to if I fancy some company. The conversation generally revolves around babies—her little Faith is just a month younger than Noah—but it's still sort of nice.

I may not be able to come and go as I like, but I'm not a prisoner. Not really.

Ethan has gone, back to his Hebridean island, I gather. Aaron, too, who I now realise is Ethan's brother. The rest of the men are in and out a lot, and the place is always busy.

I haven't caught more than a passing glance of Nico since that day. *Is he avoiding me? Maybe.* I'm sure as hell trying to keep out of his way. It would be too embarrassing otherwise.

No one has said anything, making me think that either he didn't sound off to all his friends about me or he swore them to secrecy. But there have been no snide comments, no smug looks and for that, at least, I'm grateful. The last thing I want is for Lucy to become confused. I'm quite confused enough for both of us.

Lucy's having a whale of a time. She's become best friends with Robbie, Tony and Jenna's foster son. The lad seems a bit odd to me, very shy and reserved, but he's obsessed with chess, and Lucy has got the bug, too. They spend hours together in the kitchen, their heads almost touching over the chessboard. As far as I know, Lucy has never won a game, but that doesn't seem to matter to her. Robbie is her friend, so that's that.

Tony brought my work over from my old house. He gathered up my laptop and all the sketches from my conservatory and dumped them in the library. The room has a lovely *olde worlde* vibe to it. The walls are lined with bookshelves, and I reckon I've spotted a few first editions in among the ranks of leather-bound classics, not to mention the rather beautiful Turner watercolour hanging above the fireplace. I'm no expert but my educated guess would be that it's worth around fifty grand.

The men prefer to congregate in one of the drawing rooms where there are arcade games and a seventy-inch television, so hardly anyone ever goes in the library. It's a place for me to work if I want to. The light is okay, not quite as good as my own conservatory, but it'll do. It's the ideal spot to set to on our collage project.

We detour to the kitchen and raid the cupboards. We find half a packet of dried pasta shells, some spaghetti, rice, and breakfast cereals. On impulse, I investigate the first-aid box and discover some balls of cotton wool and a handful of those little cotton buds. We leave our stash in the library while we explore outdoors. I'm not sure who does the gardening around here, but the grounds are well tended. I wouldn't call them pretty, exactly, the lawns and

woodland are too utilitarian for that, but the landscaping is natural and attractive. We find leaves of all shapes and colours and collect them in a plastic bucket. There are wildflowers, too, primroses, violets, and plenty I can't name. We gather samples to add to the collection, and even some tiny stones of different colours.

"Do we have any big sheets of paper, Mummy?" Lucy wonders as we survey our finds, spread out on the polished mahogany table.

"I'll ask Ruth. We'll need newspaper, too, or a tablecloth or something." I shudder at the thought of what a liberal dose of PVA glue will do to that gleaming surface. I bet the table is all of two hundred years old.

Ruth comes up with all that's needed and more besides. She digs out some rolls of surplus wallpaper which had been tucked away in the attic, some plastic sheeting, a few random rolls of knitting wool, and a bag of old clothes which we can cut up. She and baby Faith are to join us in our great endeavour.

Faith perches on Ruth's lap, and Noah is on mine. Lucy is in charge of all things technical, in particular the cutting and sticking. We all chip in design ideas. We're making a sea scene, so the wallpaper has been lightly dyed with a pale green made from some of our leaves. Fishes and other creatures are crafted from cut-out leaves, eyes and fins from bits and pieces we found in the kitchen. Lucy has a fabulous time, the centre of attention for once, and the little ones are contented too.

"I enjoyed that," Ruth announces when our masterpiece is looking more or less complete. "I'd never have thought that up. Where did you learn this stuff?"

"It's my job. I'm an artist."

"Even so, I wouldn't have thought to make an octopus out of four pairs of old tights."

I eye the octopus in question. "He is rather splendid," I agree.

"He needs a crown," Lucy exclaims. "Then he'll be the Sea King." She proceeds to make one out of this morning's empty yoghurt pot.

"I'll remember to save things like that in the future," Ruth says. "For our next project."

Lucy beams at her. "Yes! We can make a castle next time. With a moat, and horses and a village around it."

"You'd like Caraksay, then. There's no moat or horses, but there is a castle. And a village, sort of." Ruth bounces her baby on her knee. "I think

we need to change her nappy. What about Noah?”

“Yes. Probably.” I’ve set up a low table in the corner for this purpose, well stocked with disposable nappies, nappy sacks, and wipes.

Ruth leads the way and sets to work while I explain to Lucy about washing her brushes before we put everything away.

“Can we put our collage on the wall?” she asks.

“Maybe. In our room. Lovely as he is, I can’t somehow see our octopus in pride of place in the Edwardian drawing room.”

“No. He needs to be where everyone can see him. What about—?”

“He can go in the hall. Then everyone will be able to admire him when they come in.”

I glance up from tending to Noah. Jack has entered the library in search of his family, I suppose, and he’s studying our artwork. He takes his daughter from Ruth and kisses the pair of them. “I brought bagels for lunch.”

Ruth beams at him. “My favourite. We’ll be along in a minute. I’ll just help Molly clear away.”

“It’s okay. I can manage...”

“I’ll help Molly.”

I hadn’t noticed Nico. He must have come in behind Jack. He picks up a handful of coloured yarn from the floor and tosses it into our bucket with what’s left of our treasures.

“Can I have bagels, too?” Lucy whoops. “Do you have chocolate spread?” She’s already heading for the door.

“We do. And peanut butter,” Jack replies. “I was tipped off.”

“Lucy, wait. We—”

Too late. She’s already gone.

Ruth holds out her arms for Noah. “I’ll take him if you like, and you two can finish up here. I’ll get those gannets to save you something but I’d better hurry while there’s anything left.”

“There’s no need. I mean, I can...”

“Thanks, Ruth. We won’t be long.” Nico is picking up the spare pebbles and bits of pasta, dropping everything into the bucket. “Molly, can you grab that end?” He takes hold of the unfurled wallpaper, careful not to smudge the expertly crafted design. “We can leave this to dry on the windowsill.”

Left with no alternative, I rush to help him. Once the collage itself is safe, it takes just a few minutes to collect up the rest of the debris.

“I’m sorry,” I begin. “I’m not usually so messy. Lucy gets a bit

enthusiastic.”

“Good. I’m glad. Tell me about your art. You said you were a professional, is that right?”

“Yes. Sculptures and portraits mostly. And I teach at a college, or I used to.”

“Do you sell your stuff?”

“Are you asking as a potential customer? Are you a critic?”

“Fuck, no. Well, I might buy a piece if I liked it, but what I know about art would fit on a postage stamp. I’m interested in you, though.”

“Me? Why?”

“I’m not a guy who likes to fuck and run.”

“Oh. That.” I can’t quite meet his dark-brown gaze. “I was thinking we might try to pretend it never happened.”

He shakes his head. “Not a chance.”

“I thought, with you avoiding me since...”

“I wasn’t avoiding you. I’ve been busy.” He takes my chin between both his palms and tilts my face up towards his. “Never stopped thinking about you, though.”

“We shouldn’t have done what we did.”

“Bollocks.”

“No. Seriously. It was a mistake.”

“I don’t think so. I intend to do it again. And again. In fact, maybe right now...”

“Nico! We can’t.” I shoot a glance at the still-open door. “What if someone was to come in?”

“Is that your best excuse? What about ‘I don’t want to’ or ‘I don’t fancy you’?”

“It was a one-off. I wouldn’t normally behave like that. You must think I’m a... a...”

“A beautiful woman who deserves to be appreciated?”

“Not exactly.”

“Well, that is what I think. So, here’s my question. Are you going to nip over there, close that door and turn the key in the lock, or do we head off to the kitchen to pig out on bagels and gunk?”

“I...”

“It’s a simple enough question, Molly.” His tone has dropped to a seductive rumble. His thumbs caress my lower lip, and he holds my gaze

effortlessly. “Door or bagels?”

I hesitate, but only for a moment. “Door,” I whisper, barely able to believe that’s my voice, me saying this thing.

Me *doing* this thing.

I scurry across the room to the door, take a moment to check the corridor outside and find it deserted. I slide back into the tower room, close the door gently, and lock it. I turn to regard Nico.

He quirks his lip and beckons me with a fluttery motion of the fingers of both hands. I rush at him, swing my legs up to straddle his waist, and clamp my lips onto his.

Mistake or not, I’m in this hook, line, and sinker.

CHAPTER 9

Nico

I WASN'T LYING when I said I'd been busy. Tony and I have spent the last couple of days bullying tame officials at the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to swing bail for Jonas Bairstow. Our man, complete with crutches, was finally spat out of Barlinnie Jail first thing this morning.

We picked him up within the hour. He's currently residing in our kill room in the basement until we have time to interrogate him properly. He won't be going anywhere, and I have time to turn my attention to more pressing matters.

Like Molly.

Amelia Lowe, known as Molly, renowned artist and sculptor with several sold-out exhibitions to her name in most major European cities. Whilst I was cooling my heels in the corridors of power, I had time to do a spot of Googling. There was a wealth of information about Molly, so I really had no need to quiz her about her work. I suppose I was just interested to hear how she'd describe herself.

From my research, I know she specialises in contemporary sculpture and her pieces sell for five-figure sums. She is exhibited in the finest galleries in London, New York, Las Vegas, Dubai, and is in demand for prestigious lecture tours. Her work is mainly ceramics, but she paints, too. Portraits mainly, and usually by commission. An original Amelia Lowe will set you back the price of an average house. No wonder she could simply up and leave her old life behind and start over.

Jack did the right thing, offering to display that collage in the entrance hall at Caernbro Ghyll. An original Lowe, it's probably going to be worth a fortune.

At this precise moment, though, it's the woman not the artist who has my attention.

I cup my hands under her bottom to support her while I return the kiss. It's a pity the table is still strewn with art materials, I could have deposited her there. I break the kiss momentarily and glance around for an alternative.

I settle on the chaise longue. A delicate-looking piece, it must be tougher than its appearance suggests because it's been around for a couple of centuries at least. I hope so anyway, because I have a workout in mind.

I manoeuvre towards it and drop to my knees to deposit Molly on the embroidered taffeta cushion, then return to the kiss. She opens for me, accepts my tongue when I thrust it between her lips. I lean in for a spot of leisurely tongue-fucking, the prelude to the rest of what I have in mind.

She's wearing a loose-fitting long-sleeved T-shirt and chino pants, and my main aim right now is to divest her of them. I peel away her top to find another delightful bra beneath. Fashioned in pale-pink silk and artfully crafted to make a nonsense of the laws of gravity, it displays her to devastating effect.

Molly Lowe appreciates beautiful things. Stands to reason, I suppose, since that's what she creates.

She helpfully raises her hips to allow me to remove her chinos. It doesn't surprise me to find matching knickers, which I leave in place for now. I also enjoy the finer things in life, and Molly is all of that and more.

Our first time was a bit on the frenzied side, I have to admit that, but I won't make the same mistake again. This time will be slower, more leisurely. I mean to savour her.

She reaches for my shirt and fumbles with the buttons. Too fast. I capture her hand and raise it behind her head. I do the same with the other one.

"Keep them there," I command.

Her eyelids flutter open. Her brow furrows ever so slightly.

"Trust me," I murmur.

She closes her eyes again and relaxes against the upholstery.

I'm wearing a business suit, required dress for a morning spent hanging around in courtrooms and lawyers' offices. I shrug the jacket off and loosen my tie, then I have a better idea and remove it altogether. I wrap the silk

fabric around her wrists then loop the end around the arm of the chaise longue and fasten it off there.

She tugs against the bonds, but only briefly.

“Trust me?” I repeat, making it a question now rather than a command.

She pauses for a moment, then nods.

I kneel beside the chaise longue and admire the feast on offer. Slowly, because the door is locked and I have all the time in the world, I explore her body with my lips, my tongue. I nuzzle my way across her clavicle, kiss my way down the valley between her breasts, exquisitely framed in the designer underwear, then across her abdomen to her navel. I pause there, dip my tongue in the sensual indent and inhale the fresh, earthy scent of her.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Molly Lowe. I thought so the first time I saw you, on your doorstep. The day I brought Molly home.”

“You never... I mean, you just left...” Her voice is fractured, as though she’s struggling to catch her breath.

“It was complicated. And Lucy needed you right then.”

The circumstances on that day were just... awful. The kid came first, not my rampant dick. Had it been different, had I spotted her across a bar or a theatre, I think I’d have left scorch marks on the floor getting over to her.

“Yes. Of course... Aagh...”

She emits a satisfied cry when I lift her left leg and bend it at the knee, then gently shove it against the low back of the chaise longue, opening her to me. I admire the growing damp patch on the delicate gusset of her knickers. I love it when a woman’s enthusiasm matches mine.

I hook my finger under the edge of the lacy fabric and nudge it aside to reveal her quivering pussy. Gorgeous. I lean in and inhale again.

“Christ, you smell good...”

“Nico...”

“Shh.” I trace the outline of her entrance with the tip of my tongue, then use my thumbs to part the two lips. I admire the sight for a few moments, one seriously wet and ready female, then I point my tongue and dip it inside.

Molly goes insane. Thrashing, squirming, thrusting. Gasping and moaning my name, she writhes under my questing tongue. Her hands are secured, but I have to anchor her in place with my arm across her stomach to avoid being bucked off. Neither of us would want that.

The damp fabric is clinging to her, impeding my access to her clit. That has to stop. I consider simply tearing the offending lace but think better of it.

Why destroy something so beautiful? I pause to peel the underwear away, first one leg, then the other, and drop the scrap of prettiness on the polished wood floor. Then I return to my task.

I slide one finger inside her, then a second, and take her clit between my lips. I suck gently, then increase the pressure when she lets out another eager moan. I briefly consider slowing everything down but decide against it. I mean to take plenty of time over this but will use it to repeat the exercise rather than draw it out.

I scrape her plump clit with my teeth, then open my mouth and draw in as much of the sensitive flesh as I can. I caress her with the flat of my tongue, at the same time scissoring my fingers in her snug channel.

“Oh God...” She grinds out the words and tugs against her bonds. The tie was only loosely fastened, and she’s able to wriggle free.

She grasps my hair in her hands. I consider telling her to put them back where I placed them relent when she suddenly soars. I let her fly, working my fingers inside her and suckling her clit while she shudders through her orgasm. Her inner muscles contract violently, squeezing around my fingers, and her sensitive bud seems to pulse to the same rhythm.

I draw the moment out as long as I can, but eventually she relaxes under me as she floats down from the high. Her fingers release their death grip on my hair, and I raise my head.

Her eyes are closed. A contented smirk plays across her mouth. Her nostrils flare and she heaves in a satiated sigh.

Nice. Now for Round Two.

I shove her bent knees a little higher, tipping her pretty bottom up for my perusal. My fingers are still inside her, so I withdraw them almost entirely, then slowly impale her once more. I do that several times, just until she starts to take notice again. When her eyelids part to reveal her cornflower-coloured irises, I twist my hand to set the tip of my thumb at her anus.

Her eyes widen.

I press gently.

She gasps. “Nico? What...?”

I insert the tip of my thumb and raise one eyebrow. If she wants to protest, now is the time.

She doesn’t, so I apply more pressure. The entire length of my thumb is buried in her rear hole. I wait for a moment, let her adjust and process, then I lower my head and take her clit between my lips again.

She goes off like a firework. This time her climax is quick and powerful, a bright flash of orgasmic light, surging from nowhere and gone almost as quickly as it emerged.

She's panting, startled at her own response.

I rock my hand back and forth, burying first my thumb, then my fingers, alternating between the two channels. I'm slow, drawing out each stroke, enjoying the sight of my digits driving in and out of her.

Slowly, softly, her arousal builds again. I see it in the dilated pupils, the rapid rise and fall of her chest. The helpless flutter of her inner walls and the sudden contracting of her pussy. Her body jerks, convulses. She lets out a long sigh, comes for a third time, then goes limp.

I withdraw my fingers but continue to caress her pussy lips with the backs of my knuckles. I wait, give her time to regain her senses, then I let her lower her legs and swing her body around, so she is half on, half off the chaise longue. I spread her thighs and at last release my cock.

"You still with me, Molly?"

She lifts her eyelids and smiles. "Please..." is her only response.

"You want me to fuck you?" *Always worth checking...*

"Please," she repeats, more forcefully this time. "Quickly. Do it now!"

I fist my dick and position the crown at her entrance. One sharp rock of my hips, and I'm balls-deep inside her. In Heaven.

She's as snug as I remember. And hot. Scorching, hugging me with a pressure nothing short of exquisite. I draw back, then drive my cock deep again, relishing the friction of her body wrapping itself around me.

"Christ, girl," I mutter, holding still for a moment to savour the rush of exquisite sensation. "Fuck, you're beautiful."

"You, too," she whispers.

She reaches for my forearms, planted on either side of her hips and hangs on as she raises her feet to lock them behind my back. She rolls her hips as though to urge me on, and her pussy tightens around me. I wouldn't have thought it possible for her to be any tighter, but there you have it.

I begin thrusting again, short, sharp jabs at first, then lengthening my strokes when the pleasure builds. I adjust to find the angle that will put pressure on that most sensitive spot at the front, and I know when I hit it because she shudders violently and cries out something unintelligible.

My balls clench; I'm close to coming but I need her to fly again before I do.

I reach for her wrist and place her own fingers on her clit, then I slide my hand under us to find her arse again. She obeys my wordless command and rubs her fingertips over the swollen bud, while I drive my middle finger full length into her rear channel. The increase in pressure almost has me blowing my load right there and then. Only the thin membrane separates my finger and my cock. I think I might lose my mind, but who cares? Sanity is overrated.

Ripples surge the length of my erection when she climaxes again. She arches under me, thrusting hard against me as she finds her release.

That's it. My nuts aren't waiting another second. They contract so violently it actually fucking hurts and eject streams of cum into her. It's hot and wet, wicked, dirty and gloriously sensual, filling her channel and trickling out to coat her buttocks and my balls.

When it's over I collapse onto her, gasping to get my breath back. I remember my manners and drop an appreciative kiss on her mouth, then force myself to withdraw from her, shift over and take my own weight. She's only half my size, I could crush her.

"There are probably some tissues somewhere," I mumble, my face pressed into the cushion.

"Okay," she replies, though neither of us are in a state to go and find them right now.

I give myself a few moments to recover, then I push myself up onto my knees. "Fuck, that was..."

"Yes. I know. Totally." She's still splayed across the upholstery and showing no sign of moving.

"You all right? I wasn't too rough?"

"Were you rough?"

Evidently not. I need to work on that. I get to my feet and pause for a moment to let the earth stop moving before I zip myself up and stumble across the room in search of said tissues. I find a box on the windowsill and bring them back to her, then grab a handful.

"I can do that," she tells me and reaches for the tissues.

"No. Let me." I mop up most of the stickiness, dabbing at her until I'm satisfied she's fit to be presented to her daughter again. "Next time, I'll fuck you in my bed. You won't need to clean up after. At least, not straight away."

"Something to look forward to," she observes with a wry grin.

I dump the tissues on the floor for disposal later, and hand her her rather

delightful underwear. “I love your taste in lingerie.”

“Thank you.”

She pulls the pants back on, then the bra, while I hunt around for the rest of her clothes. I find them behind the chaise longue and help her back into them.

“Do you suppose there’s anything left in the kitchen?” she wonders as she fastens her chinos. “I think we worked up an appetite.”

My stomach growls in agreement. I offer her my hand, and she takes it. We make our way along the stone-flagged corridor to the great hall, then through that, heading in the direction of the kitchen. Voices drift towards us, a blend of male, female, and children’s chatter.

Molly pauses and tugs on my hand. “I just want you to know, I don’t…”

“Don’t what?”

“I don’t do this often. Sleep with men I hardly know, I mean. I realise what you must be thinking, with Borys and Noah and all that, but—”

“I’m not thinking anything. What about you?”

“Me? What would I be thinking?”

I shrug. “Successful artist slumming it with criminal thug? I might just be after you for your money.”

“Are you a thug?”

I notice she doesn’t quibble with ‘criminal’. Or money.

“On occasion,” I admit, offering neither excuse nor apology. It is what it is.

“I owe you everything. You’re welcome to my money, there’s no need to butter me up with banging orgasms. Not that I’m objecting, I just wanted to be clear.”

I frame her jaw between my palms. “Noted. And for what it’s worth, you owe me nothing. Tony and I stepped in to help Lucy because we were there, and we could. She was a little kid in trouble, it was the right thing to do. We came to your house the other night because she told us you were being attacked. A vulnerable woman, on her own, it was the least you could expect. This is different, and also in the interests of clarity, I wanted you before I knew who you were, *what* you were. I respect all of that, your talent, your success, but I’d want you anyway. Let’s not clutter this up with other baggage.”

She holds my gaze, hers steady and considering. Eventually, she nods. “Okay. No baggage. Let’s just… see what happens.”

I kiss her forehead. I know full well what's going to happen, and as often as I can contrive it. There's something about Molly that has my dick in a vice, and I'm not complaining.

"Let's go and eat." I take her hand again, and we head for the kitchen.

CHAPTER 10

Nico

BAIRSTOW CLEARLY DOESN'T APPRECIATE our hospitality. The din echoes in the semi-darkness as Tony and I make our way down the underground passageway towards his cell. He's screeching obscenities and by the sound of it trying to boot down the door, though how he's managing that with two broken legs I'm not entirely sure. His efforts will be fruitless, it's made of solid steel, but that doesn't stop him.

God loves a tryer.

We arrive at the entrance to the cell, and I slide back the viewing panel to check what's happening inside. Our man is lurching around the small space on crutches, one leg in plaster from ankle to thigh, the other just as far as the knee.

"Call that breaking his legs?" I grouse.

Tony shrugs. "My bad. I could have another go..."

"Probably not worth it now. Shall we go in and have a little chat?"

I don't suppose there's a lot he can tell us that we don't already know from scrolling through his phone messages, but he can fill in the details and maybe pad out the background. More to the point, he deserves to pay for what he tried to do. Fifteen years in the paedo wing at Barlinnie might do the job, but I suspect we can also deliver a more personalised version of justice well enough. And save the taxpayer a lot of money.

I key in the code to unlock the cell door, and we step inside.

Bairstow never really got a clear sight of me on the day we interrupted his

kidnap attempt, but he takes one look at Tony and pales.

“You.” he snarls.

“Nice seeing you again. It’s been a while.”

Tony saunters towards him and, sensibly, Bairstow backs off. He waggles one crutch at the pair of us in some sort of attempt to threaten us, while he uses the other to prop himself upright.

“Who said he could keep those?” I ask.

“Search me.” Tony angles around and suddenly kicks out to send the crutch Bairstow is leaning on flying across the cell.

Bairstow lets out a yowl as his weight is flung onto his other leg, but he somehow regains his balance and glares at us.

“Who the fuck are you? What do you want? I’m under police protection, I am...”

“I don’t see any police here. Do you?” My tone is deliberately soft. “You never thanked us for getting you out of jail.”

He peers at us in bewilderment, then pales even further when the reality of his situation finally dawns on him.

“What’s this about?” he asks warily. “I told the police...”

“We don’t give a fuck what line you sold to the police. This is about Molly Lowe and her children. We need to know exactly what your interest in them is.”

“Who? I don’t know any Molly Lowe...”

“Ah. So, here it begins.” I advance on him. “Shall we just cut the bullshit and get on with business?”

“What are you on about? I don’t—”

I boot his remaining crutch away, and he crumples to the stone floor with a scream. He rolls and writhes on the cold slabs, whimpering about being an injured man and knowing nothing about anything.

I lean against the cell door, my arms folded across my chest. Tony perches on the edge of the stone bunk built into the far end of the cell, the only piece of furniture unless you count the bucket in the corner. He pulls Bairstow’s phone from his pocket and opens it up using the code provided by Frankie.

He slants a bored glance at the man on the floor. “Shut the fuck up, arsehole. I’m talking.”

Bairstow continues to protest and plead from his position at Tony’s feet, earning him a vicious kick in the ribs.

“I said, shut up.”

Tony waits until the whimpering subsides to a steady wheeze, then continues. “You were busy, just before you got yourself arrested. Weren’t you, Jonas? I can call you Jonas, can’t I?”

No answer, so Tony plants his foot on the larger of the somewhat grubby plaster casts. “I’m talking to you, knob-cheese.”

Bairstow screams again. I have to assume Tony is pressing on his injury.

“Are you going to answer my friend, or do we need to remove that pot with a sledgehammer?” I offer him the choice.

“I don’t know anything. I just wanted to talk to the kid. I never meant—
Aaaagh!” Tony’s entire weight is brought to bear on the broken fibula, reducing Bairstow to a snotty, sobbing mess.

“Cut the crap,” I growl and drop to my haunches beside him. “You know, and we know, how this will end. You’ll tell us all we want to know, and it’ll be the truth. The only question is, how much will we need to hurt you to get us there. And that’s up to you. The easy way. Well, easier. Or hard.”

“I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you. Just let me go after. Back to prison, I don’t mind...”

“How noble of you. Okay, shall we start over. What do you have against Molly Lowe?”

“I... I...”

Tony applies more weight to the plaster cast, which puts an end to the gibberish.

“I was paid to track her down. I’m a detective. A private investigator...”

“Who do you work for?”

“Myself. I was in the police, but—”

“Drummed out? A bent copper?” An educated guess.

“It was just a few fags that went missing from a lorry. Everyone does it ...”

I shrug. I daresay he’s right, but Bairstow was stupid enough to get caught.

“Aren’t you going to have a good time inside? Bent copper *and* a child molester. I’d give the showers a wide berth if I were you.” I’m beginning to rethink the plan to put him out of his misery here and now. A lengthy stint at the mercy of good, honest cons is perhaps a more fitting punishment.

“Who paid you to find Molly?”

There’s just a slight hesitation, then, “Her ex. Borys Glodowski.”

“Who’s he?”

“Some art guy. Buys and sells paintings.”

“How do you know him?” Bairstow doesn’t look the artsy type to me. I doubt he and Borys move in the same circles.

“He came to me. I was recommended. I do a good job and no questions asked.”

“Indeed? And what did he want doing, no questions asked?”

“It was a simple track and trace. Find his ex-girlfriend who ran off with his kid.”

“Okay. And then?”

“What do you mean?”

“Once you found her, what then?”

“Just tell him where she was. That’s what I did.”

“Is it? Is that all?”

“Yes. I swear...”

Fucking moron. Has he forgotten we were actually there?

Tony and I exchange a glance, and Tony stamps on his right leg again.

We wait until Bairstow ceases his screaming, then I resume the questioning.

“Shall we forget the bullshit and cut to the bit where you snatch a ten-year-old girl off the street and throw her in the back of your van. What was that about?”

“Nothing,” he gasps. “I never meant no harm. I was going to let her go.”

“Really?”

“Yes. After a day or so...”

“And what would have happened to her during that day or so? If we hadn’t turned up and wrecked your plans?”

He has the audacity to look outraged. “What do you take me for? Some sort of kiddie fiddler?”

Is he fucking serious? “Well, since you mention it...”

“I’m not like that! I would never...”

“You’re a fucking liar. A dirty old nonce. You expect us to believe you were only going to treat her to jelly and biscuits and let her go after a couple of days? She’d seen you. She would have told the police, given a description. Her DNA was all over your fucking van. The police would have been onto you faster than you can say ‘Rolf Harris’. You were really going to let all that happen?”

“I’d have got rid of the van,” he mutters.

“You drove her into the fucking industrial estate,” Tony growls. “Lonely place, no witnesses.”

“I didn’t want anyone finding her.”

“No. I bet you didn’t.” Tony settles the weight of his foot on the plaster cast again, then grimaces at the ear-splitting screech. “What were you really going to do?” he asks, once the din subsides again. “And cut the crap. We’re getting bored.”

“It was to be a swap.” Bairstow whimpers. “The kid for the baby. That bitch could have her girl back if she gave Borys his son.”

I nod and meet Tony’s gaze. Now we’re getting to it. As we thought, a hostage.

“She would have been terrified,” I inform him softly. “Her mother would have been distraught. She’d probably have gone to the police in any case.”

“No, she wouldn’t. Not if she wanted to see her kid again.”

“Meaning what?” My tone is deceptively gentle. “What would have happened if she didn’t do as you said?”

“Nothing. I was just— Aaaagh!”

Tony does the honours again, just to keep our man focussed.

“Try again, arse-wipe.”

“It was up to Borys. He was the one calling the shots.” Bairstow is sobbing now, reduced to a snotty, snivelling mess.

“Borys wasn’t there. You were.”

“I did as I was told. What I was paid for, that’s all. Please, it’s the truth. You have to believe me. I would have let her go...”

“Well, you see, that’s the problem, Jonas.” I straighten to tower over him. “I don’t believe you. Neither does my colleague here. Isn’t that right?”

“Right,” Tony concurs.

“So, where does that leave us?”

“Please, I’m begging you...” Bairstow clutches the hem of my jeans and tries to drag himself off the floor. “It was just a job, a bit of work...”

“It was a ten-year-old girl,” I snarl. “Kidnapped. Terrorised. And if we hadn’t showed up and ruined your day, who knows what else? And now you’re telling us you were going to abduct a six-month-old baby, just because some greedy, fat, entitled bastard paid you to do it. You’re scum, Jonas. Pond life.”

“Please...”

“Prison’s too good for you. You’re not worth the drain on the taxpayer.”

“It’s Borys you need to be talking to. I can tell you where he is.” He claws at my ankle, abject desperation lacing every word.

“I know where he is, and yes, we will be having a word. I don’t think we need your help.”

“I can—”

“For fuck’s sake, shut it.” Tony looks to me. “Are we done here?”

“Yeah. I reckon so.” I draw my knife ready to do the honours.

Tony glances around the cell. “It’d be a pity to make a mess.”

He has a point. Up to now we’ve managed not to spill any blood. I suspect Bairstow has pissed himself, but that’s easy enough to sort with a swill of bleach. Bloodstains take a bit of shifting, and we’ve both got better things to be doing than cleaning up after this piece of shit.

“Back in a sec.” Tony strides out the door, leaving me to disengage Bairstow’s fingers from my jeans as best I can.

He’s back a minute later, a loop of rope over his arm. “You any good with nooses?” he asks me.

“Not my usual MO, but I can have a go.”

Bairstow lets out a despairing moan and at last relinquishes his grip on my ankle. He tries to crawl away, but there’s nowhere for him to go. We ignore his pathetic pleading and wailing as we set up what’s needed.

Our cells are all equipped with ceiling rings. They have a variety of handy uses and easily lend themselves to an impromptu hanging. Tony threads one end of the rope through while I fashion a noose at the other end.

“Do we need something for him to stand on?” I wonder.

“Nope. He can’t stand anyway. I’ll lift him up.”

“Fair enough. That should do.” I finish the noose and show Tony my handiwork.

“Great. Right, then, Jonas. Let’s be having you.”

We haul Bairstow upright, and Tony holds him up while I arrange the noose around his neck. The man sobs quietly now, having seemingly abandoned any hope of a reprieve.

“Is there a particular way this should go?” I enquire. “I read somewhere that there’s a science to this. Getting the drop right, and the weight. For a quick kill.”

Tony’s not impressed. “Probably, but I daresay the end result will be the same. We’re not bothered about a quick kill, are we? Doesn’t matter how

long it takes as long as he's dead at the end of it. Have you got a cable tie for his wrists?"

"Somewhere." I dig through my pockets. "Yes. Here."

I secure his hands behind his back, then grab hold of the loose end of the rope. I wind it around my wrist and brace to haul on it.

"It's easier if you don't struggle and fight it," Tony advises the condemned man before releasing him to stand or fall as he will. He joins me and seizes the rope. "We go on three. Okay?"

Bairstow doesn't heed the advice he's been given. He struggles and fights to the very end, which is longer in coming than any of us really want. The bastard is a dead weight. Quite literally, by the time he finally goes limp.

"WHAT DID YOU DO WITH THE BODY?" Ethan asks over a mug of black coffee.

He and Aaron have joined us at Caernbro Ghyll for a planning session. Our normal business goes on. We have number of protection defaulters in need of a less-than-gentle reminder of their obligations and are carving the visits up between us.

"The usual," I reply. "I dumped him in the river. He's probably out at sea by now."

"Fair enough. What about Glodowski?"

I meet my boss's steady gaze. "Glad you brought him up. I was thinking he needs a hard word, at least. Those other shits were the monkeys. He's the organ grinder."

"True. He'll just hire more thugs. What about the woman and her kids? Are they still here?"

"For the time being. It's safer."

"Not to mention convenient for you. You're fucking her? Right?"

I see no point in denying it. "Right."

"Is it serious? She comes with baggage. A lot of it."

"I like kids. Just need to sort out that arsewipe, Borys. Then we'll be peachy."

"It's not just the kids. She's well-known, a famous artist. She earns a fuck-load more than you do."

I shrug, genuinely not interested in Molly's bank balance. "So? I'm a modern man."

"Does she feel the same way? I didn't get the impression she exactly

approves of our line of business.”

I can't deny that either. “I'm working on her. She's a practical woman. And flexible.”

“Who you fuck is your business, but I don't want any hassle.”

“Beth was pretty disapproving of the family business when we first got back together.” This from Aaron, who has been silent up until now. “She's found a way to live with it. Faith, too.”

Aaron's partner and her mother both live on Caraksay. Neither grew up in this life, unlike Ethan's wife, Cristina, but they somehow manage to turn a blind eye most of the time.

“Same with Ruth,” Jack chips in. “And she's an ex-copper.”

Ethan nods slowly. “Okay. We'll see how it goes. Nice kids, I grant you that.” For a hardened crime boss, Ethan Savage is putty in tiny hands. “So, about Glodowski. Do we know where he is?”

I've been doing my homework, namely quizzing Molly for information. “His family have a yacht, currently moored at Albert Dock in Liverpool. Molly tells me he spends a lot of time there.”

“That's handy. Jed O'Neill has a warehouse not far from there. I daresay he'll let you use it.”

Jed is Ethan's brother-in-law, boss of the Irish Mob and a close ally.

“I'll give him a ring.”

Matters settled, we divide into pairs to go about our visits. Enforcement can be dirty work, but someone has to do it.

CHAPTER 11

Nico

MISTRAL ROCKS GENTLY against its moorings, the brilliant white bodywork gleaming in the early morning sunlight. She's a beautiful vessel, almost as big as *The Lydia*, the Savages' ocean-going yacht moored off Caraksay.

Dodgy art must pay well. Those things cost about a million quid a metre, and I'd guess *Mistral* to be around twenty metres in length. I'm perched on a rooftop nearly a mile from the dock but with an uninterrupted view of the target. I watch through my high-powered scope for any sign of life on the vessel. Tony fidgets next to me.

"Anything happening?" he demands, for about the thousandth time in the last half hour.

"You'd never make a sniper," I murmur. "You haven't the patience for it."

"Fuck patience," he growls. "I left my nice warm bed for this. I want some fucking action."

"A light just came on in one of the forward cabins. Probably crew."

"Why don't we just storm the fucking boat and drag him off if he's there."

"Because if he isn't he'd be forewarned. The thing about yachts is, they move. He could be miles away by this time tomorrow."

Tony subsides into restless silence. Or as silent as he can manage while I keep my eyes on the *Mistral* where someone seems to be stirring.

My patience is rewarded a few minutes later when a pudgy individual in

brightly coloured shorts and a Bermuda shirt emerges onto the deck. Barefoot, he stretches and saunters over to lean on the rail at the stern, his shirt flapping in the stiff breeze. He lights a cigarette and proceeds to send plumes of white smoke billowing behind him.

“Fucking poser. Thinks he’s sunning himself on the bloody Med,” I mutter.

“What? Have you spotted him?” Tony is immediately on alert.

“Yup. Down there.” I step away from the scope to let him have a look. “He’s a perfect target.”

“Could you hit him from here?” Tony wonders.

“Oh yes.”

“Hmm. That’d be the simple solution, wouldn’t it?”

I shrug. All options are open as far as I’m concerned. “Let’s go and round him up.”

THERE’S nothing even resembling security on the *Mistral*, unless you count an elderly captain and a lad who mops the decks and runs errands. Both disappear into the highly polished woodwork at a snarl from Tony when we cross the narrow gangplank. Borys shows a bit more interest, demanding to know what the fuck we think we’re doing.

“Morning, Borys,” I greet him. “Time for a little trip.”

“Are you mad? Get off my fucking yacht.”

“Might be. Mad, that is. Pissed off, certainly. I want a word with you.”

“Go fuck yourself. This is private property.”

“Oh dear, like that, is it? We’ll be doing this the hard way, then.” I draw my weapon, a Glock handgun, and train the muzzle on a spot between his eyes. “Before you ask, I’m a decent shot. And you have one chance to come with us quietly before we start making a mess, with you right in the middle of it. On your own two feet, or in a body bag. Choose now.”

“Who do you think—?”

“What’s happening? Borys, who are these men?”

I slant a glance in the direction of the hatch leading to the lower deck. A woman in her mid-thirties, attractive if you like stick-thin peroxide blondes, is framed in the doorway. I assume her to be this shit’s wife, though who knows? Wide-eyed, she swings her gaze from Borys to me, to Tony and back again. Unlike him, she’s fully dressed and looks to have been up and about

for hours, though we saw no sign of it in our surveillance. She clutches the rail with one hand and her bony chest with the other.

“Our business doesn’t concern you, ma’am,” I inform her. “I suggest you go back below and stay there.”

“No. I want to know what’s going on. This is my husband, and—”

“Mrs Glodowski. You need to fuck off, right now,” Tony growls.

I suspect she’d have raised her eyebrows if her skin wasn’t already stretched so tight that most facial expressions would be beyond her. “But—”

“Right now,” Tony repeats and takes a menacing step in her direction.

It’s enough to convince her. She ducks back into the stairwell and scuttles down onto a lower deck, out of sight.

Borys has my undivided attention again. “Right. Where were we? Ah, yes, you were coming with us.”

“Like fuck I am. You can—”

I cock the firearm mechanism with a loud click. “I said, you’re coming with us. Now.”

“All right, all right. I’m coming. I just need to—”

“Now!” Tony has edged around behind him and gives him a vicious shove between the shoulder blades.

Borys staggers forward and narrowly avoids ending up on his knees.

I gesture to him to start making his way down the gangplank. This will be his final chance to do it under his own steam.

“What’s this about?” he demands as he weaves his way onto the dock. “Where are we going?”

“Like I said, I want a word.”

“We can talk on the yacht. Over a drink, maybe a spot of breakfast...”

“Not hungry.”

We reach the SUV Tony and I used to drive down from Glasgow this morning.

“Get in.”

Borys reaches for the passenger door handle.

“Not there. You’re in the boot.”

He swirls around to glare at Tony, who has opened the rear hatch for him. “I’m not fucking—”

I fire off a shot which takes a lump out of his big toe.

Borys yowls and dances on the spot, leaving spatters of blood on the smooth planks of the dock.

“Get in. You’re making a mess,” Tony snarls. He grabs him by the back of his shirt collar and bundles him into the boot. “Now shut the fuck up before my friend here decides to shoot your nuts off, too.”

Borys huddles in a ball, whimpering. Seems he’s taking us seriously at last.

Tony slams the boot shut and gets in the driver’s seat. “So, shall we see what Jed’s hospitality is like?”

THE WAREHOUSE IS LESS than five minutes away from the dock, but we go the scenic route, circling the city to confuse our reluctant passenger. It’s a good forty minutes later when I throw open the boot. Borys blinks up at me.

“Right. Get out.”

“I can’t walk. My foot...”

“I suggest you fucking do. If you think I’m hauling your fat arse about, you’re wrong.”

He scrambles out of the boot, then drops to his knees. “Please, let me go. I swear I don’t know anything about anything. You’ve got the wrong man.”

“I don’t think so. Stop snivelling, get up, and come with me.”

He manages to drag himself upright again, then forgets about his injured toe and decides to make a run for it. Fucking moron.

Tony takes him to the ground before he’s got more than a few paces. If it had been me I might have stuck a boot in his ribs by way of a lesson, but Tony has more forbearance than I do. He simply drags him back onto his feet and shoves him in the direction of the warehouse.

“Get your arse in there,” he snarls. “You’re really starting to piss us off now.”

Borys limps along in front of us, protesting all the way.

“This is that brother-in-law of mine, isn’t it? He’s the one paying you. Arrogant bastard, thinks he’s a cut above. That bitch is always complaining, snivelling to him...”

He pauses to take in the cavernous space beyond the huge roller shutter door which has been raised to a height of about five feet, just enough to allow us to bend and step inside.

Jack is already there. He glances up from his phone and nods to Tony and me, totally ignoring Borys.

Borys returns the compliment and continues to complain. “Do you know

who I am? I've got connections, people who will—"

"Shut the fuck up," I snarl. "No one's interested in who you know. You're on your own, asshole."

The space is more or less empty. A few crates of something or other are stacked at one end, but otherwise it's just us and the dust motes which dance in the chilly morning sunlight.

Borys glares at me. I get the impression the reality of his dilemma is beginning to dawn on him, but still his belligerence persists.

"So, what's this about? I'm a busy man, I have stuff to do."

He cuts an almost comical figure in his garish psychedelic shorts and Bermuda shirt, his toe still seeping blood. He slaps his arms across his chest to ward off the cold.

It is bit nippy. I'm glad of my quilted Barbour jacket and boots as I stroll over to where Jack lounges against a reinforced steel column. "Is everything ready?"

"Reckon so. In there." He gestures with his thumb towards a metal door at the far end of the warehouse. "Ethan's on his way, but he says to get on with shit without him. Don't do this one too much damage, though. Apparently, the boss wants a word, too."

I hadn't expected Ethan Savage to be personally interested in today's proceedings, but perhaps he's on the mainland on other business. Whatever, this is turning into a long day, and I'm keen to get started.

"You, come with me," I bark.

Borys remains rooted to the spot.

"Are you deaf?"

"What are you...? Why...?" he stammers.

Tony grabs him by the elbow and propels him across the floor. "You need to do as you're fucking told."

Borys puts up a fight. I don't blame him, but his efforts are futile. Tony is twice his size and not missing half his big toe.

I open the door, and Tony bundles our guest through.

We're in a smaller room, and one equipped for the sort of purpose we have in mind. A metal table stands in the middle of the floor. The legs at one end are propped on rough-cut planks of wood from a pallet, raising that end up by about six inches. A pile of grubby towels is strewn about the floor, along with an empty bucket.

A water butt stands a few feet from the table. I lift the lid to check. It's

half full, should be plenty for our needs.

Jack has followed us in, bringing with him a length of rope. “Do you need a hand?” he offers.

“Yeah, just while we get him set up. If you can take his feet...?” Tony shoves Borys over to the table. “Get on there, that’s a good lad.”

“Not a chance!” Borys makes another ill-fated attempt to escape, swinging a punch at Tony and trying to dive for the door.

The punch misses by about a yard, but Tony’s doesn’t. He lands his fist in Borys’s kidneys, then delivers a blow to his stomach to bring him gasping to his knees. He’s still gasping for breath when we haul him up onto the table, his head at the end sloping down, and lash him to it with the rope. A few loops around his chest, his abdomen, his hips, and his knees are enough to immobilise him but do nothing to shut him up. His roars of terror and outrage echo round the reinforced steel rafters.

“We need a bit of hush,” Tony grouses. “I can’t hear myself think.”

I pick up one of the towels from the floor and crumple one end of it into a ball which I shove between Borys’s teeth. “There. That should do it. Now, are you ready to listen?”

He glares at me, spluttering into the gag. Expletives, I don’t doubt, but who gives a fuck?

“We’re here to discuss Molly Lowe,” I inform him when he eventually falls silent. “And her children.”

My words give rise to another furious bout of wriggling, writhing, and swearing through the rolled-up towel. I believe I may make out ‘bitch’ and ‘fucking whore’ in among the rest of his garbled diatribe. I’m tempted to teach him some manners, but no one’s that interested in his opinion anyway.

“So, you admit you know her, then. That’s something. The problem is, you’ve been making yourself a bit of a nuisance.”

We’re treated to another round of muffled invective. It’s getting to be a bit wearing, so I wrap my fist around his injured toe and twist it. The ensuing scream beats even my rolled-up towel.

“So, I have your attention? About Molly...”

His jaw is working furiously, but he manages to contain his rage.

“First, you try to bully her into handing over her child to you...”

He starts again, presumably protesting that Noah is his. I put a stop to that by seizing his toe. He shuts up.

“As I was saying, you try the heavy tactics, and when that doesn’t work,

you send some half-wit to abduct her nine-year-old daughter. Am I right so far?”

I drag the towel from his mouth so he can answer, not that he seems inclined to do so. He tells me to fuck off, it’s none of my business.

I press on. “And, when that doesn’t work, you hire another meathead to actually break into her house and try to take the boy from his home. From his cot, for fuck’s sake. When he can’t find the baby, your thug turns on Molly. Do you know what he did to her?”

“How would I know? I wasn’t there.”

I notice he makes no attempt to deny his involvement.

“Waterboarding,” I offer by way of being helpful. “He was still on with it when we arrived.”

“So what? She’s alive, isn’t she? And she still has my son. If she thinks she can—”

“Yes, she’s alive. No thanks to your little helper. Waterboarding’s not usually fatal, though it can be. Some people do actually drown, or if they have a weak heart or whatever. Do you have a weak heart, Borys?”

“What? Why...?”

“Not that it matters. You’ll be getting a dose of your own medicine anyway. Seems only fair.”

I nod to Tony, who grasps the empty bucket by the handle and sets it down under the tap in the side of the water butt. He turns the tap on, and the water cascades forth. The sound of splashing echoes around the cavernous space.

“Is it full?”

“To the brim,” Tony confirms. He drags it over to the head end of the table.

I drop the towel in the water to get it dripping wet, then fling it over Borys’s face. “Sorry we couldn’t find nice, clean water for you. This stuff’s been in there a while, and it’s a bit smelly.”

“I spotted a dead rat in there when I checked earlier. It was at the bottom, so I couldn’t get it out.” Jack offers this additional titbit with a mock apologetic grin.

“Never mind, I’m sure we’ll manage.” I pick up the bucket. “You know how this goes, I daresay.”

Borys has no time to respond before I start pouring, directing the torrent of grimy water right into his mouth and nose. He bucks and squirms and

gurgles, but he's going nowhere. I take my time. I intend to make this experience as memorable for him as it was for Molly.

By the time the bucket is empty, he's gasping like a landed trout. I drag the towel away to allow him to draw a few steady breaths, just enough to remind him how refreshing oxygen can be.

"Fill that up again, would you?" I nudge the bucket with my foot.

"No. No more," Borys whimpers.

I lean over to smile into his pallid features. "That's where you're wrong, my friend. There's plenty more where that came from."

The sound of water streaming into the bucket sends Borys into another frenzy of wriggling and pleading. I've had enough of him for now, so I throw the towel over his head again.

"Ready?" I ask as I hoist the bucket high and poise for the second dose.

I catch him mid-scream, filling his throat and nostrils with foul water. Assuming he gets out of this alive, I reckon a bout of dysentery has to be on the cards.

This time, when my bucket is empty, I leave the towel in place. I've nothing to say to him anyway. I wait for Tony to bring me fresh supplies, then I repeat the exercise.

We go through the process three more times before he goes limp.

"Did you kill him?" Jack asks. He comes forward to check.

"Maybe. Don't think so, though. No, look, his chest's rising. He's just passed out."

'Fair enough.' Jack's phone buzzes in his pocket, so he pulls it out to take the call. "Boss is just arriving," he tells us. "I'll go and open the door for him."

CHAPTER 12

Molly

“OH, sorry. I didn’t know anyone was in here.”

I glance up from my easel in time to see Frankie slinking backwards through the door.

“It’s okay,” I call out. “Come in.” I wipe my hands on the piece of paint-spattered rag I keep close by. “I was just finishing this off. The light in here is so good.”

I’ve set up my easel in the conservatory at the rear of the house this morning. It’s south-facing and catches the sun all day long. As far as I could tell, hardly anyone else ever uses it so I thought I could commandeer the space for a while. I don’t mind sharing with a huge Swiss cheese plant and a potted olive tree. It wouldn’t have surprised me to find a few cannabis plants, too, but apparently not.

“I was just looking for somewhere quiet,” Frankie mutters. “I have a form to fill in.”

He hasn’t struck me as the form-filling type, but what do I know?

“You’re welcome to stay,” I say. “I won’t disturb you.”

“But I’m interrupting you,” he argues.

“Not really. I can get on whether you’re here or not.” I pick up my brush and return to my scrutiny of the almost-complete canvas.

I’m working on a portrait of a prominent local politician. It’s a commission I accepted before that maniac, Borys, took a coach and horses through my life and career. The unfinished work was among several canvases

that Nico's friends brought over from my house, and I thought I might as well get on with it.

The subject is artfully posed according to his own specific instructions walking along a beach with his dog, his wife, and two children, against a background of the Northumberland coastline. It's all put together from photographs, my usual way of working. The scene appears somewhat contrived to my eye, but the customer is delighted with the work so far. It'll take me a couple more hours, then I can arrange to have it couriered over to him and send him the rest of my bill. A cool ten grand will be a welcome addition to my bank account.

I apply a couple of strokes to the rocky backdrop, just to emphasise the shadows a fraction more, then stand back to consider the effect.

"That's awesome. Dead cool."

I hadn't noticed Frankie coming up behind me. He's peering over my shoulder at the work in progress.

"Is it finished?"

"Very nearly," I tell him. "I'm just tinkering a bit more with the light and shade, capturing the autumnal feel to it."

"It's just... wow. How do you learn to do that?"

His question catches me on the back foot. I don't have a ready answer, despite having taught so many art students over the years. "I've always been able to draw," I begin.

"Anyone can draw," he insists. "This is... this is different. I like the sea, and the sky. How do you get the colours just right?"

"Those are always the trickiest bits. Patience, trial and error, and a good eye."

"I could never do anything like that."

"You have other talents, I gather."

"Hacking and code," he agrees, though with a disparaging note to his voice. "It's not like this. Not... creative."

"Creativity comes in many forms, Frankie. You're the best at what you do."

"No, I'm not. Mr Savage says I've got to go back to school."

I turn to regard him. "He said what?"

"That. He wants me to go to university in Glasgow. That's what these forms are about. I keep looking at them and I don't know where to start."

"Whoa. Rewind. Ethan wants you to go to university. To study IT, I

suppose?”

“He says it’ll be good for me. Make me a better hacker.”

“What do you think?”

He shrugs. “I’ve learned all I know from just getting my hands on shit. Reading sometimes. I do okay.”

I lower myself onto a chair and gesture to him to do the same. “I was bit like you, I suppose. I did lots of painting when I was a kid, turned out Christ only knows how many canvases. I sold a few, as well. I was so chuffed to be able to earn a few quid doing what I loved, and I saw no need to waste time studying when I could be making big money.”

“Exactly.” He beams at me. “I can make plenty of cash as I am. I don’t need some old professor telling me how it’s done.”

“You’ve got raw talent, that’s true. Like I did. But talent isn’t always enough. I studied fine art at university, the theory of the craft as well as the application. I learned all about other artists, their techniques, their use of colour, of light, of form. Each one of those was an extra tool in my toolbox, something to use if I wanted to, but not if I didn’t. If I see something that’s good, I know why it’s good. I can apply what I’ve learned to my own work and see how it can be better.

“University didn’t make me an artist. I was already that. But it taught me to appraise, to evaluate, to know bullshit when I see it and to be solid in my own work. I have nothing to prove.”

“Right, but—”

“I think, probably, that’s what Ethan wants for you. He wants you to be able to stand alongside anyone in your world as an equal. Head up. Proud and confident. Not finding your way through instinct, through sniffing the air. At uni you’ll meet others as talented as you. Some might even be better and you’ll learn from them. Maybe you’ll teach them some stuff as well.”

“Do you think so?” He appears doubtful but excited, too.

“I know so. You’ll get to spend three years tinkering with your code and programming and suchlike, talking to others who are just as clued-up as you are. You’ll learn how it all slots together. And you’ll have fun.”

He’s still not convinced. “I won’t know anyone. I hate getting to know new people.”

“Everyone else will start out the same. You’ll soon get to know people. And Glasgow university is just down the road. You could even live here, I expect, and travel in each day.”

“Are you sure?”

I’m not, but I reckon if that’s what it takes to get him to embrace the notion, Ethan wouldn’t object. “Do you want a hand with the forms?”

“Yeah!” He accepts my offer with genuine enthusiasm, then glares at the bundle of papers. “I got as far as writing my name.”

“I used to teach kids your age and I’ve filled in plenty of these. The hardest bit is the personal statement, so we’ll start with that, shall we?”

“They want my life story.”

“No, they don’t. They just want a few lines to explain why you’d make a great student.”

His face falls.

“So, let’s make some notes.” I dig my ever-present notebook from my bag. “What is it you like the most about computers?”

It’s slow going at first, until he warms to the theme. I tease out of him his enthusiasm for the order and predictability of IT, the endless applications, the infinite potential. His desire to create, to push back boundaries, to actually make the world a better place. Frankie’s underlying loneliness and despair are there, too, but the natural optimism of youth is unmistakable.

Ethan Savage is a canny operator, I decide. I can see the self-interest at work. Training this young man up will be good for business, but there’s more to it than that. Frankie’s had little in the way of chances so far, and Ethan seems intent on getting him to dream bigger, further than the end of his own nose.

The least I can do is help.

“There you are.” I shove the notebook across the table at him. “Your personal statement. You just need to copy that into the space on the form and fill in the rest of the details. You’ll need to apply for a student loan, too.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t need any money.”

“You will. Even if you live here, you’ll need to buy books and suchlike. And there’s the fees. Nine thousand pounds a year for three years.”

“I have plenty,” he insists. “In my bank account.”

I’m not sure he understands the costs involved. “Ethan’s keen for you to do this, and he’ll probably help out, but—”

“Will this cover it, do you think?” He shoves his smartphone under my nose.

I blink and peer at the small screen. “Who...? I mean, how did you...? Is this yours?”

He nods. "I did a few jobs, before I came here. I've been saving up."

"There's saving up and there's... this." If the numbers on the screen are to be believed, the boy is sitting on over nineteen million dollars squirrelled away in a Swiss bank account. "What sort of jobs did you do?" My voice is trembling.

"This and that. People pay well if it's important to them. And I *am* the best."

I give my head a little shake to clear it.

"So, you think I'll have enough?" he presses me.

"Oh, yes." I rally. "And it'll be a good investment. Skip over the part about student loans, then."

Frankie applies himself to copying his statement into the online form on his phone and completing the personal details. He pauses when he gets to the part seeking information about his academic career to date.

"I didn't get no GCSEs," he says. "And you have to be over twenty-five to be a mature student."

"You'll have to lie about your age or lie about your qualifications," I reply.

He never turns a hair, just goes back to the bit where he gave his date of birth and alters it. "I suppose I could grow a beard."

I think that's probably a long shot, but I'm confident Ethan will smooth out any administrative issues should they arise.

"Does that look okay?" He hands me his phone for me to scroll through what he's written

I scan through it. "I think so. You'll need two references. Do you want me to be one of them?"

"Yes, please. Who else can I ask?"

"Let's go see who's about?"

We happen across Megan Alexander, the Savage empire's doctor. She agrees to be named on his form and wishes Frankie luck.

"He looks pleased with himself," she observes as he saunters away to email his application.

"Yes," I agree. "It's amazing what a bit of attention will do for a kid."

CHAPTER 13

Nico

“DID he have much to say for himself?” Ethan skims a disinterested gaze over the man strapped to the table.

“No, boss. But we weren’t exactly asking him anything. We know what he’s done, and why. This was about teaching him a lesson. Warning him off.”

Our boss pries open one of Borys’s eyelids with his thumb and peers into the glassy orb. “He’s out cold.”

“Yeah, but he’ll be back with us soon enough,” I assure him. “We can go a round or two more still.”

“That’s a relief. I haven’t missed all the fun, then. But we have a complication.”

I accept a stick of chewing gum from Aaron, who has flown over with his older brother. “What’s that, then?”

“Kristian Kaminski,” he replies simply. “Apparently, this piece of shit is his brother-in-law. Kristian wants him back. Preferably in one piece.”

“Kaminski?” I rifle through my brain. “I know that name...”

“The Warsaw Kaminskis?” Jack puts in helpfully. “Old Oscar?”

Ethan nods. “The very same.”

“Shit.”

The penny drops. The Kaminskis are our equivalent in their corner of Eastern Europe. They have interests primarily in gambling, casinos, construction, art fraud, and counterfeit currency. Their specialism has always been what I’d think of as white-collar crime, but they’re not above a spot of

wet work when the occasion calls for it.

“Is Oscar still alive?” Jack wants to know.

“Apparently so,” Ethan confirms, “but he must be over ninety by now. Not in great health, last I heard. Lung cancer, the legacy of too many cigars.”

“Right. So, this Kristian...?”

“His son. More to the point, his heir. Oscar’s still in charge but more or less retired. Never leaves Warsaw these days, and Kristian runs the show.”

“Do you know him?” Jack asks.

“Not personally. I met him once or twice in the past, when we were kids. He’s a couple of years younger than me. My father did a lot of business with Oscar, though. They were decent allies, shared trade routes through Europe. The Poles supplied us with weapons once upon a time. Oscar was at our father’s funeral, but Kristian didn’t come with him.”

“No. He was doing a ten stretch for GBH at the time,” Aaron informs us. “Served two years then was let out on a technicality of some sort. Has a reputation for being a hard bastard.”

“I like to think, so do I,” Ethan mutters. “Anyway, Kristian wants a meeting.”

“When?” Jack asks.

“Today. He’s suggesting somewhere in Liverpool.”

“He’s here? In the UK?”

“Seems so. I’ve suggested Stanley Park as a neutral spot. We’re meeting him there in an hour.”

“Fuck,” Jack breathes. “What’s the rush?”

“Don’t think he trusts us to return his brother-in-law unharmed if we get to hang on to him for any length of time. Can’t say I blame him.”

We all spare a glance in Borys’s direction. He’s showing signs of stirring.

I check my watch. “Stanley Park is only about twenty minutes from here. We’ve still time to re-educate our friend here. Teach him not to mess with innocent women and children.”

“Fair enough. Have your fun, but make sure you’re at the Lake Bridge five minutes before the hour. And bring him with you. Alive. But keep him out of sight until I say different.”

“Will do. Are you staying to watch?”

“No. I’ll leave him in your capable hands. I’ve got shit to see to before I take on Kristian. First order of business, pick up a couple of Kevlar vests. I trust you have yours handy?”

WE DO. Never leave home without them. We make sure we're wearing them when we arrive at the meeting place. We're there ten minutes early. There's no sign yet of Ethan and Aaron, but we park within sight of the bridge. Borys is in the boot, semi-conscious. Every so often there's a loud groan from behind us and a bit of a thump as he shifts about. We'll leave him where he is until he's needed.

"I wonder what's going on. There was no love lost between Borys and his brother-in-law, from what he was saying earlier." I'm recalling his obvious resentment of his brother-in-law, and his initial assumption that Kristian had paid us to abduct him.

"That's what I was thinking," Tony concurs. "Families, eh?"

"There's Ethan." I point to the dark-grey Audi pulling up on the opposite side of the lake.

Ethan and Aaron get out and stroll in the direction of the bridge, looking for all the world as though this is an everyday gentle meander through the municipal gardens. They even pause to admire the ducks before walking halfway across the bridge and halting to lean on the stone parapet.

Jack is in the back seat of our SUV. He gets his phone out and calls Ethan on speed dial.

"We're here," he growls. He listens in silence for a few moments before hanging up. "He's seen us. We're to wait here until Kristian arrives, then you and I move in, Nico. Tony, you're to wait here with him." He jerks a thumb backwards over his shoulder. "When Aaron gives you the call, bring him out and dump him somewhere in view, near the bridge."

Seems straightforward enough. We leave Tony with the vehicle while Jack and I make our way across the expanse of grass to join Ethan and Aaron. Our boss gives us a nod but says nothing.

"Is that him?" Jack asks a few minutes later.

A dark-grey Land Rover Discovery is making its way slowly down the main drive through the park. It draws up right behind Ethan's Audi, and a man alights from the passenger door.

Tall, dark-blond hair. Slim build, but athletic rather than scrawny, he's dressed for the boardroom in a charcoal suit, silk tie, and expensive black leather shoes. Italian, I'd say, and handmade.

Clearly, crime pays in Poland.

I can make out three more men in the Discovery, the driver and two in the rear seat. Despite being outnumbered by us, he signals his companions to stay where they are. He marches towards us, hand outstretched.

“Mr Savage. Thank you for agreeing to meet me at such short notice.”

So, we’re playing nicely, then. At least for now.

Ethan dips his head and steps forward to greet him and accept the handshake. “I confess, your request came as a surprise. I had no idea you were even in the UK.”

“I find I have business interests which require my presence in your country, though I normally restrict myself to London.” He shivers and gazes about him. “It is unusual that I should venture this far north.”

“Well, let’s hope the trip is worthwhile, for both of us. You have an interest in my prisoner, I gather.”

“He is my brother-in-law.” He lets out an exaggerated sigh. “A worthless pile of slime in my view, as you have doubtless already concluded. But my sister is inordinately fond of him and desires him to be returned. She is most insistent.”

“I see. You are aware, I daresay, of the reasons for him being... detained.”

“I am, though it is not entirely clear to me, Mr Savage, what your interest in this matter might be.”

Ethan turns to me. “Perhaps you can explain?”

“Molly Lowe is my...” I break off, uncertain how exactly to describe my embryonic relationship with her. “I care about Molly,” is the best I can come up with.

It seems to be sufficient. “I understand.” Kristian inclines his head. “Please convey my apologies for the inconvenience and distress caused to her. I shall see to it that there is no further trouble.”

“We could do that ourselves,” Ethan points out. “We were about to do just that. Why should we turn him over to you?”

One aristocratic eyebrow lifts. “Because I have asked it of you?”

“Do I owe you a favour?”

“You do not. But I will be in your debt if you agree to my request.”

His choice of words is significant. A request rather than a demand, and he is clearly prepared to offer something in exchange.

“Or I could simply pay you for him. Would twenty thousand euros be sufficient?”

It's a generous offer, but we don't need the cash.

Ethan points that out. "May I enquire what is the nature of your business in the UK? Do you intend to remain here for long?"

He ignores the first part of the question and is evasive with regard to the second. "I am not yet certain if my personal presence will be necessary for an extended length of time. I may be required to return to Warsaw at short notice."

"Ah, yes. I heard that your father is unwell."

"Indeed. Another reason why I would like to conclude this matter with all haste. Do we have an agreement, Mr Savage?"

"How can we be sure that there will be no further attempts to abduct Ms Lowe's little boy? Or attacks on her personally?"

"I understand your caution in this matter. It is my intention to send Borys to my estate in Warsaw. Indefinitely. He and my sister can... settle their differences there, and he will not be in a position to cause you any further problems."

"I have your word that this issue is resolved?" Ethan presses him. "He'll be shipped off to Poland and he'll stay there?"

"Exactly." Kristian extends his hand once more. "We are in agreement, then?"

Ethan accepts his handshake. "Out of respect for your father, we are. I'll be in touch when it's time to return the favour."

"I look forward to that, Mr Savage."

Ethan nods to Aaron, who produces his phone. He texts Tony.

We all watch from the bridge as Tony walks around to the rear of our SUV, opens the boot, and drags Borys out. The man collapses to the ground, so Tony hauls him onto his feet again and half carries him in the direction of the bridge. He halts about twenty paces away and lets Borys drop onto the damp grass.

"He's all yours," Ethan announces. "It was nice doing business with you, Mr Kaminski."

He and Aaron stride off towards the Audi, and Jack and I make our way back to the SUV, passing the slumped form of Borys Glodowski as we go. By the time we get back in our vehicle, Ethan and Aaron have gone, and two of Kaminski's men are escorting Borys to the Discovery, his arms draped across each of their shoulders.

"Can we trust him?" I breathe.

“We’ll see,” is Jack’s response. “It’s obvious Ethan wants the alliance.”

“Hardly an alliance. He owes us a favour now, that’s all.”

“It’s a start. Okay, we’re done here. Let’s get back to Glasgow.”

CHAPTER 14

Molly

“WHAT DID you know about Borys’s family?” Nico asks me. “Specifically, his brother-in-law?”

I roll over and nestle under his arm, my naked body pressed up close to his. My fingers graze his taut, flat nipple.

“Not a damn thing,” I reply. “I only just found out he was married, and I dumped him straight away as soon as I knew. I know nothing at all about his wife’s family. Why would I? And do we have to talk about him?”

“I suppose not. In any case, you don’t need to worry about him or his in-laws. He’s out of your hair now.”

I shove myself up on one elbow, my previous reluctance to discuss Borys evaporating. “What do you mean?”

“We had a little word with him. Persuaded him of the error of his ways.”

“Oh God, what did you do?” I have visions of missing appendages.

“I may have shot his toe off.”

“Christ!” *I knew it!*

“But he’ll live. The brother-in-law is based in Warsaw, and Borys has been sent over there to cool his heels for a while. A long while.”

“Warsaw? He’ll hate that.”

“Not his choice. Anyway, I believe it’s a pleasant enough city.”

“Probably, but he’s an art dealer, not a tourist. He needs to be in London, or Paris or Milan. Anywhere there’s a vibrant market. He’ll be back the first chance he gets, and he won’t let up.” I sit up in the bed. “Oh God! He knows

where I am. I'll have to go. Disappear again."

He slides his arm around my waist as though he imagines I'm going to make a run for it right now. "Calm down. He won't be back."

"How can you be sure? I know what he's like."

"And I've met his brother-in-law. Kristian Kaminski. He gave us his word."

I give a derisory snort. "And you believe this Kristian Kaminski?"

"He's not a man to cross. Borys knows that."

I give that some thought. I can easily imagine Borys being intimidated by a stronger personality. At heart, he's a weak man, which probably explains his bully-boy tactics. Maybe he has been reined in, after all.

"Even so, and assuming you're right, I can't stay here forever. If Borys is really out of the picture, maybe I could go back to my house. Lucy and Noah need to be somewhere settled."

"Lucy loves it here," I remind her.

"I know that, and everyone's been so kind, but—"

He rolls me over onto my back and drapes himself on top of me. "Ms Lowe, you need to relax. I know just the thing for you." He parts my thighs with his body and settles between them. "Open for me, honey."

I sigh and do as he asks. "Well, perhaps I can stay a little bit longer..."

A WEEK HAS PASSED, then a fortnight. There's been not a murmur out of Borys. I begin to think it might just be true. He's gone. Dealt with. Not a problem anymore.

Even now, if he'd see reason, I think I'd be okay with him having some sort of contact with Noah. He is his father, after all.

Nico snorts when I suggest such a thing. "The man's deranged," he states. "Noah's better off without him."

I can see his point, so I let the matter drop. I have another, more pressing battle to face.

"I've been thinking some more about moving out. This was only ever a temporary arrangement, and I do have a perfectly nice house of my own just a couple of miles away. And Lucy needs to be back at school. I'm already getting phone calls from the headteacher. She won't accept my word that she's ill for much longer."

Nico pauses getting dressed. "I like things as they are. You and me here

and the kids in the room next door. And, who says it's temporary?"

"The living arrangements, I mean. Not us. We can still see each other. Once I've gone back home you can stay over as much as you like."

He straightens. "I love that you're an independent, professional woman. It's one of the things that makes you so hot..."

"Hot, eh?" I slide my arms around his neck. "I could be even hotter in my own studio. I could paint you in the nude."

He lets out a groan. "Me in the nude, or you?"

"Both," I whisper.

"We could do that here," he suggests.

"Oh, no. Not with houseful of rampant crime lords ready to burst in at any moment. I need my own space. *Our* own space."

"Fuck. Okay then." He's starting to appreciate the potential benefits. "But I'll need to check out your security first. And make some arrangements for Lucy to be escorted to and from school."

"I thought you said Borys was out of the picture."

"He is, but indulge me. You need security."

I settle for what I can get. "Okay. You do what you need to do. A couple more days won't make any difference."

"YES? WHAT IS IT?" Nico gestures to me to wait while he takes the call.

We're on our way to a gallery in Edinburgh. An associate of mine has an exhibition of landscapes opening today. It's not my specialism, but I like to show support for a fellow artist and I'm also keen to pick up the threads of my former life once more. I told Nico I intended to show my face. He offered to come with me.

"You'll be bored to tears," I told him.

"You seem to think I'm a Philistine with no appreciation of art?" He assumed a mock aggrieved expression. "Let me assure you, I'm as cultured as the next marksman."

"I'm sure you are, but this is *landscapes*. Mountains and meadows, the occasional rolling cloud..."

"Now who's not appreciating the finer qualities? I'm coming, and that's it. If I'm going to hang around with you, my artistic horizons need expanding, and this sounds like the very thing."

I shrugged. "Okay. It's next Wednesday, at Modern One in Edinburgh."

“How many Moderns are there?”

“Two at the last count.”

“Who’d have thought it?”

So, Lucy and Noah are safely settled with Ruth and baby Faith, and we’re strolling across the grounds towards the sprawling old carriage house which is now home to the fleet of vehicles at the disposal of the Savage crew. The drive to Edinburgh will take us an hour or so, but we’re leaving early with the intention of stopping off for a nice lunch somewhere on the way.

It’s good to actually relax at last. It seems so long since...

“What the fuck? Did they say anything else?” Nico comes to a halt on the gravelled driveway. “What did you tell them?”

He doesn’t catch my eye as he finishes the call. I wait, my new-found sense of peace and calm evaporating fast.

He shoves the phone back in his pocket and faces me at last. “There’s a problem. Maybe.”

“What problem?” I refuse to panic, not yet. My kids are safe, that’s all that matters.

“That was Eddie. He’s the electrician I sent to install the security at your house.” Nico insisted on cameras, and audio-triggered surveillance system, state-of-the-art remote monitoring. He brought in a crew he’s used before, and they’ve been crawling all over my property for the last two days getting the system operational.

“Has he run into a snag?”

“No. Nothing to do with the security system. You had a visitor. Well, two visitors...”

“Who? What did they want?”

“Police. Detectives, apparently.”

“Was it to do with Lucy being abducted? They did say they’d be back if there was any news.” And the fact that their prime suspect was released on bail and has since disappeared without trace probably qualifies as news.

Nico shakes his head. “These two were from the Art and Antiques Unit. They wanted to speak to you about a missing painting.”

“I don’t have any paintings missing...”

“No, but apparently someone does. *Death of Atalanta*? Ring any bells?”

I nod. “Sixteenth-century masterpiece. A seascape, in a storm. There’s an old galleon, Atalanta, sinking... It’s by Albrecht Dürer, reputedly commissioned by the Holy Roman Emperor himself. It’s in a museum in

Germany, Nuremberg, I think. That's where Dürer was born..."

"Not anymore. Apparently, it's gone walkabout."

"What?" I gape at him, aghast. "It must be worth millions..."

Nico is tapping something into his phone. He brings up a news channel. "An estimated eleven million euros according to this. The painting was seized in an audacious robbery two nights ago. Police believe the heist was orchestrated by an international cartel and the painting is already out of the country."

"Jesus Christ," I breathe. "But what does that have to do with me?"

"Didn't you say Borys wasn't above a spot of... irregular dealing?"

"Yes. Maybe. But..."

"International art theft gang? Sound likely?"

I nod slowly. "I wouldn't be surprised. But this is big, way off his normal scale."

"How do you know? Were you involved in any of his other dealings?"

"Of course not!" I can't believe he's seriously suggesting that. "I produce art. I don't steal it. In any case, there's no easy market for a piece like that. It's famous, instantly recognisable. Whoever has it won't be able to sell it on apart from to a private collector who isn't fussy about provenance and who can't ever let anyone else see it. I mean, there are people like that around, but..."

"Would Borys know anyone like that?"

"Yes, I suppose so. He has a lot of contacts. And there's always the dark web, whatever that is. But why would the police be knocking on my door?"

"Not sure, but Eddie says they're keen to talk to you. The detective left his card. I asked Eddie to send us a picture of it." He hands me his phone with the image of a police-issue business card on the screen.

"Detective Inspector Martin Norris," I read it aloud. "Should I give him a ring?"

Nico looks doubtful, and I suppose I can understand that. He's naturally reluctant to get involved with the police.

"This is big," I tell him. "Massive. It'll send shockwaves through the international art world, and the police won't be giving up. I ought to cooperate, especially as I've nothing to hide. If Borys has somehow pulled off a stunt like this, and I can help to recover that painting, well, I should do what I can, surely?"

"Why?" He appears genuinely baffled.

“Because a masterpiece like that belongs to the world, to humanity. If it’s been stolen by a greedy lowlife for their own selfish pleasure, that means it’s as good as lost. And that’s wrong. It offends me, as it would any genuine lover of art. I *want* to help...”

He appears unconvinced but eventually nods. “Okay.” He checks the card image again. “This guy’s based in Edinburgh. We can arrange to meet with him somewhere...”

“Why don’t we go to his office after the exhibition. We’ll be in town anyway.”

“His office? You mean to just wander into a police station? I’m not sure about that.”

“I have nothing to hide. Assisting with enquiries means just that, Nico.”

“To you, maybe.”

“To everyone. Look, you don’t have to come in...”

“Oh, no, you’re not going on your own. I’ll be there, and so will one of our lawyers.”

“I don’t think—”

“Just in case. Humour me. You ring Inspector Norris and tell him when we’ll be dropping in, and I’ll line up the legal representation.”

THE LAWYER IS WAITING for us in the reception area at the police station. Lynne Meadows thrusts her hand at Nico, then at me as soon as we enter the waiting room, ignoring the young officer behind the desk. She introduces herself, then draws us into a corner for a briefing huddle. She is a matronly sort wearing a staid tweed two-piece suit and rimless spectacles, her greying hair scraped back into a severe bun. Despite her conservative appearance, I get the impression she is a force to be reckoned with.

“*Death of Atalanta* going missing has caused an international furore,” she hisses in a low tone. “They’re desperate for clues, anything to help locate it.”

“I’m not sure I can—”

“No, obviously not. We just need to convince them of that, and they can be slow on the uptake, this lot. Words of one syllable tend to work best. Leave the talking to me.”

“But I want to help,” I protest. “If this is about Borys—”

“Then we’ll send them his way, naturally. Now, shall we get this over with?”

I can only nod. Lynne hustles over to the desk and wags her finger at the nervous young officer on duty. He initially invites us to take a seat, but Lynne's having none of that.

"We shall see Inspector Norris now," she insists. "Please inform him."

"I'll see if he's free—"

"Now," she repeats, in a tone that I swear would peel paint from the windowsills.

The rookie constable pales under her determined glare and picks up his internal phone. He ends the call and does his best to drum up a confident smile. He fails utterly.

"I've been asked to show you into interview room three," he stammers. "Through here."

We troop through, to find ourselves in a utilitarian little space, sparsely furnished with a wooden table, screwed to the floor, and four chairs, also secured down. Obviously, they're accustomed to a bothersome class of clientele.

There's a recording machine on the table, red light flashing, and an obviously one-way window set into the far wall. I imagine a team of bored detectives on the other side, watching and listening to proceedings in here. Clearly, I've been watching too much television.

A couple of minutes later, two men enter. Their name badges identify them as Detective Inspector Martin Norris and Detective Constable Ian Fletcher, but they go through the honours anyway.

The constable is hefting a substantial file which he deposits on the table with a resounding thump.

His superior settles himself in front of the file and opens it at the first page. "Please, be seated Ms Lowe. Thank you for coming in so promptly."

There are only two spare seats. I take one and Lynne the other. Nico lounges against the wall, his back to the peculiar window.

"Would you be more comfortable waiting outside, sir?"

Nico grunts. "I'm fine. Get on with it."

"Of course. I need to inform you that this interview will be recorded. Those present are..." He flicks the switch to turn on the machine and recites his own name and credentials, and those of his companion. Then he pauses to allow the rest of us to say who we are.

"Molly Lowe," I say. "Amelia."

"Lynne Meadows, legal representative, representing Ms Lowe."

“Nicolai Hanssen,” Nico intones from behind us. “Accompanying Ms Lowe.”

Inspector Norris slides an A4 sized picture out of the folder and places it on the table. “Do you recognise this, Ms Lowe?”

“Yes. It’s *Death of Atalanta*. Albrecht Dürer, 1498.”

“Have you ever seen this painting, Ms Lowe?”

“Not personally, though I am familiar with it. I studied Medieval Art as part of my degree at university. *Death of Atalanta* is an old master, widely known and admired. I doubt there’s an art student anywhere in the world who wouldn’t recognise it.”

“You are familiar with it, then?”

“As I explained—”

“What can you tell me of the picture’s current whereabouts?” he interrupts me to fire another question.

“It was in Nuremberg. I gather it isn’t there anymore...”

“And you know this how?”

His curt tone is making me distinctly uncomfortable. I came here to help him, for fuck’s sake, not to be bombarded with rapid-fire questions. I rein in my irritation and answer him. “I watch the news, Inspector.”

He grunts and pulls another document from the sheath before him. “This is a recent valuation of *Death of Atalanta*.”

I glance at the figure, produced presumably for insurance purposes. Thirteen point seven million euros.

“I see. And?”

“A considerable sum, would you agree?”

“I would.”

“Enough to make the theft worthwhile.”

“Definitely, though you could say that for any old master. That’s why the security surrounding such pieces is so strict.”

“Yet somehow, this item was... removed.”

“So I understand.”

“Inspector, are you intending to raise any matters *not* already in the public domain?” Ms Meadows manages to inject a note of boredom into her question. “We came here intending to assist your investigation, not go over existing ground.”

He acknowledges her point with a sideways glance in her direction, then returns to his file. “As I was saying, an exceptionally valuable item, security

bypassed, is somehow spirited away. It's clear that whoever perpetrated this crime knew what they were looking for..."

"And as Ms Lowe was saying, any first-year student of art would know exactly what they were looking for," Lynne interjects. "They would need to have knowledge of security systems, and the means to move the painting quickly. Do you have any information on these matters, Inspector? Or are you intending to continue this little fishing trip for much longer?"

"I note that you are having high-end security installed in your home, Ms Lowe. You do have an understanding of that particular technology, then?"

"Ms Lowe has been bothered by intruders in her home. Her daughter was recently abducted, as I am sure you would know, were you to consult your colleagues, Inspector. She is naturally keen to strengthen her own security and has procured expert external advice in order to do so."

Inspector Norris is undeterred. "You associate with known criminals. Ms Lowe. You have links to organised crime, and therefore the means to execute a robbery such as this."

"I have never—"

"What exactly are you suggesting, Norris?" Nico's tone is hard. "Do you have evidence to back this up?"

"Our investigations are ongoing."

"Are you investigating Borys Glodowski?" I snap. "He's the one you should be interested in. He has—"

"Mr Glodowski is assisting us with our enquiries but is not a suspect. He was abroad when this robbery took place so cannot be implicated. You, on the other hand..."

I can only gape at him as various facts drop into place. First and foremost among these facts, Inspector Martin Norris of the Art and Antiques Unit is as bent as they come. He's clearly one of Borys's tame coppers, which makes a sort of sense given Borys's trade. He'd have to have someone to protect his interests on the inside, and who better?

Second, Norris is looking to fit someone up for this, and that someone is me. The robbery took place in Germany. Borys was in Poland, and I was in the UK. I was as 'abroad' as Borys, but I'm a suspect and he isn't.

'Helping with enquiries.' What does that mean? Feeding them information most likely. False information aimed at implicating me.

"This is ridiculous," Nico snarls. "Ms Lowe had nothing to do with any of this and you know it. We're leaving."

“I’m not finished—”

“Yes, you fucking are. We’re done.”

I start to rise, but the inspector fastens his gaze on me.

“Sit down, Ms Lowe. As I said, we’re not done here.”

I sink back into my hard, inhospitable little chair.

Lynne stiffens in her seat. “Ms Lowe came here voluntarily to assist in this enquiry. She has done so to the best of her ability and has nothing further to add. She now wishes to leave and is free to do so. If you will excuse us, Inspector...”

I start to get up for a second time. I just want to be out of here, to breathe fresh air again and go home to my kids.

“Ms Amelia Lowe, I am arresting you...”

“What?” I can only gape in horror as he goes on, reciting the familiar speech.

“...on suspicion of burglary. You do not have to say anything...”

I’m in a daze. My head feels to be full of cotton wool. His words float over me.

“...which you later rely on in court.”

“This is... You can’t do this...” I swing my astonished gaze from one officer to the other, incredulous.

“Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Constable?” He gestures to his colleague who produces handcuffs.

“What? No.” I’m on my feet, backing away. “You can’t. This is mad...”

Nico bars the police officer’s way. “Touch her and you’re dead.”

“Please don’t make things any more complicated,” the inspector intones, as more uniformed police pour through the door. “You need to come with us, Ms Lowe.”

“No way.” Nico floors one of the police officers and is immediately rushed by the rest. He’s overwhelmed by sheer force of numbers, tackled to the floor and held there by three burly coppers while Constable Fletcher snaps his handcuffs around my wrists.

I’m sobbing as I’m led away.

CHAPTER 15

Nico

“IDIOT. You know better than to start throwing punches in a fucking police station. What the fuck were you doing there anyway?”

Ethan paces the floor of his office in the castle on Caraksay, glaring at me. I was summoned to the Savage headquarters immediately on my release from custody, but not before I spent two nights in police cells. I don't know what technical strings Lynne Meadows and her bewigged colleagues managed to tug on to get me released, but here I am. And it's fair to say my boss is less than delighted with me.

Molly, however, is still in custody and about to be moved to HMP Edinburgh having been refused bail on the grounds she's a flight risk.

I rake my fingers through my hair. “I wasn't keen on going in, but Molly was determined to help in the enquiry...”

Ethan emits another derisory curse.

“I know. I should have stopped her.”

“Too fucking right, you should. Or at the very least had the interview conducted on our turf. But, no. You have to walk in there...”

“Fuck. I know that now.”

“It's not good for business when my inner circle gets banged up. Have you any idea what it cost me to get you out?”

“I'm sorry, boss. But what about Molly? She's still in there.”

“Is she my problem?”

He's not serious. Is he?

“Boss? She didn’t do anything.”

“I know that. Prisons are full of people who didn’t do anything. Your point is?”

“What about her children? They need her.”

“Where are they now?”

“Still at Caernbro Ghyll.”

“So, they’re safe. They can stay there while this is sorted out.”

“But—”

“Doesn’t she have family who could look after them?”

“Her mother, but she lives abroad. Ethan, we have to—”

“We all know it’s a stitch-up. The courts will see that, too, and she’ll be released. Eventually.”

“But that could take ages. And what if she isn’t? What if Norris somehow manages to make this stick?”

“Isn’t what? Innocent?”

“No. Released. Of course she’s fucking innocent. But that inspector’s on the take, that much was obvious. Glodowski must be paying him to fit her up. He’s good. It could go either way in court.”

“Molly may be innocent, but *someone* stole that painting,” Ethan reminds me. “It’s definitely gone.”

“Glodowski, it must be. He’ll have it stashed somewhere.”

My boss nods. We can all see how this is playing out. Glodowski has somehow pulled the strings from his exile in Warsaw to execute this heist and throw the blame on Molly. Revenge, maybe, or perhaps it’s still part of a ploy to get his hands on his son. The man is relentless, and it’s high time he was stopped permanently. I intend to see to that at the earliest opportunity, but first I need to convince Ethan to help me get Molly out of jail.

“I need Lynne Meadows,” I state. “She’s the best. If anyone can get these charges dropped, it’s her.”

Ethan fixes me with an icy glare. “I agree. She *is* the best. And the most expensive. That woman charges a hundred quid a comma. She doesn’t get out of bed for less than a thousand pounds an hour.”

“Boss?” I’ll beg if I have to.

“Oh, fuck.” He grinds his teeth. “Right, I can see how it is. Okay, you can have Lynne. I’ll make the call. I’ll also be having a word with Kristian Kaminski. He’s supposed to have Glodowski on a tight leash.”

I heave a relieved sigh. “Thank you, Ethan. As for Kaminski, we need to

deal with Borys ourselves.”

“Agreed, but Kaminski made a deal with me, and I’m not about to let that go. He owes me now.”

ETHAN CALLS the offices of Savage and Southern, the prestigious firm of lawyers in Edinburgh who handle most of our business. He commissions the services of their most ferocious litigator. One of his cousins is a partner in the firm, so we’ll get a discount, but even so, their fees are eye-watering.

But they’re good. With Lynne Meadows on the case, it’s only a matter of time now before Molly is out.

It actually takes Lynne three days to secure Molly’s release, and even then, it’s only on bail. The shit-hot lawyer worked her magic and convinced a different magistrate to reconsider the flight risk nonsense but couldn’t get the charges dropped entirely. We’re still working on that.

I’m waiting for her outside the prison when she walks out. She takes one look at me and bursts into tears. I bundle her into the back of the SUV and let her cry herself silly while Tony drives us back to Caernbro Ghyll.

“I thought...” She gulps when the sobbing subsides briefly. “I thought I was...”

“I know,” I soothe. “I know...”

“How could they actually think...?”

“Because they’re idiots. And corrupt.”

“Everyone will believe it,” she wails. “I could still go to jail...”

“We won’t let that happen.” I’m making promises I may not be able to keep, but what’s the alternative? Agree with her that this nightmare may not be over, even now?”

“What about my kids? What’s going to happen to them? I don’t care about my career, but—”

“Nothing’s going to happen to them, or to you. They’re fine. Lucy’s excited about seeing you again.”

“I need to thank Ruth. And Jenna.”

“No, you don’t.” I don’t bother to tell her that while Ruth and Jack took little Noah in with them, Lucy has spent the last three days glued to me.

“He’s not going to stop, is he?” She grabs the front of my shirt. “Oh God, I need to disappear again. I knew it. I can’t be safe as long as—”

“Molly, stop this. We’ll deal with him.”

“You said he was dealt with already. You told me he was gone. You were wrong. How can I be sure he won’t...”

I cup her chin in my palm and lift her face, so she has no choice but to meet my gaze. And hold it. “Because I’m going to deal with it personally this time. And my solution will be permanent.”

She falls silent. We pass the rest of the journey without further conversation. What more is there to say?

“GOOD TO SEE YOU BACK, Ms Lowe.” Ethan greets Molly cordially enough.

He’s at Caernbro Ghyll when we get back there, letting Lucy beat him at chess while Robbie waits for his turn. Ethan gets to his feet and gestures for Robbie to take his place while Lucy rushes at her mother and hugs her around the waist.

“I missed you, Mummy,” she shrieks. “Nico said you’d be back soon, but I still missed you...”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I couldn’t—”

“Well, you’re here now,” Lucy says, releasing her so she can retake her seat at the table. “I’m winning.”

Ethan ruffles Robbie’s hair. “I left you in a mess, mate. Sorry. See what you can do...”

Robbie grabs at his castle and swipes it across the board. “Check,” he crows.

That boy has no mercy.

But he’s up against a worthy adversary, it would seem. Lucy grins and swoops her queen from one end of the board to the other, to take the castle with a flourish and get out of check.

Ethan beckons me, Molly, and Tony to follow him, and we leave the tournament in full swing to reassemble in the main office on the first floor.

Jack and Aaron are already there, poring over spreadsheets. They abandon that when we all troop in.

“I trust your ordeal wasn’t too awful, Ms Lowe.” Ethan pours coffee for all of us. “I’m sorry it took so long to get you out. The wheels of injustice turn slowly, it seems. Especially when bent coppers are involved.”

She accepts the coffee with a smile, but I see her hands are still shaking. Not sure if anyone else has noticed.

“I know you did all you could, and I’m grateful. I gather I have you to

thank for that lawyer. I'll pay you back, obviously."

Ethan merely grunts. Despite what he said to me over on Caraksay, I know the money won't be much of an issue for him. He's far more pissed off that Kaminski didn't deliver what he promised.

Sure enough. "Thank you, but I'm not interested in the cash. I want a favour."

She sets down her cup with a rattle. Now, there can be no mistaking the tremor in her hands, and her voice. "A favour? What can I do...?"

An excellent question. "Boss, you can't expect—"

"You're an artist, right? A good one?" Ethan takes a seat opposite Molly. "Are you any good at copying paintings?"

Her jaw drops. Mine, too, probably.

"Copying paintings? I don't know what..."

"Making a copy. A *good* copy, good enough to fool most people. Could you do that?"

"Forgery, you mean?"

Ethan inclines his head. "I suppose you'd call it that, yes."

"That's illegal," she protests.

"So is stealing the art in the first place. And trying to pervert the course of justice by getting you banged up for it. Not to mention whatever other backhanders Norris is greasing his oily palms with. In the grand scheme of things, one little forged picture doesn't seem too outrageous. Wouldn't you say?"

"You want me to make a forged copy of a painting? Why?"

"First of all, *could* you do it? Well enough to pass inspection?"

"That depends on who's doing the inspection." She shakes her head. "But, no, probably not. A convincing forgery is a complex business. It's not just a matter of recreating an image. It's about the light and shade, the texture, the unique brushwork of the original artist. And if it's an old painting, there's the wear and tear of centuries of dirt and grime to reproduce as well. It's specialist stuff."

"The painting I have in mind is old. *Death of Atalanta*."

"I don't understand. Why would you...?" I shake my head in bewilderment. "It's not as though you could sell it as the original. Everyone knows the original was stolen. If it suddenly surfaces again, the police will..."

"I'll explain, but first, is it possible? Do you know of a specialist?"

Someone who could do it? Can we create a copy?"

Molly hesitates, then, "There is someone..."

"Who?" Ethan leans in, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, a couple of people, actually. You remember that fuss in Amsterdam a year or so ago when a fake Vermeer found its way into a display of his work?"

We exchange puzzled glances, shrugging.

"You'll have to enlighten us, I'm afraid."

"It was one of the largest exhibitions of his work ever, at the time. There've been bigger ones since, but they had twenty-two of the thirty-five known Vermeer's in one place. It was fabulous, drew thousands in to view the masterpieces. Many of the foremost Vermeer authorities in the world were there, and no one spotted that the girl with the red hat was a ringer."

"The girl with the red hat?" I can't place it.

"This." Molly produces her phone and taps a few keys, then scrolls.

She shows us the picture, and I do recognise it. I think.

Ethan is more of a connoisseur than I am, and he definitely knows what he's looking at. "Is this a forgery?" he asks, squinting at the tiny image.

"No. That's the genuine one. This is the copy..." She produces another image and hands the phone back. "Spot the difference."

"Bloody hell," Ethan breathes. "They're identical..."

"Very nearly. Good enough to fool some of the foremost experts, including the actual owners of this work. The National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. The truth came to light when animal rights activists broke into the exhibition and flung red dye over the painting. Somehow, the gallery had got wind of the plan, and they commissioned the fake. They hung it instead of the original and waited for the protesters to show up. The vandals ruined a copy worth a few hundred pounds, but the true Vermeer was safe."

"So, you're saying that the artist who created this..."

"Marlow McGuinness," Molly clarifies.

"...could paint a copy of *Death of Atalanta*."

"Maybe. Probably. The other guy who might be able to do it is Giuseppe Rafael, but the last I heard he was in jail in Italy. Got caught with three dozen *Mona Lisas* in his attic."

"Is that illegal?"

"It is when they're all signed by Leonardo da Vinci himself."

"Where can we find Marlow McGuinness?" Ethan demands.

“He flits about. Despite being a well-known forger, his work is absolutely legit. He works for galleries and studios producing high-quality copies for display, but not passing them off as anything else. Copyright issues aside, it’s not a crime to replicate something, only to try and pass it off as the original. That’s fraud. I have an email address for him. Last time I saw him was in New York, but that was a few months ago...”

“You actually know this guy?”

“Yes. He... his brother and I were at university together. I met him a couple of times.”

“Can you find out where he is now?”

“I suppose so. Do you want me to—?”

“No. I’ll make contact. Just find out where he is, and I’ll take it from there.”

“You still haven’t told us why,” she murmurs. “Like I said, he’s legit. I don’t want to get him involved in something dodgy. Or dangerous.”

Ethan hesitates, then, “Okay, here’s what I’m thinking...”

CHAPTER 16

Molly

“WHAT A FABULOUS PLACE!” Marlowe McGuinness hops down from the helicopter and turns in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree circle. He lets out a low whistle as he takes in the glorious Outer Hebridean landscape.

The majestic, restored castle looms behind us, and all around the rugged landscape glimmers in wondrous greys, oranges, and purples. It’s an artist’s wet dream, and I already have several canvases on the go.

Ethan invited and Nico insisted that I relocate here, to the impenetrable fortress on the Savages’ own private island, bringing Lucy and Noah with me. This is the heart of the Savage empire, and at last I feel safe. Truly, properly safe.

No thugs are going to break in in the night.

No men in vans will be trying to snatch my baby off the street.

I’d forgotten what safe felt like. Now, I remember.

“It’s just until we’ve finally dealt with Glodowski. And Kaminski,” Nico promises me.

I’d be happy to stay here forever. Caraksay is my idea of heaven.

There are even other children here for Lucy to play with. Ethan Savage has a son of eleven, and another toddler of just two. His brother, Aaron, also has a son living on the island, and young Robbie is a regular visitor. The helicopter pilot doubles as nanny, of all things, so I have help with Noah when I want to paint.

And now, one of my oldest friends is here, too. I dart forward to hug him.

“Thank you for coming, Marl. I wasn’t sure if you would...”

“Mr Savage is persuasive. And he has deep pockets. He’s paying me a fortune for this, and you know what a mercenary I am.”

That’s not true. He’s picky over what commissions he takes on. He can afford to be.

“Not to mention the pleasure of closing down Glodowski’s operation once I heard what he’s been up to. What a dipshit. I’d have done it for half the price, but don’t tell *him* that.” He nods towards Ethan who has emerged from the castle, Nico at his side, and is marching towards us. “Mr Savage. Great place you have here.” Marlowe offers him his hand.

Ethan takes it. “Welcome to Caraksay, Mr McGuinness. Did you have a pleasant trip?”

“Once I got out of Brazil it was fine...”

I tracked Marlowe down in Paraguay where he was doing some work for the National Museum of Fine Arts in Asunción. Ethan spoke to him on the phone and somehow managed to persuade him to drop everything and fly to Scotland. I’m guessing a hefty fee would have been involved, but it sounds like there’s some job satisfaction at play, too.

“I’m Nicolai Hanssen,” Nico introduces himself. “You’ll be working closely with me on this project.”

“You’re an artist, too?”

“No. I’m a marksman.” He pauses to let that unorthodox career choice settle. “Shall we say, I have a keen interest in the outcome? And in Molly.”

Marlowe grins at me as the penny drops. “You have an unusual taste in lovers, Molly, but I prefer this one to the previous model. He was a douchebag.” He offers Nico his hand, too. “Nice to meet you, Mr Hanssen.”

Ethan is playing the cordial host. “You must be tired after your journey. I’ll have someone show you to your room.”

“I’ll do that,” I offer. “It’ll give us a chance to catch up.”

“I wouldn’t mind dumping my bags, but I’d prefer to look round if that’s okay?”

“Please, feel free. You can find me in my office when you’re ready. Molly knows the way. Nico?”

“I have shit to be getting on with. I’ll get someone to take your luggage up to your room, and I’ll see you soon, Mr McGuinness. Molly.”

He kisses me on the mouth, as much by way of marking his territory, I suspect, as to show affection.

Marlowe watches the two men's retreating backs for a few moments. "If your boyfriend pulls out a ruler and wants to measure my dick, I'm out of here."

"It's not like that," I protest. "He's just—"

"Possessive? Confrontational? Rutting alpha male?"

I pause for a second. I suppose Nico is all of that, yet...

"He's... nice," I say. "Really, really nice."

Marlowe's arm is slung around my shoulders. "That's good to hear, babe. About time you bagged yourself a keeper. And I do have a personal interest, obviously."

"Oh, no. He's not... I mean, we haven't... It's just..."

"Yeah, right. So, about this tour...?"

I START with the collection of cottages and converted barns which make up the facilities and accommodation for most of the inhabitants of Caraksay.

"There's the medical centre..." I gesture to the single-storey building to my right. "It's incredibly well-equipped considering it only caters for about fifty people. And that large barn is the gym and swimming pool. The smaller buildings are where people live. Families, mostly... There are apartments and offices in the castle. Do you want to see the beach?"

"Too right I do."

We scramble down the cliff path to stroll along the shingled shoreline, and I point out the tiny harbour and the luxury yacht anchored out to sea. "I've never been on board, but I gather it's fabulous."

"Do the wind turbines serve the island?" Marlowe asks. He shields his eyes with his hand to gaze at the four stately offshore structures.

"They do. I think there's some tidal energy as well. Ethan likes to be green. Protect the wildlife. Apparently, this is a known breeding ground for grey seals. They turn up in their thousands, and he won't have them disturbed. I've spotted dolphins, too, and one time, a whale."

Marlowe shoves his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket and gazes out to sea. "Your boss is an interesting guy. Scary as hell, but kind to children and animals."

"I suppose so. But he's not my boss. I'm just staying here until this is all... settled."

"Nico's boss then. Your gangster boyfriend."

I don't bother denying that. Instead, I settle for a change of subject. "Ethan's a bit of a collector, too. Antiques, and art. You should see the library here. It's full of first editions."

"Lead on," he says, gesturing to the path up the cliffs.

We make our way back to the castle in time to greet Tony and Aaron as they alight from yet another incoming helicopter. Together, the four of us enter the great hall of Caraksay Castle.

Marlowe's reaction is exactly the same as mine was a few days ago when I first saw this space.

"Holy shit!" He gazes around, taking in the medieval carved fireplace, the huge solid oak table and benches, the tapestries adorning the walls, and the genuine sixteenth-century dresser which houses a cunningly disguised twenty-first century sound and communications system. The restoration works have been subtle to say the least, retaining and enhancing all the period features but somehow managing not to compromise even slightly on comfort and modern convenience.

The Savages run a state-of-the-art global empire from an ancient fortress perched on a Hebridean lump of rock.

But this is a home, too. A place for kids to play and lives to be led. At the far end of the huge hall stands a pair of basketball hoops, and someone has chalked goalposts onto the granite wall.

"The weather can be a bit fierce outside," I explain. "The boys need somewhere to play..."

"Not to mention jobbing artists," Marl replies. "Fancy shooting a few hoops?"

"Not right now, but I daresay you'll have some takers later, when the boys get back from school. We ought to go and find Ethan."

"Sure. His office, right?"

"It's this way." I cross the great hall and lead the way up the staircase at the far end, to reach the first floor.

This section has been mostly converted to offices, but Ethan and his immediate family have their apartment here, too. Aaron is one floor up, and that's where the guest suites are, as well. One has been allocated for Marlow while he's here. Nico and I are using another, and my children are next door.

The main office is at the end of the upstairs corridor. The door is standing open when we arrive. Ethan, Aaron, Tony, and Nico are already there, noisily discussing business.

“Olsen’s keen to get a quick sale. He’ll settle for ten million.” Tony’s voice.

“Probably. But I prefer to pay half that. Offer him five.” This from Ethan.

“It’s worth twelve. Fifteen at a push.”

“We can walk away. He can’t. My top offer is six. Tell him that. And tell him to make his fucking mind up. This deal is only on the table for twenty-four hours... Ah, you’re back.” He spots us hovering in the doorway. “Come in.”

We join them in the office-cum-conference room, and Ethan completes the introductions, then it’s straight down to business. He produces a rolled-up poster from his desk and unfurls it on the meeting table, using coffee mugs to anchor the corners.

“*Death of Atalanta*,” he announces, tilting his head to squint at the reprinted image. “Have you ever seen the original, Mr McGuinness?”

“It’s Marlowe. And yes, once. Not really my bag, if I’m honest.”

“Mine neither. Too much in the way of moody blues and greys,” Ethan agrees. “Give me a nice, airy Constable or Turner any day. Still, we must work with what we have. You know what we want?”

“A copy of this.”

“Right. But not just any copy. A *good* one. Excellent, in fact. Good enough to pass as the original, at least at first glance. And second, at a push.”

“You understand that forgeries rarely get past first base these days? Once the experts start examining it, they’ll be bringing in x-rays, forensic techniques, chemical analysis of the materials to date and authenticate the work. My replica won’t stand up to that sort of scrutiny. Nothing would.”

“We appreciate that. But it’s also true, is it not, that in the art world, reputation is everything? Once a dealer’s credentials and integrity are called into question, he’s ruined.”

“Yes. Pretty much. Trust is fragile. Once there’s a blemish...”

“And that’s true in the illicit art dealing world as well as the legit one?”

“Probably more so as those deals can’t usually rely on water-tight provenance. If there’s no paper trail, the buyer only has the dealer’s word for it that the work is the real thing.”

“So, our plan is to blemish Borys Glodowski’s reputation. We’ll put him, and his brother, out of business by exposing his so-called masterpiece as a cheap fraud.”

“When you say cheap...?”

Ethan slants him a sharp glance. “You want to renegotiate the fee?”

Marlowe shakes his head, grinning. “No. We’re sound. You want this job completed within two weeks, you said?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, as long as you can source the materials.”

“That’s covered. Molly was able to pull some strings.”

“And a place to do the work?”

“I’ve been using one of the tower rooms as a studio,” I put in. “The light is fabulous up there.”

“Then it sounds as though we’re cooking with gas,” Marlowe replies. “Can I see the workroom?”

“You want to get started straight away?”

“Might as well. Wouldn’t mind something to eat, though, if you could send something up. Just a sandwich would be fine. And I’ll take that, if I may?” He gestures to the print of *Death of Atalanta*.

“It’s yours. I’ll see to the food.” Ethan gets to his feet, signalling that this meeting is concluded. “Molly? Can we leave you to look after Marlowe?”

“Of course.”

We leave them to conclude whatever business they were on with earlier while we get started on our mission.

WELL, when I say *our* mission...

I find myself something of a spare part. Marlowe has the focus of a laser once he gets started. It takes him maybe an hour or so to orient his easel to catch the light just as he likes it, and the same again to select the exact paints he wants to use. He experiments with the colour mixing to create the perfect range of hues. He has an expert eye but also uses a gadget he pulls from his pocket which analyses chromatic qualities to create the most accurate colour match possible.

He will use other techniques to artificially ‘age’ his canvas once the painting is completed to arrive at the best possible likeness.

Nico joins us, complete with a tray bearing a slice of homemade beef pie, a salad, fluffy French fries, and coleslaw. There’s a flask of tea and one of coffee. “Mrs McRae sent both,” he explains. “There’s a bunch of fresh brownies in the Tupperware box. She thought they might help the creative juices.”

“Who’s Mrs McRae?” Marlowe demands as he prises the lid off the box to grab a brownie. “I want to marry her.”

“Ethan’s housekeeper,” I explain. “Won’t Clemmie object if you bring another wife home?”

“Clemmie likes brownies. She’ll understand.”

“Mind if I watch?” Nico is peering at the chaotic assortment of paint samples scattered around the table next to the easel.

“As long as you keep quiet,” Marlowe tells him. “You, too, Molly. I need to concentrate.”

“Sure.” I snag Nico’s hand and drag him over to the plump sofa I had hauled up here and installed in the corner. Lucy sometimes likes to come up and read while I’m working, and it’s ideal for her to curl up on.

Marlowe places the brownies close at hand and homes in on his task. He’s soon oblivious to our presence, lost in his own world of colour, form, light, and shade.

The poster is pinned to a spare easel beside the one he’s propped his canvas on, but he also refers to electronic images of the old master which he has displayed on a laptop. He occasionally zooms in on a specific area and makes notes in pencil on the actual canvas.

“Why’s he doing that?” Nico murmurs.

“Not sure. Colour references, perhaps. Every artist has their own little tricks, ways of creating just the effect they’re after.”

“He’s not doing much painting.”

In fact, not a splodge of paint has so far found its way onto the blank canvas.

“Applying the colour usually comes later. First you need to get the outline sketched in, create the perspective, orient the subject within the wider scene.”

“You appear to have lapsed into a dialect of Swahili,” he replies in a dry tone.

I dig my elbow in his ribs. “It’s all very technical. Shut up and watch.”

We settle in and observe as the master works. For myself, I’m fascinated to watch the work unfolding, but I do have some inkling of what he’s doing. I understand the techniques, even if they are not the ones I would utilise, and I admire his expertise. Marlowe McGuinness truly is a master of his craft.

Despite knowing next to nothing about artistic methodology and execution, Nico watches with keen interest as Marlowe’s hand darts back and forth across the canvas, leaving faint pencil strokes in its wake. As if by

magic, the outline of the ship at the heart of the scene emerges, tilted at the final, fatal angle before the inevitable plunge below the teeming, churning waves which have yet to be crafted. But somehow, they are there, not yet visible, but present in the shades and smudges appearing before us.

“He’s fucking good, isn’t he?” Nico breathes. “You’ve known him a long time, right?”

“The best,” I concur. “Yes, a few years.”

“Do you see much of him? Socially, perhaps?”

I shake my head. “Hardly ever. He’s abroad most of the time. He does occasionally rock up at an exhibition or showing, but not often.” Yawning. I check my watch. “It’s almost seven. I need to go and spend some time with Lucy. Put her to bed.”

“I can do that if you want to stay.”

“No, it’s my job. I’m surprised she hasn’t come marching up here already to see what I’m doing.”

“Too busy trailing around after Tomasz and Jacob, I expect.”

Lucy has developed a monster crush on the two cousins, Ethan’s and Aaron’s sons.

“I hope they’re not mean to her. She can be a bit full-on...”

Nico shakes his head. “Ethan won’t stand for that. Or Cristina. They’ll make her welcome.”

“I’d better go and see.” I get to my feet stiffly.

We’ve been sitting here for over four hours, and my knees have seized up.

“I’ll follow you soon. I just need a word with Michelangelo, there.”

“What do you mean? Don’t go disturbing him.” *Or worse...*

“Chill. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

I have my misgivings, but his bland smile is disarming. Reluctantly, I leave him alone with Marlowe.

CHAPTER 17

Nico

WHAT DOES she think I'm going to do? Set up a sniper's rig in the corner and take him out with a single bullet to the heart? I doubt it will come to that.

Marlowe barely even acknowledges that she's left. Just the merest tip of his head in her direction as Molly creeps out of the door is the only indication he's noticed at all. He continues to peer into the almost empty canvas, shifting his focus from that to the poster, then to his laptop screen and back again.

"You've something to say, gangster boy?" Marlowe never lifts his nose from his work, but his attention has definitely shifted to me now.

His focus might be finely honed, but mine's even more so. It goes with the job.

"Yes," I answer simply.

He straightens and swings around to face me. "Go on, then."

I come straight to the point. "Why are you really doing this?"

"Twenty thousand US dollars," he replies with a smirk.

I raise an eyebrow. I've been checking, or rather, I've had Frankie checking. I know he could earn ten times that amount working for one of the prestigious galleries. When it comes to creating world-class copies, Marlowe McGuinness can name his own price.

"Job satisfaction," he adds, as though he can see my lack of conviction.

"Right. What else?"

He hesitates, then, "If you have questions, you should ask Molly."

“Ask Molly what?”

Again, that pause. “She and I, we go back...”

“I know. University. She was at your wedding.”

He nods. “That’s right. We’re friends. And when I heard what that bastard has been doing...”

I prop my feet up on the low table in front of me. “Okay, we’re on the same page so far...”

“I care about Molly, and her kids. That’s what friends do. What’s your excuse? Or Ethan Savage’s for that matter?”

“Molly’s mine,” I state, for the avoidance of doubt.

He lifts an eyebrow. “Does she know that?”

“Probably. If not, she will. I take care of what’s mine. That goes for Lucy and Noah, too.”

He pauses for a moment, taking that in. “I’m glad to hear it. And Ethan? What’s his angle?”

“The same. In his case, it’s his reputation at stake. A deal gone bad, needs putting right.”

“Revenge, you mean?”

“You could call it that. It’s just business. It’s how things have to happen.”

“I see.” He meets my gaze, steady, eyes narrowing. “So, are we good now?”

“Not quite.” I wait a beat, then hit him with the killer question. The question that’s been nagging at me for the last few hours. “Is Lucy your kid?”

He’s quick, I’ll give him that. And cool. He appears rattled, but only briefly. His brow furrows momentarily, but he quickly rearranges his features back into a bland mask.

“No,” he replies.

I’m not buying it. “She has a look of you. In the eyes, the shape of the nose. There’s something about your jawline, and hers...” I’ve been studying this man’s profile all afternoon. I’m not mistaken. “You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not.” His tone is icy calm. And emphatic.

I could offer to remove his fingernails with a chisel, but I opt to change tack. Because, weirdly, against all the evidence, I think I believe him. “Do you know who Lucy’s father is?”

He hesitates again, then, “I do, actually.”

I knew it. “Who?”

He turns his back on me and picks up his pencil again. “This

conversation's over.”

“Like fuck it is!”

“Take this up with Molly. It's her secret to share, not mine.”

“You piece of shit! I—”

He swivels around to face me again. “If you're serious about Molly, do her the courtesy of letting her share what she wants, when she wants. If she chooses not to talk to you, maybe she has her reasons.”

“What reasons?” I seethe.

“Just ask her,” he repeats. “If it bothers you so much, why don't you go and sort your shit out now and leave me to my work?”

I'm back to Plan A. Fingernails.

“Sounds like good advice, bro.”

I never heard Tony approaching, and I don't know how long he's been in the doorway or how much he's heard. Now, he strolls into the studio and makes a pretence of studying the work in progress, what there is of it.

“How would you say it's going?”

“Not bad,” is Marlowe's non-committal response. “I do need to crack on, though, before the light goes.”

“We'll leave you to it, then.” Tony gives me a pointed glare. “You coming?”

This will have to wait. I grunt something that even I find unintelligible and follow him from the room.

I FIND Molly in the bedroom shared by Lucy and Noah. The baby is on her lap, snoozing. An empty feeding bottle lies on its side next to them, and a faint trail of milk drool snakes down Noah's chin.

She lifts a finger to hush me as I enter. “He's just dropping off,” she mouths.

Lucy is leafing through a book. She's in her pyjamas, hair freshly washed from her bath. She scuttles over to me.

“Nico, will you read me my story tonight?” she asks in a whisper.

“Your mum does the voices better than I do.”

“No, she doesn't. I like your voices. You can do the witch better.” She starts to demonstrate but is quickly shushed by her mother. Undaunted, she thrusts a copy of her current favourite, one of the Narnia books, into my hands. “Start from where Lucy goes into the wardrobe.”

“We always start there.”

“No, we don’t. Sometimes we start at the bit where they meet Mr Tumnus.” She opens the book at the page she wants and starts to recite the words. She knows them more or less by heart.

And I know when I’m beaten. “Okay, let’s read that bit, then.” I settle on a huge cushion by the window with a delighted Lucy curled up next to me.

That girl loves to get her own way, and she knows I’m a pushover. I read the chapter and go on to the next one as Noah is still fidgeting. At last, the baby nods off, and Molly stands to place him in his cot.

Lucy sees trouble coming. “Do I have to go to bed yet? I’m lots older than Noah. Tomasz and Jacob stay up way later than this.”

“Because they’re both older than you,” her mother tells her.

Lucy’s face falls. She’s gearing up for a serious protest.

“Maybe a few more minutes,” I suggest. “Another chapter, then that’s it. You go to bed. Agreed?”

Lucy beams. A deal is struck. I settle in to honour my side of it while Molly tidies up the baby paraphernalia. It never ceases to amaze me how much of it there is. A whole Narnia chapter’s worth and then more...

Lucy is struggling to stay awake by the time all four Pevensie children have found their way into the snowy wastes of Narnia. I murmur to her that it’s time to get into bed, and she doesn’t argue. I wait until Molly tucks her in, then we both creep from the room.

“She’s settled well,” Molly observes, closing the door. “To say how much upheaval there’s been recently. She really likes it here. We all do.”

I’m not massive fan of island life. I enjoy Caraksay in small doses, but I really prefer something a bit less isolated. A city. But I can see the attraction for a child. The beach, the wild landscape to run around in, the swimming pool, the cinema, and exciting places to play inside the castle. It’s all one big adventure to Lucy.

“That’s good, as we might be here a while.”

“I understand that, but I’m worried that she’s still missing school. It’s been a few weeks already...”

“Why not send her to the same school the boys go to? The chopper flies over there every day.”

“That’s a private school, isn’t it?”

“Does that matter? The fees won’t be a problem.” More to the point, it’s secure. And I can afford it, even if Molly can’t. I realise her work schedule

has been shot to pieces lately and she may be short of cash.

“No, it’s not that. I could have sent her to a private school before, but I always preferred not to. I believe in state education.”

“Not much of that to be had round here,” I observe.

“Anyway,” she goes on, “aren’t those places in high demand? There’d be a waiting list...”

Not if you have the money to make it disappear, there isn’t. “Get Cristina to have a word with the headteacher. I daresay something could be arranged, and Lucy would love going to school with her heroes.”

Molly grins. “She’s got it bad for those two, hasn’t she?” She turns to wrap her arms around my neck. “I know the feeling.”

I slant my mouth across hers and walk her backwards down the hallway towards our bedroom door. I pin her against it with my body, never relinquishing the kiss, while I fumble for the handle and manoeuvre her inside. I back-heel the door shut and sweep her into my arms. In three strides we’re at the bed.

I drop her onto the mattress then follow her down.

“I was going to—”

“It can wait,” I growl. “Get naked.”

“Make me,” is her playful reply.

Challenge accepted. I pin her down with one arm across her chest and stretch over her to root about in the drawer beside the bed. I know there are some... Ah!

My fingers close around a handful of my ties. Life here on the island is fairly informal, so there’s not much call for getting suited and booted, but there could be a need to fly across to the mainland at any time. It pays to be prepared. I draw three of them out and drop them on the duvet.

Molly squints at them in confusion. “What are those for?”

“This is me, making you, baby.” I wrap one of the ties around her wrists before she can utter a word of protest and draw her hands over her head. I secure them to the headboard, then stand back to admire my handiwork so far.

She tugs at her bonds. “Nico, this is weird.”

“Do you want me to untie you?”

She doesn’t answer immediately. Instead, “What are you going to do?”

“Get you naked.”

“That’ll be tricky, don’t you think?” She pulls at her wrists by way of a

demonstration.

“Depends how fond you are of those clothes,” I reply. I produce the knife I always keep tucked in my belt. You never know when something like that will come in handy.

“You can’t!” She gapes at me, wide-eyed.

“No?” I slice off the bottom button on her oversized shirt. “Shall I go on?”

She tenses. Her gaze meets mine, never wavers. Eventually, “I suppose I can always buy another...”

I allow myself a silent cheer and settle down next to her on the bed. Slowly, carefully, I remove each button with the point of my knife until the shirt hangs open. Her bra is visible, a pretty affair made of pink and black satin-type fabric. I sigh. It does seem a pity, but needs must.

I lift the central link and slide the point of my knife under it. It splits and parts. Her gorgeous breasts tumble free.

“That’s better,” I murmur. I set the knife aside and bend in to take one taut nipple between my lips.

Molly writhes and squirms when I suckle her. The plump bud hardens and grows. I press it against the roof of my mouth with my tongue and enjoy the keening hum dragged from somewhere in her throat. I move to the other nipple and apply the same treatment.

“Nico,” she wails. “That’s too... Too...”

I pause, raise my head to look at her. “Too what?”

“Someone might hear.”

“I doubt it. The walls in this place are two feet thick. And you’re going to be quiet, aren’t you?”

“I can’t...”

“I could gag you.” Actually, the idea doesn’t appeal that much. I relish those moans and squeals and little gasping sounds.

“I don’t want that...”

“Okay. You know what to do, then.” I return to my task.

She tries to muffle her response, turns her head and buries her mouth against her arm. It doesn’t do much good, and I daresay we’re both glad of those walls, constructed hundreds of years ago to keep out armed invaders and now put to another use entirely. If they can withstand cannon balls, they should be able to contain a few shrieks.

I nuzzle my way down her torso, detouring to flick my tongue around her

navel then pausing when I reach the next barrier. Her denim jeans.

I sit up and reach for my knife.

“You can... you can just unbutton them...” Her voice is breathy now, high on lust.

“I could, yes...” But I don’t. I remove the row of metal buttons one at a time, then grab the heavy fabric and pull them down over her hips. I’m careful to leave her underwear in place, a rather fetching thong to match the bra.

I feel a shopping expedition coming on.

I don’t really need to destroy the thong but I’m on a roll. I slice through first one side string, then the other. The scrap of prettiness falls away. I pick it up and scrunch it in my fist “You won’t be needing these back.”

“You ruined them,” she accuses, but with little heat in her tone.

“Send me a bill. Later.” I briefly consider taking my knife to what’s left of her shirt but decide it’s not in my way. I take in the almost-nude gloriousness of her, the tanned, slightly rounded abdomen, the full breasts, nipples swollen and still moist from my attentions. And lower, the smooth mound, the curve of her hips, her long legs and elegant feet. Even her coral-pink toenails are exquisite.

“You’re perfect,” I breathe. “Every fucking inch of you.”

“Nico...?”

“Molly?”

“You’ve got what you wanted. I’m naked. You can untie me now.”

I shake my head. “I prefer you like this. Vulnerable. Fuckable.”

“But I’m not going anywhere. There’s no need to tie me to the bed.”

I get to my feet and unbuckle my belt. “Your point is?”

Her eyes widen. She’s fixated on the belt. “You can’t... I mean, you wouldn’t... I’ll do as you say next time.”

I smirk at her. “I hadn’t intended to take my belt to you, but since you mention it...”

“No! Please. You’re scaring me, Nico...”

Point noted, but maybe something to save for another time. I drop the belt on the floor and unbutton my jeans. “I’ll settle for fucking you, then. It’s what I’ve been wanting to do all day. Spread your legs for me, Molly.”

She still looks worried, though she’s stopped wrestling with the bindings. “You promise not to hurt me?”

“No. But I do promise to make it rough, just the way you like it. And

thorough. I promise to drive my cock into you, deep and hard, until you come all over it, screaming my name. Then I promise to do it some more, until you come again. And again. Does that sound okay to you?"

She waits a heartbeat, lets my words settle, then a soft smile curls her mouth. "Promises, promises..." She parts her thighs and gnaws on her lower lip. "Show me what you've got, then."

I fist my cock and balance one knee on the mattress. A couple of swift strokes bring me to full, aching hardness. I position myself between her thighs, taking my weight on one hand while I guide my dick between her pussy lips. Slowly, I drive forward until I'm buried balls-deep inside her.

Molly sighs and tips her head back, her eyes closed. She squeezes her inner muscles around me and rolls her hips.

I brace my arms on either side of her shoulders and draw back, almost completely. Then I plunge forward again.

She lets out a small cry and arches her back.

I drive my cock in and out, relishing the delicious friction. She's tight, and hot and wet, her pussy quivering around me.

I shift my angle to find that sweet spot that drives her wild. Her breath hitches, so I know I'm on target.

"Nico," she moans, and her breath catches in her throat. "I'm close..."

I increase my pace, pounding into her and hitting that special place with every driving stroke. Her body stiffens, arches, and a flood of wetness bathes my eager cock.

I keep up the rhythm as she floats through her first orgasm, drawing every last frisson of pleasure from it for her. And me.

When the storm abates, I slow down, adopt a more leisurely tempo but never letting up on her sweet spot. I lean to one side to allow me to slip my hand between our bodies and I find her clit with my forefinger. I stroke and rub, teasing a second climax from her while she cries my name in a ragged, breathless voice. It's as though the sound is dragged from her throat.

This time, when her climax passes, I pull out. She's limp, washed out, but I'm not done yet. I move her onto her front and lift her hips to arrange her on all fours, her knees wide apart. Her pussy is swollen, pink, glimmering with her juices and mine. I part the lips with my thumbs and taste her, plunge my tongue as deep as I can, then I slide my cock home again.

I take my time now, driving my erection in then easing it out, each stroke long and slow and deep. I watch in lust-fuelled fascination as her body opens

to accept me. In, out. In, out. I place the pad of my right thumb over her tight little arsehole, pressing on that intimate rosebud at the same time as my left-hand snakes around to find her clit again.

“Oh God,” she groans.

Her pussy clenches around me.

I tease her clit, sweeping my fingers through the juicy moistness, then massaging that plump bud between my finger and thumb, all the while filling her tight pussy with my cock.

My balls twist and contract. It’s painful, almost, but I grind my jaw and wait.

Wait.

Wait some more, until—

“Aaaagh!” She comes again, the most explosive yet.

Her pussy clamps down around my aching dick. The friction is exquisite, intense. I can hold back no longer so I let it go.

We come together, shaking, rocking in unison, our bodies locked in a sensual dance. My semen fills her, coats my dick, dribbles to stain her peachy perfect arse cheeks, trickles down her thighs and mine.

I swear, the sight is engraved on my retinas, beautiful, intimate, glorious, and filthy. *Lord, take me now and I shall die a happy man.*

We tumble flat onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs, still joined, both of us panting, savouring every breath of oxygen we can suck in.

I recover first. Well, enough to roll off her and reach for the headboard to release her hands.

Molly turns over, onto her back. Her eyes remain closed, her breathing is still laboured. It’s as though we’ve both completed a marathon. Bring on the energy drinks and tin foil blankets.

“Are you okay?” I mutter.

She answers with a non-committal grunt.

“Did I hurt you? I scared you, and I’m sorry...”

Her eyelids flicker. I catch a glimpse of those chocolate-coloured eyes before she closes them again.

“Surprised me, maybe. Not scared.”

I know better, her reaction was honest, and genuine. I should have taken it more slowly, but I was rattled by my conversation with Marlowe. Too eager to mark her as mine.

No excuse, but that’s how it was.

I need to get a grip.

“Next time,” I begin.

“You can buy proper handcuffs online,” she tells me. “I’ve seen websites...”

I prop myself up on one elbow. “I know that. Are you saying...?”

“Fluffy ones. And Velcro cuffs. Borys had some, but he always wanted to be the one tied up. It did nothing for me, but that, with you...”

“You liked it?”

She nods. “I wasn’t sure at first, but then... Wow!”

I manage to dismiss the unsettling image of Borys prancing about in his Velcro cuffs and instead settle for kissing her. “We’ll go internet shopping. Soon.”

“Mmm,” is her response, followed by a soft snore.

She’s asleep.

CHAPTER 18

Molly

CRISTINA IS confident that there will be a space for Lucy at Glencruitten and offers to phone the headteacher today. I agree, but not before checking the place out online. It's a classy establishment catering for children from six years old, some residential, but many day pupils like the Caraksay contingent. The helicopter school run goes at eight every morning and returns by four, all ably managed by Magda, the pilot-cum-nanny.

We discuss it at breakfast the following morning, and Lucy is delighted at the prospect of going to school with Tomasz and Jacob. There will be two other children attending with them, a fourteen-year-old girl called Natalyja, and Yuryl, a boy of about eight. They are the younger siblings of Arina, who I gather is the girlfriend of one of Ethan's elite crew. Their parents are dead, and the family was displaced from Belarus by sex traffickers. The Savages put a stop to that vile enterprise and rescued the younger children. Whilst Rome and Arina mainly live at Caernbro Ghyll, the children have settled on Caraksay in the care of the families there. It seems to work, and given the trauma they've endured in their short lives, no one is keen to upset the applecart.

"They are settled and happy," Cristina tells me in her faintly accented English. "I look out for them, and Ethan, of course. Oh, and there is Faith..."

"Faith?"

"Aaron's mother-in-law. She has a cottage down by the cliffs. Natalie and Yuryl live with her. All the kids adore Faith. And there's also Magda. I don't

know how we'd manage without her.”

“This family just goes on and on...”

“I suppose so. And now we have you, Lucy, and Noah...” She jiggles my baby on her lap. “It’s lovely to have a tiny baby here again.”

“It’s kind of you to let us stay.”

She simply smiles at me. “How is the painting coming along?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll be going up there in a minute, when Magda gets back from the school run and can look after these two.”

“You can leave them with me, you know. I was planning to take Seb to the pool for an hour or so. They can come with us and splash around a bit.”

“Can you manage all three of them?”

“Yes, I think so. Lucy can swim, and so can Seb, after a fashion. I’ll get one of the men to be poolside as well, just in case.”

“I’ll come,” Beth chimes in from the direction of the toaster. “I could do with checking out that filtration system anyway.”

“Beth is a plumber,” Cristina tells me, as though that explains all her odd little idiosyncrasies. “She likes to fix things.”

“I heard that.” Beth shoves a quarter of a slice of toast in her mouth. “Someone round here has to be practical. Let me play with the baby, you’ve had your turn.”

Cristina doesn’t argue. “I’ll go round up Lucy and Seb.” She hands Noah over to Beth. “Back in five.”

I WAIT until Lucy has trooped off with Beth and Cristina and the two little ones, then I set off to make my way back up to the tower studio. I pass Nico on the stairs.

“I was looking for you,” he says, dropping a kiss on my mouth. “Kids sorted?”

“They’ve gone to the pool with Cristina and Beth.”

“They’re in good hands. Cristina will have Noah swimming before he can walk. She used to be Olympic standard.”

“She did? Wow.”

“Yes. She was in the Moldovan national squad. A triathlete. Won international medals, I gather.”

“Why did she stop?”

“Not sure. Some family trouble, I think. It was a long time ago. What are

you doing today?” He turns to follow me back upstairs.

“I was going to hang around with Marlowe. I might be able to help.”

“I doubt it. He seems pretty self-contained to me.”

“You’re right. Even so...”

We reach the foot of the spiral staircase leading up to the tower room.

“Are you coming up?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “I’m flying over to Inverness with Tony later. Some business we need to follow up.”

By which he probably means someone’s not been paying their dues and needs a reminder. I know better than to ask.

“Have you seen Marlowe this morning?” he asks me, changing the subject.

I shake my head. “Knowing him, he’s either still in bed or been up since before dawn and started work already.” My money would be on the latter.

Nico rakes his fingers through his over-long dark hair. “He’s an interesting guy.”

I eye him sharply. “You don’t like him, do you?”

“Not sure. I respect his skills. And his loyalty.”

My brow furrows. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We had a chat yesterday...”

“I know. I was going to ask about that.”

He slouches against the granite wall. “I asked him if he was Lucy’s father.”

My jaw drops. I gape at him. “You did what?”

“I asked if—”

“I heard what you said. Why? Why would you ask that?”

“Because I could tell he was related to her. They’re like two peas in a pod. Haven’t you noticed that?”

“No!”

“Yes,” he replies quietly. “She has his eyes.”

“She does not!”

He shrugs. “He denied it, and I believe him.”

I glower at him. “Right, then. Not that it concerns you...”

“But he admitted that he does know who her dad was. Suggested I should ask you.”

“I’m not... I mean, I don’t... It was a long time ago.”

“Eleven years or thereabouts.” he agrees. “Not so long you wouldn’t

remember. Or maybe there were a few candidates..."

My slender hold on my temper evaporates. "How dare you? What the fuck does it have to do with you anyway? If you think—"

"I apologise. That was uncalled for."

He has the grace to look chastened but I'm past caring.

"You bet it was." It'll take more than an apology to make up for that misogynistic little gem. "I don't answer to you, or anyone. Keep your nose out of my business."

"I'm sorry. I should never have said that. You know I adore Lucy..."

"Even if you do think her mother's a slut."

"I never said that."

"You implied it, asshole."

"Molly..."

"You go and play your gangster games in Inverness. I have stuff to do, and that doesn't include going through the third degree with you."

"I—"

"Go fuck yourself, Nico. I'm done with you and your bloody questions." I spin on my heel and stomp off up the stairs.

He doesn't follow me. Sensible man.

"WHAT'S GOT up your arse this morning?" Marlowe sets aside his paintbrush to regard me.

"Nothing," I lie.

"Fair enough." He picks up the brush and dips it into a little pool of off-white paint. "In that case, do you mind making yourself scarce? You're curdling the milk in my coffee."

"What are you...?"

"I'm guessing you spoke to Nico," he offers, ignoring my denial.

"Apparently, so did you."

"He asked, I answered."

"It was none of his business."

"If you say so." He tilts his head and applies a deft brushstroke.

"What's that supposed to mean? You think it was?"

"Was what?"

"His business."

He abandons his work and swings around to fully face me. "He loves

you.”

“He does not!”

“It looked like that to me.”

“He has a lousy way of showing it, then. He said...” My voice trails off. I don’t even want to repeat the ridiculous slur.

“What did he say?” Marlowe presses me.

“He implied that I was a whore.” There. I’ve said it out loud.

He tries and fails to conceal his grin. “Oh dear. I bet he’s regretting that.”

“He’d better. He did say he was sorry, but—”

“But you stormed off?”

“How did you know?”

“You always storm off, sweetheart. It’s one of the things I like most about you. No long, drawn-out goodbyes. Just a ‘fuck you’ and the door slams. Keeps things simple.”

I subside onto the sofa and drop my head in my hands. “You know how much I regret that.”

“You mean just now, with Nico? Or back then, with Tris?”

“Both,” I moan. “Tris mostly.”

“You can’t change what happened.” His voice is gentle now, no longer laced with his usual note of mockery or challenge.

“No, but...”

“Tris is gone, Molly. It wasn’t your fault, the accident...”

“I know that, but if I hadn’t walked out when I did... If we’d stayed longer at the party, then he wouldn’t have been on that road, and ...”

“Tris was taken out by a drunk driver. You and I both know that. Killed instantly, they said. It was the driver’s fault, no one else’s, and he’s still inside for it last I heard.”

I nod. The lowlife who’d downed nearly eleven pints then got behind the wheel and mowed down an innocent pedestrian got twelve years for causing death by drunk driving. With remission and suchlike he should have been out by now, but apparently, he’s not been able to behave himself in prison. He might be coming up for parole soon, I daresay. But nothing will bring Tristran back.

“You and Tris, you were finished anyway,” Marlowe reminds me.

That’s true, but does he need to be so brutally honest?

“That doesn’t mean I wanted him dead. I loved him. Once.”

“You weren’t his type. It would never have worked out.”

That's Marlowe's not-so-subtle way of reminding me that Tristram was gay. He played around with me for a while because it suited him at the time to have a girlfriend on his arm. We had a brief affair, he got me pregnant, then cheated on me with another man. We rowed about it, and I did my usual storming out trick.

"I know there was no future for us, but I still miss him."

"Me, too," Marlowe agrees.

"He was your brother. Of course you miss him..."

We sit in silence for a few minutes. Marlowe is the first to speak.

"You need to sort things out with Nico."

I respond with a disparaging snort.

"He loves you. He loves Lucy, and Noah. And you love him. You told me so."

I raise my head. "I did? When?"

"You said he was nice."

"That doesn't mean..."

He raises one eyebrow. "Why make a secret of it? What happened to Tris is public knowledge."

"He'd no right to ask. Or to speak to me the way he did. What does it matter who her father was?"

"It doesn't, unless her father is still in the picture."

"Well, he isn't. Obviously."

"Nico doesn't know that. What he does know, what he's worked out for himself, is that I'm somehow related to your daughter, which is true. She's my niece. And it must bother him that I know the truth and he doesn't. He was bound to ask. I told him he should speak to you."

"It's none of his business!"

"I know, I know. Except, maybe it is. He wants to make a life with you, with your children. In his shoes, wouldn't you want to know if there was an ex-lover and baby daddy in the background? There are no clean breaks when kids are involved. Or, there shouldn't be. I guess he realises that, so..."

I grunt, for want of a more articulate response. What Marlowe says makes sense, I suppose.

He's not finished. "It didn't matter until he met me, saw the family resemblance and started to make connections. That brought the dim and distant past right into the present. And even though he had his suspicions, he didn't ferret about in corners. Men like him have ways of finding shit out, but

he was transparent about it and just came right out and asked.”

“You make him out to be some sort of saint.”

“Hardly. But I do think he deserves an explanation, and it’s yours to give. Not mine or anyone else’s.”

“He asked a straight question, so he deserves a straight answer. Is that what you’re saying?”

“It looks that way to me, but it’s your call. For what it’s worth, though, I like him. And I trust him to do right by my niece.”

“You know what sort of a man he is?”

“I understand perfectly well what this setup is, what they do. Not saying I’m entirely on board with it, but I can see that they take care of their own.”

“That’s true. He proved that, even before we...” I bury my head in my hands again. “Oh God. I need to go and find him.”

“Excellent idea. Now fuck off and let me get on with some work.”

CHAPTER 19

Nico

“ARE you going to tell me what’s got you so wound up, or do I have to put up with your ugly mug scowling at me all day?”

“I’m fine,” I reply, my nose pressed to the window of the chopper as the North Sea rolls past a thousand feet below us.

“Tell your face that.” Tony goes back to pretending to study his phone. “What hardware did you bring?”

“The usual.” A knife in my belt and a handgun tucked in a holster inside my jacket. “Why? Expecting trouble?”

“I always expect trouble.”

“You should have said. I could have packed a flame thrower and maybe a missile launcher.”

“Fuckwit,” he mutters.

I return to my scrutiny of the roiling waves. Today’s mission isn’t especially taxing, just a simple reminder of the rules and protocols of doing business in Inverness. It’s our territory, and though we welcome a healthy mixed economy, anyone wanting to do business on our streets has to pay for the privilege.

Albert Mulligan, pimp, fencer of stolen goods, and car thief extraordinaire, is no exception.

Mulligan has diversified in recent weeks, and despite our initial reservations has so far lived up to his promises as far as high-end cars are concerned. The first shipment of motors to Eastern Europe left Liverpool a

few days ago, and he's been paid the hundred grand he was after. If there are any remaining hard feelings after Tony broke his nose and dislocated his jaw, he hasn't seen fit to raise them.

But today's business doesn't concern dodgy BMWs. It does concern the 'rent' of a hundred quid a month for every girl he puts out on our streets. In exchange, we provide a decent level of security, access to healthcare if it's needed, and a place to do the business. The Mermaid can pass as a fairly respectable two-star hotel, but in reality it offers rooms by the hour, a convenient location just outside the city centre, and free condoms.

Mrs Ellison, the woman who oversees the premises for us, reports a lot of Mulligan's girls using the place in the last couple of months, but the revenue from that particular little weasel has actually dropped to about half what it used to be. We suspect he's got cocky and is underpaying us, or even paying protection to someone else.

Either way, it's not happening. We need to find out what's been going on and put a stop to it. A not-so-gentle word in Mulligan's ear should do the trick.

We touch down in the car park of a pub we run in the suburbs and pile out into the SUV we keep tucked away behind the main bar. It'll take us about twenty minutes to get to The Mermaid, which is where we arranged to meet with Mulligan.

I check my watch. "He'd better not keep us waiting," I snarl. "I have shit to do." Like grovelling to Molly, assuming she's cooled down enough to listen to me by the time I get back.

"He wouldn't dare," Tony assures me. "He knows this isn't a courtesy call."

I subside into the passenger seat to watch the streets of Inverness go by. Britain's most northerly city, it's a place I normally enjoy visiting. I admire the architecture, sturdy and solid, the dark granite buildings, the narrow streets, and the bustling city centre which makes more than a passing nod to tourism and the worldwide fascination with the Loch Ness monster.

Should I pick up a stuffed Nessie for Noah while I'm here? And maybe a book for Lucy?

The charms of the city are lost on me today, and I'm glad when we pull up outside The Mermaid five minutes before the time we agreed with Mulligan. At least we can now abandon any pretence at small talk, not that Tony has been especially chatty.

“Is that his car?” I wonder, checking out the shabby Mitsubishi in the car park.

“Probably. He’ll want to convince us that trade is bad and he’s on his uppers.”

“Is he for real? He must know we know to the penny what he’s been earning these last few weeks as most of it comes from us.” Mulligan has been making good on his grand claims regarding the supply of high-end motors. “Right. Let’s get this done with.” I lead the way through the swing doors at the hotel entrance.

There’s no lobby to speak of. We don’t really need one. There’s just a sort of cubicle where Mrs Ellison hangs the keys to all the doors and from where she can keep a watchful eye on comings and goings. I march over and lean on the half door.

The cubicle is empty, apart from the rows of keys dangling from numbered hooks. They all seem to be there, suggesting none of the rooms are in use currently.

That strikes me as odd. This place is a goldmine usually, it’s always busy. I knock on the wooden surround. “Hey. Shop.”

There’s no answer from within the bowels of the hotel. No panting manageress comes trotting from within. Even more odd, since she knew we were coming and should be here to greet us.

I knock again, harder. And shout louder.

Still no response.

“What the fuck...?” Tony walks around the outside of the cubicle to reach the one room located here on the ground floor. This is Mrs Ellison’s tiny studio apartment, the only other place she spends her time when she’s not in her cubicle. He batters the door with the side of his fist. “Mrs Ellison? Agnes? Get your arse out here.”

Still no answer. He tries the door, and it opens.

We exchange a troubled glance. This isn’t right. She trusts no one and never leaves her door unlocked. Silently now, we both draw our weapons, and I cover him while he enters the apartment.

It’s basically one room with a tiny kitchenette and a shower room, so it doesn’t take long to find her. Agnes Ellison is in bed, her sightless eyes staring at the ceiling and her throat slit from one ear to the other. The blood soaking the bedclothes is still wet, and she’s not yet quite stiff.

Grim-faced, Tony assesses the scene. “I’d say about an hour. What do

you think?”

I have to agree. Which means, whoever did this won't be far away. Maybe they're still here, even. “We need to get a clean-up team in. Let's check the rooms first.”

We drop the latch on the outer door to prevent anyone else coming in and discovering the body. We prefer to clean up our own mess and not involve the authorities. Then we arm ourselves with all the keys taken from the hooks and climb the stairs to the first floor.

All three rooms here are empty and locked. We knock on each then let ourselves in. They look to be undisturbed since the last housekeeping visit. The beds are neatly made up, and stocks of toiletries, including generous supplies of condoms, are laid out in the bathrooms.

We move up to the next floor and find much the same result.

“This is weird. It's like the *Marie Celeste*,” I whisper as we start on the third staircase to the top floor.

Scowling, Tony follows me.

“Where the fuck is Mulligan? He should be here by now.”

I nod. I'd have expected him to rock up and find the outer door locked, but he'd spot our vehicle and know we were here. He should be hammering on the door. The fact that he isn't suggests he knew something we didn't and is giving the place a wide berth.

I try the first door on this landing, and I'm not surprised to find it locked. I try one of the remaining keys, but it won't turn. I try the other two. Neither works. I go through the rigmarole again before I finally conclude that it's locked from the inside.

I peer at the door. “Does that look right to you?” I point to the outer casing of the cylinder lock.

H squints at it over my shoulder. “It's been bent. Damaged. Maybe someone forced it...”

“Whatever. Right, then. We do it the old-fashioned way.” I line up my boot and deliver a sharp blow just below the handle. The timber surround shatters, and the door flies open.

“Holy fuck.”

The first thing to hit me is the stench. A decaying corpse is not exactly subtle. The scene is not one of quite so much carnage as the ground floor flat, but it's grisly, nonetheless. The girl is dead, and not recent, I'd say. At least a day or two, going by the smell. My guess would be she's been beaten then

strangled, and whoever did it has dropped the latch on their way out, somehow sabotaged the mechanism so it couldn't be unlocked again, and returned the key to the cubicle downstairs.

She's naked, so I drop a blanket over her. It seems the least I can do for her now.

There's no question of leaving the room undisturbed for the scenes of crime guys. We won't be involving the police in our business, but that doesn't mean we'll do nothing.

Tony checks the other rooms but finds them empty, while I get started on the phone calls. I begin with Ethan, who will instigate the inquiry. By the time I hang up he'll have Frankie and Casey digging through CCTV, bank records, phone and text logs to establish exactly who's been through here in the last few days, and more particularly, earlier today. We'll have men interviewing all the girls who use this place regularly, and of course, Albert Mulligan.

Tracking that weasel down will be our next job.

I place a call to the clean-up team, too. They'll take pictures before removing any and all trace of the violence done here. We'll want this place up and running again within the day.

I clatter back down the stairs and force the half-door on the cubicle. Inside, I find the rickety old laptop which Mrs Ellison used to record day-to-day business. She had the sense to password protect it, so I tuck it under my arm to take it to Frankie to hack into.

We check for any other paperwork but find nothing.

"The cameras look to be working okay," Tony observes, peering up into the corner of the cubicle. The small, winking red light indicates a functional device. "Should be something on there. Where's the monitoring station?"

"Could be on this." I tap the laptop, "or more likely in her flat."

"I'll check." He leaves me to do a final scan of the tiny office.

I hear his footsteps coming back.

"Find anything?" I exit the cubicle. "We should wait for the cleaners to get here—"

"Let's make the trip worth their while, then."

I whirl at the unfamiliar voice, but not fast enough. I let out a sharp cry when white heat explodes between my ribs.

My last thought as I crumple. *I've been stabbed.*

CHAPTER 20

Molly

I MAKE my way down from the tower studio. I don't know when to expect Nico back from whatever business he's involved in on the mainland, but perhaps one of the men will be able to tell me. Or even Ethan. I can swing by the main office, see who's around.

The drone of a helicopter reaches me as I arrive at the first floor. *Is he back already?* I peer out of the window overlooking the cobbled forecourt.

No, it's not a helicopter returning, it's the spare one preparing for takeoff. Magda is on board, and the rotors are slowly spinning. As I watch, Megan, the Caraksay medic, sprints across the cobbles from the direction of her clinic. She's carrying her medical bag.

Ethan and Aaron appear on the main castle steps, and they, too, jog over to the aircraft. All three leap on board, and the chopper immediately rises into the air. Magda circles the battlements just once, then sets a course heading east, towards the Scottish mainland.

What's got them in such a hurry? I dread to think, and happily it's none of my business. I carry on along the upper hallway to the main office.

Cristina is there, seated at her husband's desk. She lifts her gaze when I appear in the doorway. "Ah, Molly. I was just about to come and find you."

"Well, I saved you the trouble. Is it about the school?" Maybe she's spoken already to the headteacher at Glencruitten.

"What? No, not that. I... I have bad news..."

My heart lurches. "Is it Lucy?" She was okay an hour ago when she came

up to the tower room to ask if she could go down to the beach with Beth and Faith. “Has she—?”

“No, not Lucy. She’s fine. It... it’s Nico.”

“Nico?”

“He’s been hurt.”

Does she mean our row? I know he was upset, but...

“Hurt?” I echo. “I know, I said some things...” *But so did he.*

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Molly. He’s been stabbed.”

I collapse onto the closest chair. “No!”

Cristina is beside me. “Can I get you anything?”

“Stabbed? Did you say...?”

“I’m sorry,” she repeats.

“Is he... Is he alive?” *Please, God, let him be alive. I can’t lose him, not like this, not now.*

“He is. Ethan and Megan are on their way there. We’ll have news soon.”

“I just saw them... The helicopter...” It makes sense now. “Where is he? I need to go to him.”

“He’s in hospital, in Inverness. He’s in the best possible hands, and—”

I leap to my feet. “I need to be there.”

“Soon. Megan needed to get to him straight away, and Ethan and Aaron jumped in with her. The chopper will drop them off and be back for you.”

“I need...” My face crumples, and I’m sobbing. “We argued, I said...I said...” I can’t remember exactly what I said, but it wasn’t nice. “What if that’s the last time...?” I can’t even say it. If I say the words, it becomes real.

“It won’t be. He’s at The Richmond clinic. There are surgeons, they’ll take care of him, and Megan is on her way there.”

“I need to tell him I’m sorry.”

“You can, and you will. Soon.”

The awful reality of her words is beginning to settle. I’m processing, trying to make sense, but my head is bursting with questions.

“Who did this? Why? Why would anyone stab him?”

“I don’t know, not at this point. But Ethan will find out and—”

“It’s because of what he does. What all of you do. This life...”

“We don’t know the answers yet, Molly.”

“I do. I do!” I thought I could put my misgivings to one side, turn a blind eye. But here it is, front and centre. Armed attackers, men with guns and knives and fuck knows what else. It could have been me, or worse, Lucy or

Noah. I have a vision of Nico bleeding to death on some backstreet, murdered for a few grams of cocaine.

“You need to pull yourself together, Molly.” Her tone is firm, no-nonsense. “Nico will need you, and so will your children. Go and find Lucy, tell her you’re going to be away for a while.”

“How can I tell her...?”

“Don’t tell her everything, not yet. But she’ll wonder where you are. Tell her something, then go and get a few things together. Pack some things for Nico as well. I’ll look after the little ones while you’re away.

“I can’t just—”

“Yes, you can. You need to be strong. Now, go and get ready.”

Numb, I stumble to my feet.

“Do you need me to come with you?”

I shake my head. “I can manage.”

“I know that.”

I’M STILL BITING back tears when I fob Lucy off with talk of a meeting with a gallery owner. “It’s short notice. He’s only in Glasgow for a couple of days.”

“Okay, Mummy.”

She’s in the kitchen, engaged in a game of chess with Robbie, overseen by Mrs McRae. She’s so engrossed that she pays barely any attention to me. There are plans for a beachcombing expedition later, so I doubt she’ll miss me or Nico until bedtime.

“Auntie Cristina will read you your story tonight.”

“Can she do voices?”

“I’m sure she can.”

“Not as good as you. Or Nico.”

“Well, no, but—”

“I won’t say anything in case she gets upset.”

I throw my arms around her. “You’re a very special little girl. Have I told you that?”

She wriggles free. “You’ll knock the board. And why are you crying?”

“I’m not.” I swipe my hand across my eyes. “I have to go.”

“Bye, Mummy.” Her attention is back on the prospect of sacrificing her bishop to save her castle.

I slink from the kitchen.

Cristina is waiting for me outside in the courtyard. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. When—?”

“The chopper is due back in ten minutes. Magda will need to refuel, then you can be off.”

“How long will it take to get there? Is there any news?”

“Megan is with him and says he’s out of surgery and stable.”

It’s good news, or it should be, but her grave expression sends a chill down my spine. “What are you not saying?”

“I’m—”

“Is he going to be all right? What else did the doctor tell you?”

“He’s very poorly, Molly. You need to understand that.”

“He might not survive. Is that it?”

“Molly, we need to prepare—”

I drop to perch on the step, my head in my hands. “Prepare for the worst? That’s it, isn’t it? That’s what people say when... Please, he can’t die. He just can’t...”

Cristina is spared the need to dredge up further platitudes by the whine of the returning helicopter. She lays her hand on my shoulder and reaches for my holdall. “Come on, let’s get you on board.”

“HOW LONG WILL it take to get there?”

Magda glances back over her shoulder at me. “Just over an hour. There’s a helipad in the hospital grounds.”

I nod. “Did you see him? When you were there?”

“No. Sorry”

“Do you know what happened?” I should have asked Cristina, she’s more likely to have the details, if there are any to be had.

“Some sort of incident...”

I’d worked that much out for myself. I fall silent. There’s nothing to do but wait.

WE TOUCH down in the hospital grounds, and I’m out of the helicopter before the rotors stop spinning.

“The main entrance is that way,” Magda calls out to me. “Ask at

reception and...”

The rest of what she might say is lost as I race over the gravel parking area, heading for the main door to the private clinic. I burst through and rush up to the counter.

“I’m here to see Nico Hanssen,” I blurt. “He’s been stabbed.”

The nurse behind the counter never turns a perfectly coiffed hair. I guess stab wounds must be an everyday occurrence round here.

She consults her desktop monitor then bestows her bland, professional smile on me. “Can you tell me who you are, please?”

“Molly. Molly Lowe. I’m his...”

While I’m working out what might be the best description of my claim for a right to be here, she treats me to that plastic grin again.

“You’re on my list. Take the lift to the second floor. He’s in room eight.”

“Is he...? Can you tell me how he is, please?”

She checks her computer again. “You’ll need to speak with the clinician treating him, Miss Lowe.”

That makes sense. “Where can I find the doctor?”

“Second floor.” She points to the lift tucked away in the corner.

I march over and plonk the holdall containing Nico’s things on the floor, then stab at button number two with my index finger. Seconds later, the metal doors slide apart. I grab the bag and dart inside.

I emerge onto a wide, clinical corridor. Unlike the NHS version, there are no trolley beds parked down the side, no huddle of utilitarian wheelchairs abandoned by the stairs, no harried-looking staff rushing about with clipboards. Instead, it’s calm, quiet, a shrine to well-heeled medical efficiency.

I check the closest door to me. Number twelve. Next to it, number fourteen. I spin around and dash the other way, halting outside number eight. I can hear voices from within.

I knock and enter.

Three pairs of eyes turn in my direction.

Ethan is lounging in the bedside plastic armchair, while Tony perches awkwardly on a low stool. Aaron leans on the windowsill.

I ignore them all and rush to the side of the bed.

Nico’s eyes are closed. A mask covers the lower half of his face, and he’s attached to a variety of devices by a spaghetti junction of lines. Lights flash, and there’s the occasional beep accompanied by low, repetitive whirring.

“Nico?” I grasp his fingers, then think better of it in case I dislodge the canula sprouting from the back of his hand. “Is he..? Can he hear me?”

Ethan stands up and offers me his seat. “Maybe. He’s still sedated.”

I accept the seat. “What happened? Do you know...?”

“It was an arsewipe called Mulligan,” Tony growls. “We searched the place, but he must have been hiding...”

“Hiding? Why? What...?” *Who the fuck is Mulligan?*

“None of that matters right now,” Ethan tries to assure me. “The main thing is, Tony was there and he was able to get Nico here in time.”

My head is spinning. None of this makes any sense. “I don’t understand. Where were you? Why would anyone...?”

“We were working,” Tony answers, as though that explains everything. “These things happen.”

“No, they don’t. Not to normal people. No one ever stabbed me just in a day’s work.”

He narrows his eyes. “No, I can see that. A spot of waterboarding, though...”

I bite back my next remark and settle for, “That was different.”

Ethan interrupts the exchange. “No vital organs punctured. He was lucky. Lost a lot of blood, but it could have been worse.”

I grab on to that snippet and heave a relieved sigh. “Is that what they said? The doctors?”

“Yes. They’ve patched him up as best they can. Now, we wait.”

“But he’s going to be okay, surely? If it’s just—”

I’m interrupted by the door opening. Megan joins us.

I leap to my feet. “Thank Goodness. How is he? What can you tell me?”

She switches on her best, super-efficient bedside manner. “I’ll be able to tell you more in a moment. Can I just check him?”

I bite my tongue while she faffs about with her stethoscope, then shines her little torch in his eyes. She scans the various machines, consults the chart at the foot of the bed, before turning back to regard me.

“His blood pressure is still very low, despite the surgery having stopped the internal bleeding. That’s a concern, and we need to monitor it. He’s poorly but stable.”

“Will he...?”

“He has every chance. He’s strong, healthy. He needs rest, but as long as there are no other complications, no underlying issues, we’re hopeful.”

Hopeful? That must be the understatement of the decade.

“What about the blood pressure? What does that mean?”

“The surgeons are confident they caught and fixed all the internal injuries, but there’s a chance they may have missed something. If he’s still bleeding internally, they may have to go in again.”

Oh, dear God... “When will we know?”

“His blood pressure should start to rise again in the next twelve hours or so. If it doesn’t, that would be cause for concern and we’d investigate further.”

Twelve hours? A lifetime. “Will I be able to stay with him?”

“Yes, of course

“How long will he need to be in here?”

“If all goes well, just a day or two, until we’re sure he’s on the mend. Then I can transfer him to Caraksay to care for him there.”

“So soon?” I start to panic. “Are you sure? What if...? I mean, they have all the facilities here.”

“So do we,” Ethan puts in. “Megan won’t move him until he’s ready.”

“Of course. I’m sorry, I...”

Megan lays her hand on my shoulder. “It’s been a shock, I know. A lot to take in. Why don’t we leave you alone with him for a while?”

My panic reaction soars into overdrive again. “What if something goes wrong? A relapse?”

“Then any number of alarms will go off and the place will be swarming with medics. Don’t worry, we’ve got it covered.”

“Will he come round? I mean, if I talk to him, can he hear me?”

“He might. It’s always worth a try, I think.”

“We have shit to discuss,” Ethan interrupts. “Let’s get out of here and find a quiet spot somewhere. And, Megan, I have another job for you.”

Ethan gestures to the other men to come with him. They all troop out, leaving just me and the doctor.

“The nurses will be right outside if you need them. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” She jots something down on the clipboard and replaces it at the foot of the bed. “The alarm bell is just here.” She points out the red button set into the clinical bedside table. One final reassuring smile, and she’s gone.

“PLEASE, DON’T DIE.” I cut right to the chase. “I need you. You can’t leave

me, not now.”

My fingers are interlaced with his. I kiss the blunt, clean fingertips, then lay my cheek on his shoulder.

“I need to tell you I’m sorry. Sorry for being such a cow. I didn’t mean what I said.”

I swipe away a stray tear. I’m done with weeping. Nico needs me to be strong. Everyone tells me that, and they’re right. I swallow hard and start again.

“You need to get better. I need you, so does Lucy. And Noah, though he doesn’t know it yet. When you wake up, we’ll talk about everything. No secrets.”

I fall silent and drop my forehead onto the crisp, white coverlet. The only sound is the monotonous beeping of the machines. I’m not sure how long I remain like that, listening, waiting. Hoping.

At last, I raise my head and start over again.

I’m not a believer in any higher power, but I find myself making bargains with God. *Please, send him back to me. Let him live, and I’ll start going to church. I’ll have Noah christened, and I’ll do something good. I’ll sponsor a child in Africa, or even a whole orphanage.*

None of that brings about any discernible change, so I abandon The Almighty and revert to talking to Nico.

“You need to wake up. If you can hear me, please, let me know. Squeeze my hand. Open your eyes. Something. Anything.”

Nothing.

I take his hand in both of mine. “I love you, Nico. I know I never said that before. I should have, but you know how it is. It never seemed... like the right time.”

I’d thought I had all the time in the world. I’d believed we had forever. I was wrong. I know that now.

“Please, Nico, don’t leave me. Come back to me, to us...”

Silence engulfs me again, punctuated only by the incessant chorus of the machines. I drop my head back onto the mattress and close my eyes.

“MOLLY...?”

The voice in my dream is soft, barely there at all. It breathes my name, then falls away, silent again.

I drift back to sleep, dozing lightly, only half listening to the sounds of the machines.

“Molly.” It’s louder, stronger. Someone is calling my name. No, not calling, but not whispering either.

I open my eyes and lift my head. The room is empty but for me and...

“Nico!”

I sit bolt upright and stare into those dark-chocolate eyes I’ve come to adore. “You’re awake.”

“More or less.” He gives me a lop-sided smile.

“Are you...? I mean, I should call a nurse.” I reach for the alarm button.

“Not yet.” His voice is hoarse, gravelly. “Let me just... enjoy the moment.”

I pause. “You might be bleeding internally.”

“I’ll take that risk. Was it true?”

“Was what true?”

“All that stuff you said. It *was* you, I assume. At least, I hope...”

“You heard me?” I try to recall exactly what I said while I pleaded with him not to die.

He inclines his chin. “You said you love me.”

I meet his gaze. “Yes.”

“And now?”

“What do you mean?”

“People say all sorts of stuff when they’re scared. Did you mean it?”

I can only nod.

“Say it. Say it again, out loud.”

“I love you, Nico Hanssen.”

His mouth curls in a smile. “I love you, too, Molly Lowe. And I didn’t mean what I said before. Yesterday... was it yesterday?”

“It was this morning,” I whisper, though our row at the foot of the tower stairs seems a lifetime ago now.

“I’ve no idea why I said it. I guess I’m just a twat. A stupid twat.”

“You hurt me, but—”

“I know. Can you forgive me and let me have another chance?”

“I—” He winces and clutches the dressing on his side.

“I need to get the nurse.”

“If you agree to let me have another chance, I’ll let you call as many nurses as you like.”

“I told you, I love you.”

“Does that mean I’m forgiven?”

“I think it must do. When I thought—” I knuckle back a sob. “You could have died.”

“I didn’t.” He grimaces in pain. “Christ, what did he stick me with?”

His face is ashen when I press the call button, and moments later, two nurses bustle in. The next few minutes are a flurry of activity as they check all the screens and dials and administer pain relief. I’m glad of the respite, my opportunity to regroup.

“Blood pressure’s coming back up,” one of the nurses remarks. “Looks like you won’t be cluttering up our operating theatre again after all.”

“Always glad to help,” he mutters, already drifting back off to sleep.

HE WAKES up again an hour later, and I’m ready for him this time. So is Staff Nurse Judy Thomson.

“Now then, Mr Hanssen, how are we feeling?”

“Like shit,” is his growled response.

“Excellent. We’ve rigged up a self-administered pain relief drip.” She shoves a keypad with a button on it into his hand. “Just press when you want a shot. The dose is measured and timed, you can’t overdo it.”

“No? Pity.” He settles back against the pillows and scans the room.

I step forward. “I’m here.”

He smiles again. “I hoped…”

“I shall be outside if you need me. Don’t be overdoing things now,” Staff Nurse Judy admonishes.

I wait until the door closes behind her, then cut to the chase. “I’m sorry, too. I said things I didn’t mean.”

“What things?” He looks genuinely puzzled.

“About Lucy, that she was nothing to do with you.”

“Oh, that. I should never have asked. It was just…”

“Her father was Marlowe’s brother,” I blurt. “Tristram.”

He doesn’t answer at first. Then, “I saw the resemblance, jumped to conclusions.”

“I never had, until you pointed it out. It’s obvious, I suppose.”

“Does she know?”

I shake my head. “She has asked about her father, and I told her he was

an artist, like me. She knows he's dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes. In an accident, before she was born. A hit-and-run, drunk driver."

"I'm sorry..."

"Yes, so am I. He was... a nice man. He never deserved that."

"Do you still—?"

"Love him? No. Definitely no. We'd split up by the time he died."

"But, with a baby on the way..."

I shake my head. "We would have been friends, I think. Good friends. He'd have been a part of Lucy's life. And we'd have stayed that way. Nothing more. He was gay."

"Oh." He frowns, recalculating. "But still, he and you..."

"Yes, I can't account for that, and neither could he. We rowed about it, the night he was killed. We were at a gallery in London, an exhibition. He'd cheated on me, with another man. I was hurt, angry. Baffled and humiliated. I couldn't cope so I stormed off. He was making his way home alone when, well, you know."

"That sounds horrendous."

"It was, at the time. I was desperately sorry about what had happened to him, but he was never the love of my life. And, you have to go on. I picked myself up, lost myself in work for a while. Then a few weeks later I found out I was pregnant."

"So, Tristram never knew?"

I shake my head.

"You didn't want to get rid of it?"

"Maybe, for a brief moment. But I suppose hormones kicked in. I wanted my baby, and that was that."

"Marlowe knows about Lucy, obviously?"

"Not at first. I didn't really know him at the time. He was at the same university as me but not the same year. Our paths started crossing later, as we both established our careers in art. He'd been aware that Tristram and I were an item, and he put two and two together. A bit like you did, but he didn't come up with five."

"He had an advantage," Nico grumbles.

"I guess so. He offered to help me out, financially, but I've never needed that. My career took off, and I've never been short of cash. I know he'd be there if I needed him, but he stays out of our lives. It's been simpler that

way.”

“In his shoes, I doubt if I’d be able to stay away.”

“No, and now he’s met Lucy properly, I expect he’ll be wanting a relationship with her. He hasn’t said so, but...”

“How do you feel about that?”

I take a moment to consider, then, “I’m fine with it. I like Marlowe, always have. We’ll have to explain to Lucy, but then, I think they’ll get on. He’s her family, after all.”

“You know I want to be her family, too?” His voice is soft, barely a whisper.

“Do you?”

“Yes. I love you, and she comes with the package. Noah, too.”

“But—”

“Not instead of Marlowe. He’s her uncle, it’s right he should be involved. He cares about her, and about you. I could see that when we spoke. I... I like the guy, too.”

“Are you sure?”

“What about? Marlowe? Lucy? You?”

“All of it. All of us.”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I wasn’t sure.”

“I never... I mean, I wasn’t looking for... anyone. Someone.”

“Me neither, but shit happens.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Right now? I want to get out of this fucking bed and nail the bastard who did this.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know it isn’t. I’ll settle for you knowing how it is, for me. And now I know you feel the same way, well, we can see what pans out from here.”

“See what pans out?” I echo.

“Yes. Let’s just enjoy being together. Nothing heavy, no big promises. Just, try it all on and see how it fits.”

I turn that over in my head. As proposals go, it’s weak to say the least. Woolly, even. But it’s exactly what I want.

“Yes, please,” is my considered response. “Let’s see what pans out.”

CHAPTER 21

Nico

“HOLY FUCK!”

Ethan sips his vending machine sludge and scowls into the plastic cup. “Thought you’d be happy. Good news, eh?”

“Alive? Really?” My brain is still foggy from the painkillers, and I can’t quite take in what he’s telling me.

“Alive,” he confirms, “but only just, and we have Megan to thank for that.”

“Where is he?”

“Caernbro Ghyll. I told Megan to stay there and keep an eye on him, once we knew you were out of danger. She’s not optimistic, though, so if you want in on the interrogation, you’ll need to get your arse out of that bed. If we wait too long, he’ll die on us.”

“But how could he still be alive?”

“It’s like I told you, Tony heard you yell out when you were stabbed. He charged out of the flat and saw Mulligan bending over you. He shot him, obviously, and assumed he was dead. He was meant to be. Tony was more concerned about you and didn’t waste time checking him over. He just left him behind and scooped you up. Luckily, you were in Inverness, The Richmond was less than ten minutes away, and Tony put his foot down. He got you here in time for the surgeons to do their stuff.”

He takes a final mouthful of his coffee, grimaces, and tips the rest out of the window. “Meanwhile, the clean-up crew arrived at The Mermaid

expecting just bodies to shift, but they found a live one. Mulligan. He had a bullet in his gut, but he was still breathing. They rang me for instructions, and I told them to move him to Caernbro Ghyll. I sent Megan down there to keep him alive if she could, just until we've time to go and have a little chat."

"We should assume he killed Agnes. And that woman upstairs."

"Yes. Probably. It might be useful to know why."

I close my eyes and nod. "The doc says I can leave here tomorrow, but for bedrest at Caraksay. He thinks I'm going to put my feet up in the clinic for a few days."

"You can do that if you want. Tony and I will deal with Mulligan."

"No. I want to be there. I want to hear what he has to say."

"Thought you might. I'll come and pick you up in the morning."

MY WOUND IS STILL THROBBING like a bitch, despite the generous slug of pain relief provided by the lovely Staff Nurse Judy.

"That should be enough to see you home," she assures me cheerily. "Doctor Alexander can administer more as required."

I'm relying on that as I huddle in the helicopter for the short hop to Glasgow. The journey would have been several hours by car, and I'm not sure how I'd have coped. The chopper is faster, and smoother.

And I'm not missing this.

Magda is at the controls. Ethan and Tony are with me in the cabin.

Molly is waiting for me on Caraksay. I told her about this detour, and to say she wasn't best pleased is an understatement. But I'm not prepared to start 'seeing how things pan out' on a fabric of lies and half-truths. I'm ready to shoulder her baggage, I only hope she can cope with mine.

I have to do this, it's that simple.

WE CIRCLE CAERNBRO GHYLL, and Magda brings the helicopter down on the gravelled forecourt. Tony and Ethan help me down from the chopper, then Ethan instructs Magda to grab a coffee or whatever and be ready to fly us over to the island in an hour or two.

"Where is he?" I grind out through clenched teeth.

"Downstairs," Ethan answers.

I'd wondered if Megan might have insisted Mulligan be accommodated in one of the guest rooms, in view of his injuries, but apparently not. Probably better this way. The cells below the house are soundproofed and easy to clean up afterwards. And these days, we have women and children around the main house, so it's best to keep the wet work separate.

The stairs to the basement are accessed off the main foyer. Megan is waiting for us there.

"Do you need me?" she asks.

Ethan shakes his head. "I don't think so. Magda's on her way in. We'll be leaving for Caraksay in an hour or so if you want a ride back."

Megan appears relieved. As a doctor, and one with battlefield experience in the US military, she has a strong stomach, but not for this sort of work. She's loyal and capable. She'll do what has to be done, and that's the only reason Mulligan has lived this long. But we all know how uncomfortable she is with the more brutal side of our work, and we never directly engage her in it if we can help it. She's been known to put a captive out of his misery before now, though no one ever refers to that.

Ethan is being considerate in letting her opt out.

We leave her to chat with Magda and make our way down the steep stone stairs to the underground tunnel with the various rooms leading off it.

There are half a dozen cells, each about two paces by three and equipped with just a bucket and a stone bench. Blankets and lighting are optional extras. There's no heating and no sanitation apart from a regular swill down with bleach.

The kill room itself is bigger. The floor slopes to a large drain for easy sluicing, and there's a cold tap set into one wall. A bench along the other wall is where we keep the various bits of kit likely to be needed—tools, rope, candles, matches, knives, tongs, and suchlike.

In the centre is a metal table, bolted to the concrete floor. That can also be tilted as needed and is equipped with straps for restraining unruly guests.

And that's it. Nice and uncomplicated.

Jack is waiting for us down there and has had Mulligan moved from his cell already. He's laid out on the metal table, held there by straps at his wrists, ankles, and across his belly.

Jack is leaning on the wall by the tap, messing with his phone. He straightens when we enter.

"You look like shit," is his greeting for me. "I'll get you a chair."

“I’m fine,” I begin.

‘Get the chair.’ Ethan overrules me.

He waits until I’m settled on a wooden high-backed chair at the head of the table before turning his attention to the man at the centre of this morning’s bit of business.

“Morning,” he begins. His tone is deceptively jovial. “It’s nice to see you again, Mr Mulligan. Do you remember who I am?”

“Ye’re Mr S-Savage,” the man replies.

“That’s right. You’ve met my associates already, obviously.”

“I need tae be i’ the hospital,” he whines. “That bastard shot me.”

“He did. Right after you tried to slice my friend’s guts out. So, you see, we have a problem.”

He has the sense to stay silent. That won’t last long.

Ethan continues, all the while pacing slowly around the table to examine his quarry from all angles. “It’s cold as fuck in here, so we won’t keep you any longer than we need to, but I also find myself exercised by the presence of two dead women in my hotel. Are you able to shed any light on that, Mulligan?”

He shakes his head. “Ne’er saw no women.”

“Do try to remember. It will be so much easier for everyone if you do.”

“No... no women...”

“You’re a fucking liar. Shall we start with the one on the top floor? What was her name?”

“I dinnae ken. Fuck off.”

Ethan looks to Jack. “Did Megan give him anything for the pain?”

“Not since yesterday.”

“Good.” Without warning, he lands a punch right on the dressing covering Mulligan’s stomach wound.

Mulligan howls in agony. Blood begins to seep through the neat bandage. Soon it’s pooling on the table and dripping onto the floor.

“Are you quite sure you can’t remember? Do you need me to remind you again?”

The howls subside to rasping groans. “Hospital, please...”

“You won’t be going anywhere, dipshit. You’re here, with me, until I let you die.” Ethan leans in so his face is inches from Mulligan’s. “Do you want me to let you die? Just let you slip away, quietly?”

“I... Please, I ne’er—”

Ethan punches him again. More howling, more blood flowing.

“You’re making a mess, Albert. If I take that bandage off, will your fucking guts spill out all over my floor?”

“Mr Savage, please...”

“I want her name, scumbag.”

“I dinnae... aaaah!”

Ethan draws back to deliver another blow, but Mulligan’s had enough.

“Elsie. ’Er name were Elsie.”

Ethan lowers his fist. “Now we’re getting somewhere. Tell me all about Elsie.”

“I dinnae... what d’ye want tae ken? She were a whore...”

“How old was she?”

“How would I ken? Twenty-five mebbe.”

“Did she have a family? Kids?”

He nods. “Two.”

“How old are they?”

“I’m nae sure. Five, or six perhaps.”

“What was her last name?”

“Pattinson.”

Mulligan has become decidedly more cooperative now.

“Where did she live?”

“She ’ad a flat. I’ the city centre, Queensgate, I think.”

“Okay. And what had she done to deserve what you did to her?”

“I didnae. I—”

“You’re pissing me off with your fucking lies. You know what happens if you lie to me. Do you really want to go down that route again?”

Mulligan sees the wisdom in honesty. “She were allus... allus moanin’. Complainin’, wantin’ a bigger cut. But I ’ave expenses. Over’eads...”

“She had two kids,” Tony points out. “They cost money, too.”

“All the lassies took a drop i’ wages. Times are ’ard, fer all of us, but Elsie wouldnae shut up.”

“Did you take a drop, too?” Ethan wonders.

“What? Nay, but it’s business. Ellison wanted more fer the rooms, so...”

“You could have put your prices up.”

“That’s what she said, Elsie. I told her, punters willnae pay more. She thought... thought she could tell me what tae do.”

“So, you murdered her over money?”

“She were greedy an’ stirring up the others. I warned ’er, I said—”

Ethan’s heard enough of his whining. We all have.

“Shut the fuck up, you streak of shite. What about Agnes Ellison?”

“Agnes...?”

“You killed her, too. Why?”

“It were business, just business. She wanted more an’ all. I’d’ve ’ad nae profits left if it were up tae them. Ye’re a businessman, ye’ll understand.”

“I understand Agnes was a valued employee of mine and losing her is bad for my business. You owe me for that, Mulligan.”

His eyes take on a sudden spark, as though he can at last see a way out of this.

“I can pay. I’ll pay ye. What were she worth? Fifty? A hundred?”

Ethan shakes his head. “I don’t think you can afford to pay me what Mrs Ellison was worth.”

“Two hundred? Five? A grand?”

“Fifty grand.”

His eyes bug. “Fifty grand? Fer a two-bit, clapped-out whore? Are ye mad?”

“Well, I am, rather. And, there we have it, the difference between you and me. You see, Agnes was loyal, and good at her job. I liked Agnes and I could rely on her to tell me when some greedy chancer tried to steal from me. Someone like you, Albert.”

“I’m not— I wasnae, would ne’er...”

“Was she onto you? Insisting you pay what was due?”

“No, I—”

There’s no warning this time. Ethan lands the blow before Mulligan even registers it’s happening. He wails and promptly vomits all over the table.

“Fuck, what a mess. I should rub your fucking nose in it.”

Mulligan’s gasping, choking on his own spew.

“Get a hosepipe,” Jack snarls.

Tony nips out and returns a couple of minutes later with a hosepipe coiled over his arm. He connects it to the tap in the wall, then sprays cold water all over the table to swill the mess away. Mulligan is soaked, shivering with the cold and a fair helping of shock, too, I daresay.

“Try not to do that again,” Ethan advises him. “Now, where were we? Ah, right, you killed Mrs Ellison because she knew you were short-changing me. That’s right, isn’t it?”

“She could’ve ’ad a cut, too. I told ’er...”

He clams up, but it’s too late.

Ethan strolls around the table again, avoiding the rapidly expanding pool of blood on the floor.

“You don’t have long left, Albert. You know that, don’t you?”

“If ye let me go, I can work fer ye. I’m good, I’ll make ye money. I have girls, plenty o’ girls, an’—”

“For fuck’s sake, stop babbling.”

Mulligan’s way past saving, if he could but see it. He would do well to keep his mouth shut, but he continues. “Drop me off at a ’ospital. I willnae say ’ow it ’appened. I can run yer operations in Inverness, or anywhere else. Whatever ye like...”

Ethan stops pacing. “I’m torn.”

Mulligan isn’t done yet. He finds more straws to grasp at. “There’s the cars. I’ve bin good wi that, ye ken I ’ave. Made ye thousands.”

“He’s right,” Jack agrees. “We’ll need to find another partner on the ground to keep the enterprise running smoothly.”

“What about Lemmy Olsen,” I suggest. “He’s been asking for a chance.” And young Lemmy has an inventive, I heard his mother is ill and he needs the money.”

“You can give him a call later,” Ethan agrees. “But that doesn’t solve my dilemma right here.”

“What’s the problem, boss?” Tony asks.

“Well, I can shut this bastard up by slicing his tongue out, but then he won’t be able to tell me why he saw fit to knife Nico. And I would like to hear an answer on that. Wouldn’t you?” His final remark is directed at me.

“Yes, boss. I would.”

“Right, then. He keeps his tongue. For now.”

“What about his nose? Or his ears. His eyes, even?”

Ethan gives that a few moments’ thought. “A bit medieval, but effective. Pass me those shears.”

Mulligan lets out a frenzied shriek and writhes furiously on the table. “No, not me eyes. Please, ye cannae...”

Ethan takes the large pair of garden shears that Tony hands him. He opens and closes them with an ominous scraping sound.

“Not especially sharp, but we’ll manage.”

“Please, please...” Mulligan sobs. “It were... I were just, I wanted tae get

oot o' there. He'd seen me..."

"Had you seen him, Nico?"

"If I'd seen him, he wouldn't have had the chance to do this," I growl.

"No. Thought not. So, he's lying. Again."

Mulligan launches into more frantic wriggling and pleading. "I'm no' lyin', I swear. I thought... I were sure..."

"Where were you hiding?" I demand. "We searched the place."

"I were under the desk, in Ellison's office."

I shake my head, berating myself. Schoolboy error.

Ethan scratches his chin. "So, as I see it, you've cost me two decent employees, and it could easily have been a third."

"Strictly speaking, the girl worked for him, not you," Jack reminds him.

"It's not like you to split hairs, Jack."

Jack shrugs. "Just saying."

"So, as I said, three lives. But this miserable piece of scum only has one to give in exchange, and even that's a pretty pathetic excuse for an existence from where I'm standing."

"He'll be dead in an hour or two anyway by the look of that blood on the floor," is Tony's pensive contribution.

"Hmm. Him dying can make up for Nico, but what about the others?"

"There's still his eyes and ears," I suggest.

"Or his fingers. Two for each woman he murdered." Ethan shifts his gaze from me to Tony, then Jack. "Does that sound fair?"

Mulligan wails quietly while we deliberate.

"I say we let him decide," Jack suggests. "Let him choose."

Ethan nods slowly. "Excellent plan. So, Albert, what's it to be? Do I take off four of your fingers with these shears, or would you prefer me to slice off your ears and nose with them? Either way, assuming you survive the next few minutes, you'll bleed out soon enough."

"No, no..." he moans. "Just let me die."

"I will, you have my word. But it's a matter of justice, you see. We owe it to Elsie, and her kids. And Agnes. And to all the other girls who work for me. A few pics circulated, a warning about what happens if anyone sees fit to damage my business assets. Or steal from me. I think things will run more smoothly after that. Don't you?"

"Please, I ne'er..."

"Just choose, or I'll choose for you. If you go for the fingers, I'll even let

you decide which hand. Can't say fairer than that."

"Please..."

"Choose. Now."

"Nooooo," he wails.

"Ears and nose, then. Hold his head still, Tony."

"No! F-fingers. Take me fingers," he sobs."

Ethan pauses. "Which ones?"

"L-left hand."

"Okay. Left it is. And you're going to keep quiet, right? Unless you want me to slice out your tongue first, then take your nose and ears as well."

Mulligan's shaking now, whimpering softly. I'd almost feel sorry for him, but the image of that dead girl is enough to harden my resolve. And now we know we have her children to sort out as well. They'll need to be provided for, and it all adds up.

"Free his hand and hold it up for me, Tony."

Tony does as he's asked, securing the fated limb in his vice-like grasp while Ethan positions the shears around all four of Mulligan's fingers.

"This might take a while," he mutters. "These things are blunt as fuck."

He's not wrong. The entire operation takes almost three minutes of hacking and sawing, but eventually the last mangled digit tumbles onto the floor to join the first three. Mulligan has passed out. He got as far as seeing his index finger dangling from a sliver of shredded muscle, and that was it. Jack wanted to chuck a bucket of water over him, but Ethan preferred to just get on with the job and see it finished.

Jack leans in and peels back an eyelid. "He's still alive. Shall I...?"

"No. Give him an hour or so to finally peg it, then send someone down to clear all this away. They can dump what's left of him in the river."

"Okay."

We leave Mulligan on his own to breathe his last in peace. I don't think it will take anything like an hour.

CHAPTER 22

Molly

I TAKE IN A SHARP BREATH. “Wow!”

“Holy fuck,” is Nico’s equally articulate comment.

“Fuck me, that’s good.” Ethan moves closer to peer at Marlowe’s finished work. “This is... this is just superb.”

“Glad you like it. It won’t stand up to forensic scrutiny, modern materials and suchlike. But until the experts start scraping at it, and getting out their microscopes and UV pens, you should be okay.” Marlowe surveys the copy of *Death of Atalanta*, his head tipped to one side. “You’ll want me to point out the tell, I suppose.”

“The tell? What’s that?” Ethan demands.

“It’s here, in the foam around the ship’s bow.” Marlowe brings up an image of the original painting on his laptop and enlarges the area around the sinking ship. “See, there, the white crests to the waves?”

We all peer at the image, then back to the version propped on an easel in the tower room. Even to my trained eye they appear identical.

“My copy has a slightly greenish tint. Can you see it?”

We all shake our heads.

“What about now?” Marlowe has taken a picture of his masterpiece and displays it on his laptop screen alongside the original. He lays the two enlarged sections side by side. “There.”

The men gathered around still seem unable to spot the difference, but I can. It’s subtle, barely discernible, as it’s intended to be. You would need to

know what you were looking for, and even then, you wouldn't be sure which was genuine without the scientific proof.

"Why did you put that in?" Nico asks. "I thought we wanted an exact copy."

"We need to be able to point out that it's a forgery," Ethan explains. "When the time comes. But this will do the trick. Thank you, Mr McGuinness. I'll arrange the transfer of your fee before close of business today."

"Nice doing business with you, Mr Savage. And now, since my work here is done, I'd like to spend some time with my niece who's promised me a game of chess. I gather she's a worthy opponent."

"Stay as long as you like," Ethan replies.

The not so closely guarded secret of the relationship between Lucy and Marlowe is out now. I sat her down and explained, and the first thing she did was rush and tell Robbie. That opened the floodgates, and within the hour everyone on Caraksay knew, even Mrs McRae the cook. Lucy was bursting with pride to have such an accomplished artist as her uncle, having totally failed to grasp that my fame probably exceeds his. That's kids for you.

She's been hanging around the tower room the last few days watching Marlowe at work, and he's been happy enough to tolerate her presence and her chatter. It's good to see.

Even better to see, Nico is still her absolute hero, her Superman and Harry Potter all rolled into one.

"WE HAVE A NIBBLE."

Frankie makes his announcement over a pile of chocolate chip cookies in the Caraksay kitchen.

"A nibble?" I query.

Nico is sharper than me. "He's trying to sell it?"

"Sell what? Who?" I'm baffled. They're taking in some foreign language.

"Glodowski, and he's trying to sell that picture he nicked."

"*Death of Atalanta*? Are you sure?" Is he mad? That painting is hot. Scorching. Police forces across the world are on alert, looking for it, waiting for it to surface on the black market.

"I'm sure. He has it on the dark web. Obviously, he's not calling it that."

"So, how do you know it's the same one?"

“The price. He’s asking ten million euros for it. He doesn’t have anything else even close to that value, and the fact that he’s not displaying an image is proof.”

“How do you know all of this?” I wonder aloud.

Frankie stuffs another biscuit in his mouth. “Been tracking him for weeks, waiting for him to make his move.”

“He’s a greedy bastard,” Nico observes. “A wiser man would have laid low a lot longer. He must need the cash.”

Ethan has been listening. “It could be Kaminski trying to sell it.”

Frankie shakes his head. “Not a peep out of him online, at least not in relation to this. He’s busy setting up his counterfeit currency outlet in the southeast. Got some construction projects in the pipeline as well. Birmingham and Sheffield.”

“Kaminski is in the UK?” Ethan’s tone sharpens.

Frankie nods. “As far as I can tell. Glodowski is definitely in Warsaw, and that’s where he’s uploading the data from.”

“Doesn’t mean the painting is there. He could have it stashed anywhere,” Ethan points out.

“I know. I’ve been on that, too. Like you asked.”

“And?”

“Nothing concrete, but I’ll know the moment he tries to shift it. He can’t wipe his nose now without me knowing about it.”

Nico interrupts. “You said there was a nibble. You mean, someone’s interested in buying it?”

“Even though they must know it’s stolen,” I chip in.

“That could be part of the attraction. Who is it?”

“This guy.” Frankie swings his laptop around to show us a crisp image of a man in flowing Arabic robes and a bright-red headdress.

“Who’s that?” I ask.

“Sheikh Mustafa Saeed Al-Quraheen,” Frankie replies.

“A rich Saudi?”

“Must be. He has links to the Saudi royal family but he’s primarily a businessman. Oil mainly, according to Wikipedia. He’s fabulously wealthy, and a well-known art collector. He’s reputed to be not too particular about provenance.”

Borys’s favourite type of buyer. I try to place the name but can’t. “I’ve not come across him, but if he’s into dodgy art, the chances are Borys knows

him. He has a lot of contacts, he used to brag about it.”

“Makes sense,” Ethan agrees. “He’d probably try to shift the goods by offering the picture discreetly to those he knows might be interested. And who won’t be sniffy about the paperwork. From what you’ve said, he’s done this a lot.”

“That’s right. So, what happens now?”

Ethan scratches his chin. “Frankie, can you impersonate this Sheikh Mustafa? Better still, his agent, whoever is brokering this sale for him?”

“I could, yes. In theory.”

“I need you to set up a viewing. Tell Borys the sheikh wants to be sure he actually has the painting.”

I shake my head. “That won’t work. He’ll be sure already, especially if he’s had dealings with Borys before. Borys has a reputation, he always delivers the goods.”

Ethan is undaunted. “That’s okay. The sheikh won’t have a clue what’s happening. Frankie, don’t let the Saudis know you’re in there. Just set up the viewing, for as soon as possible. Today, or tomorrow at the latest.”

“What if Borys doesn’t agree?” Nico points out.

“I think he will,” I tell them. “That painting is hot. He wants it off his hands as soon as possible. The longer he hangs on to it, the more chance some enterprising art detective will track it down.”

“Art detective?” Nico lifts an eyebrow.

“Yes. There are plenty of them around, specialists who make it their business to trace missing artworks.”

“Maybe we should have hired one of those,” he replies.

Ethan grins. “That could be Plan B, if this doesn’t work. Who would you recommend?”

I don’t have to think very hard. “Edouard Montrou is generally considered to be the best in the business. I think the Nuremberg gallery hired him to look for *Death of Atalanta*. But there will be other freelancers on it as well. They’re offering a reward of a million euros.”

“Maybe we’ll be in a position to help them out, for a share in the reward money. First things first, though. Frankie, let me know as soon as you’ve agreed the arrangements for the viewing.”

“Just on it now, boss. Ah, he’s replying.”

We wait. No one speaks.

Frankie’s mouth curls in a smile. “Eleven p.m. Tonight. In Prague.”

“HE DIDN’T MOVE it far, apparently. Prague is only a couple of hundred kilometres from Nuremberg where *Death of Atalanta* was stolen.” Nico consults the map on his phone. “He must have squirrelled it over the border into the Czech Republic and stashed it there.”

“That would make sense,” I have to agree. “Eleven o’clock is tight. Will they make it in time?”

“By private jet? Sure. Then all they have to do is make the switch and get out of there.”

“There’ll be guards. Security.”

He simply meets my gaze and smiles.

“IT’S DONE. We’re on our way back.”

Nico’s phone is on speaker when he takes Ethan’s call. It’s only just after eleven-thirty.

“Any problems?” Nico asks.

“Nothing that a well-timed power cut couldn’t fix. It helped that they agreed to meet us at Kbely. Frankie was able to hack into the supply and turn it off for a couple of minutes.”

“What’s Kbely?” I whisper.

“It’s a private airport near Prague. Sounds like they made the switch while the lights were out.”

“Shit. Is there nothing that lad can’t do?”

“He was trained by the best.”

“You mean Casey?” I’ve never actually met Ethan Savage’s sister, the renowned hacker, but her fame precedes her.

“I do.” He checks his watch. “It’ll be a couple of hours until they’re back in Glasgow, then they have to fly over here. We might as well get some sleep.”

“I don’t believe you. You just helped orchestrate the theft of a ten million euro artwork, and now you want to sleep?”

He shrugs. “It’s tiring work, art theft. Anyway, is it theft, technically? The picture was already stolen, we’re just helping it to find its way home again.”

“Are you sure that’s what Ethan will do? Will he actually give it back? I

mean, it's worth a fortune."

Nico shrugs again. "He said he would."

"I know, but..."

"Don't let's worry about that yet. Our task now is to make sure the deal goes through and the sheikh ends up buying a forged painting. That'll be when the shit'll hit the fan."

MARLOWE and I view the masterpiece in silent awe. His version was beautiful, but this, this is beyond exquisite.

Death of Atalanta now hangs on the wall in the great hall at Caraksay. Majestic, serene, atmospheric, a centuries-old wonder.

It's the first time either of us has actually seen the original. It's breathtaking.

"I did a fine job," Marlowe murmurs, "but Dürer did better."

I can't disagree, though it's a close-run thing.

"What happens now?" he asks.

"I'm not sure of the exact sequence of events, but I gather Frankie is monitoring the negotiations. He has to keep intercepting the communications to erase any mention of the viewing."

"Right. And...?"

"As soon as the deal is struck, the money is to be lodged in a Swiss bank account. I understand Frankie has one set up already. And the picture is to be transported to a place of the purchaser's choosing for final exchange."

"So, in the end, Ethan gets the cash, and he already has the genuine picture. The sheikh gets his forgery, and Borys gets outed as a thief and a fraud."

"Something like that, I think." I've purposefully stayed out of the finer details.

"The Saudis will be furious. The sheikh will want blood. And his money back."

"I expect so. But he'll blame Borys. The Kaminskis' reputation will be ruined, they won't be able to trade in stolen art anymore. And Kristian won't have the money to be able to refund it, even if he wanted to."

Marlowe grins at me. "Neat."

"Ethan said he'd return *Death of Atalanta* to Nuremberg, where it belongs. Eventually, once all this is over. Quietly, of course. It must never

come out who was behind all this.”

“Do you believe him?” Marlowe wonders.

I nod, slowly. “Yes, I think I do.”

CHAPTER 23

Nico

“ONE MORE THING, Mr McGuinness, before you leave.”

Marlowe has decided it's time he headed off to his next assignment. Apparently, the Tate Modern requires his services to support a restoration project. The fee is eye-watering.

“How can I help you, Mr Savage?” He pauses at the foot of the three steps leading up into the helicopter cabin.

Molly, Lucy, and I stand back. We've said our farewells.

“The deal between Sheikh Mustafa and Borys went through a week ago,” Ethan reminds us. “He got it for a knock-down price, five point seven million euros.”

“The original was worth ten million, insured for even more.”

“Yes, but Borys was hardly in a position to haggle. The painting—your painting—is safely installed in whatever secret place the sheikh keeps his illicitly acquired merchandise.”

“Yes. I expect it is.”

“No doubt he's enjoying his purchase.”

“Probably, though of course he is not in a position to share it with anyone else. Not that that will concern him.”

Ethan's eyes narrow. “I think it's time to burst his bubble.”

“I wondered how long you would wait.”

Marlowe is not the only one. Molly and I discussed the very same thing last night in bed.

“No point rushing things. But he’s had a few days now. And so has Borys. He thought he got away with it, until he checked his bank account and found it light by a few million euros. Apparently, he’s livid, threatening to set fire to half of Switzerland. He’s convinced the Gnomes of Zurich have nicked his money.”

“Alas, poor Borys...” Marlowe grins in genuine amusement. “It couldn’t happen to a more deserving character.”

“Quite. So, I was wondering if you have contact details for Edouard Montrou.”

“The art detective?” Molly interrupts. “You’re going to tip him off?”

“That’s the plan, yes. You said Montrou is respected, and influential in his field.”

Molly nods. “He’s also straight as a die. He’s known for it. Incorruptible, and believe me, many have tried. So, if you were thinking of hiring him...”

“I’m not, but if he’s as upstanding as you say, he won’t ignore the deal I’m going to send his way. The opportunity to recover a priceless artefact and restore it to its rightful home. An anonymous tip-off and an offer he can’t refuse. The original painting back, in return for exposing the fake in the sheikh’s private collection.”

Marlowe smiles. “I’m sure he’ll be delighted to hear from you. Montrou is based in Luxembourg. He has an apartment in Luxembourg City itself.”

“Thank you. That’s enough for me to work with.” Ethan offers Marlowe his hand. “Have a safe journey, my friend.”

“A BIT CLICHÉD, but it will have to do.”

The photograph of the original Dürer masterpiece alongside a copy of today’s *Washington Post* lies on the table between us.

“The US newspaper is a neat touch,” Tony remarks. “Throws them off the scent.”

“Let them think the painting is in America,” Jack agrees. “Now all we have to do is deliver this to Montrou and tell him what we want him to do.”

Ethan slides the picture into a large envelope. “There’s a phone number on the back of the photo. A burner, obviously. When he calls, I’ll explain our terms for the return of the original.”

“The sheikh won’t be keen on allowing anyone to view his painting to authenticate it or otherwise,” I point out.

“That’s Montrou’s problem, but my hunch is that Sheikh Mustafa will want it authenticated. The suggestion that he’s purchased a fake will eat away at him.”

Molly agrees. “He’s in a no-win situation. Either he’s bought a stolen work of art, in which case under international law he’ll have to give it back. Or he’s allowed himself to be duped and he’s been sold a forgery, and that will be even worse in his eyes. His pride, his standing as an expert, all will be called into question. Not to mention the money he’s lost.”

“Life’s a bitch,” Ethan murmurs. “Nico, I want you to see this gets to Montrou in Luxembourg.”

I take the envelope. “Consider it done, boss. I’ll leave in an hour.”

MOLLY WANTED to come with me, but I convinced her otherwise.

“He might recognise you.”

“I’ve never met him...”

“No, but you know what he looks like, don’t you?”

“Yes, but only from pictures. Television...”

“You underestimate your own fame, sweetheart. Anyone in the art world could recognise you the same way. There needs to be no connection, nothing at all to link you, or me, to any of this.”

“I can see that. But—”

“But nothing. I need to go on my own. I’ll slip in and out of the country within an hour.” It’s not as though I don’t have experience of crossing borders while staying invisible. It comes with my job. I don’t mention that, though.

“What if he sees you?”

“He won’t. But even if he did, he wouldn’t know who I am.” I already have a disguise in mind. Parcel couriers come and go all the time. All I need is a white van, an Amazon sweatshirt, and a baseball cap.

She agrees, reluctantly. “I want to know as soon as it’s done. I need to know you’re safe...”

I kiss her. “Keep the bed warm, sweetheart. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

MAGDA FLIES me to Luxembourg and drops me off in a secluded wooded

area just outside the town of Ettelbruck, north of the capital city. A van is waiting. I've brought the rest of my props myself.

"It's twenty-five kilometres to Luxembourg City. I'm allowing an hour each way."

"I'll be waiting," she assures me.

I pull the cap down over my face and start the engine.

The journey is uneventful, but the traffic in the city itself is a bitch, like any capital city, anywhere in the world. I locate Montrou's apartment block easily, but finding a place to stop is not so straightforward. In the end, I double-park in the underground car park serving the building next door and stroll along the Rue de Treves. No point attracting attention by jogging, though everyone else here seems to be in a hurry, too.

I ring the outer buzzer and I'm let into the building by the concierge.

"*Forfait pour appartement trente-et-un,*" I trot out in my best schoolboy French. I rehearsed the line on my way over here in the chopper.

The man barely raises his gaze from the magazine he's absorbed in. "*Troisième étage. L'ascenseur est là-bas,*" he replies, pointing over to his left.

Third floor. I knew that already. The lift is handy. I press the call button.

The ride is smooth and uninterrupted. I emerge onto a thickly carpeted hallway. A sign opposite the lift tells me to turn left for apartments thirty to thirty-five. Fair enough.

I find myself outside number thirty-one, and I knock. If there's no answer, I'll post the envelope through the letterbox, but I prefer to hand it over.

The door is opened by a blonde, aged around thirty-five, wearing a rather fetching ankle-length kimono. I suspect that's all she's wearing.

"*Colis pour M. Montrou.*" I thrust the envelope at her, now suitably camouflaged in Amazon packaging.

"*Qui est-ce?*" The male voice comes from somewhere within the apartment.

"*Courrier Amazon. Vous avez un colis...*" she replies over her shoulder.

"*Je n'ai rien commandé. Qu'as-tu acheté maintenant?*"

I'm at the far reaches of my schoolboy French now, but I gather he's not expecting anything, and he thinks she must have been on a spending spree.

The woman examines the package. "*Il y a ton nom dessus,*" she insists, turning away from me to take the package indoors.

My work here is done. I bob my cap and head for the stairs.

I'm halfway down the first flight when the door above me slams. There are running footsteps. The flashing button on the next landing tells me that the lift call button has been activated. Exactly the reaction I was expecting.

Edouard Montrou has obviously opened his package. We seem to have captured his attention.

I double my pace and beat the lift to the ground floor. I check the lobby before marching across. Luckily, the concierge is still engrossed in his magazine and never sees me leave, which is just as well. From the pavement, I glimpse Mr Montrou, in his pyjamas, burst out of the lift and charge over to his desk.

Mission accomplished. I disappear into the milling crowds of tourists.

“WELL?” I demand. I headed straight for Ethan's office as soon as the chopper touched down on Caraksay.

Ethan doesn't mess about. “He phoned. A couple of hours ago, in fact.”

Right. Within minutes of receiving my delivery by the sound of it. “He didn't waste any time. Did he bite?”

“Not yet. But he will. We're still at the ‘I never take any notice of anonymous tip-offs' stage.”

“The main thing is, he believes we do have the original.”

“Agreed. And he knows he can have it back if he finds a way to expose the copy in Riyadh. So now, we leave him to it. And we wait.”

FRANKIE IS MONITORING the online traffic. The shit has hit the fan, big style.

“The sheikh denied all knowledge of *Death of Atalanta* when Edouard Montrou contacted him,” he tells us when we gather in the great hall for an update.

The genuine painting still graces the wall above us.

“Well, he would,” Jack observes.

Frankie continues. “But, Montrou has clout, and influence. If he's saying the sheikh purchased the stolen art thinking it was genuine when in reality his picture is dodgy, then others will listen. The sheikh can deny having the painting all he wants, but he was rattled. Enough to get some crony of his in to take a look.”

“And?”

“The guy confirmed what Montrou was saying, that the sheikh’s *Atalanta* was fake. He might not have spotted it straight away, but Montrou told him about Marlowe’s ‘tell’ and that was enough.” The slightly miscoloured waves were a snippet Ethan shared in his brief conversation with the art detective. “The sheikh and Borys are hurling insults at each other. The sheikh is accusing Borys of deliberately fobbing him off with a forgery, and Borys is accusing the Saudis of stealing his money.”

“Excellent. We’ll leave them to fight it out.”

“The news is already circulating,” Molly tells us. “The grapevine is buzzing with it. The German police are applying to the Polish government to extradite Borys because they want to question him about the missing original. Their working assumption seems to be that Boris still has it and is trying to sell copies.”

“Even better.” Ethan is grinning like a Cheshire Cat. “I love it when a plan comes together. With any luck they’ll haul in Kristian as well. Whatever, the Kaminskis are out of the dodgy art business. No one will ever trust them again.”

“Was that your objective all along? To discredit your enemy? Not to clear my name?” Molly asks.

“Two birds with one stone,” Ethan replies easily. “I think this calls for a celebration.” He raises his glass of fine malt whisky and salutes the painting on the wall.

Molly is less easily convinced. “I’ll just settle for *Death of Atalanta* being returned to Nuremberg.”

“All in good time, Miss Lowe.”

“I’VE HAD a message from Inspector Norris.”

I roll over in bed and prop myself on my elbow. Molly gazes up at me, her phone in her hand.

“Let me see.”

She hands me the device, and I scan the short text message.

I need to interview you again in connection with the theft of Death of Atalanta. When would be convenient?

She’s already starting to panic. “What if he found out, somehow? What if he locks me up again?”

“He won’t have. We covered our tracks.”

“What if he could prove that Marlowe McGuinness did the copy? He could link him to me, through Tristram, and Lucy.”

I stop her panicked chatter with my mouth, slanting my lips across hers.

“He can’t and he won’t,” I assure her. “Even if he suspects, that’s all it can ever be.”

“Do I have to go and see him?”

“He’ll be persistent, but we can set up the meeting on our turf this time. We should have done that before. We’ll be lawyered up, we’ll have Lynne Meadows there. He won’t be able to touch you again. I promise.”

“I’m scared. What if—?”

“I know. Trust me, it will be all right.”

WE MEET with the bent detective in the offices of Savage and Southern, Lynne Meadows’ practice. He has his trusty sidekick with him, Detective Constable Ian Fletcher. The pair of them perch awkwardly on plush, low sofas in the solicitors’ waiting suite. We arrive five minutes late.

“My apologies for keeping you waiting, gentlemen.” Lynne hurries in and takes a seat opposite them.

Molly and I follow her in and make ourselves comfortable as well.

“Since we are all acquainted with one another, perhaps we can get right on with whatever has brought you here today. Are we to assume there has been a development in the case.”

“You know there has,” Norris snarls.

“Perhaps you could enlighten us, since my client is not aware of any developments concerning her.”

“She knows who forged that picture,” he rumbles.

“Which picture might that be, Detective Inspector?”

“*Death of Atalanta*. It turned up in Riyadh.”

“Did it? My goodness, that must be a weight off your mind.”

“It’s a forgery. A copy. The original is still out there, somewhere. Lost.”

“I see. That is... disappointing. But how does this concern my client? She has never been to Riyadh. Isn’t that right, Miss Lowe?”

“Quite correct,” Molly murmurs.

“Forgive me,” Lynne purrs, “but did you not explicitly state that *Death of Atalanta* was stolen? If this is the case, when that same picture mysteriously

surfaces in Riyadh, why would you not simply seize it and restore it to its proper owner?"

"It's not that simple, Miss Meadows."

"Indeed? Why not?"

"Because it's not the same picture. The Riyadh one is forged."

"Ah, yes. You did say. I am becoming confused. In that case, how does this concern us? My client was accused of stealing the genuine article, not a fake. I believe you're wasting our time and your own, Detective Inspector."

Norris points an accusing finger at Molly "*She* knows where the real one is."

"You have evidence to support this outrageous claim, naturally. Please enlighten us as to what that is."

"She *must* know," he insists. "She's part of it. The scam."

Lynne effects a bewildered air. It's really very good. Oscar-worthy.

"Now we are thoroughly confused. We were given to believe that the genuine painting has been stolen, and Miss Lowe was suspected of the crime. Now, you seem to be suggesting that it was all some sort of deception. A scam, as you put it. Which is the correct version of events, Detective Inspector?"

"Neither. Both." The inspector's fist clenches around his pencil. A sharp crack echoes around the conference room.

Lynne takes a breath. I try not to grin, but I haven't enjoyed myself so much since Coldplay rocked out Hampden Park. I'm not normally a fan of bloodsports, but I'm mesmerised. This is like watching a kitten square up to a tiger.

"I don't believe this meeting is getting us anywhere," Lynne announces at last. "I suggest we leave it there."

"No. I want to question her." He stabs his finger in Molly's direction

"Do you have grounds to arrest my client, Detective Inspector?"

"Not arrest, no, but she could help with our inquiries. I insist—"

"I think not." Lynne closes her file with a definitive thud. "I shall have someone show you out." She gets to her feet.

"I haven't finished," Norris yells to her retreating back.

"I think you have," she replies as the pair of us troop out with her. "This is over. Goodbye, Detective Inspector."

CHAPTER 24

Molly

ETHAN STROLLS into the kitchen as I am trying to convince Lucy to finish off her scrambled eggs. “See, Noah ate all his breakfast,” I cajole.

“He’s always eating. And he only has milk.” She scowls at the plate. “I’m full.”

“He has other things as well.”

“Yoghurt doesn’t count,” she insists.

I’m hard-pressed to argue, especially as most of the stuff ended up on the floor. Weaning is a messy business.

“You need a decent breakfast inside you. It’s your first day at your new school today.”

Cristina was able to pull whatever strings, and the headteacher found her a place, despite it being mid-term. He chuntered a bit, said it was ‘unorthodox’, but apparently relented when Cristina reminded him that Lucy was the daughter of a celebrity.

I gather she meant me. Who knew?

“I don’t want to go,” Lucy moans, shoving her food around with her fork.

“Yes, you do. Tomasz and Jacob are going.”

She seemed keen, right up until this morning.

“It’s too posh. They won’t like me.”

“We’re posh, too.” *You’d have to be, to afford those fees.*

“I don’t like the uniform. It looks silly.”

She has a point. The bottle-green skirt and straw boater hat wouldn’t be

out of place in the last century. Or the one before that.

“You can take the hat off, once you get inside,” I assure her.

“But I—”

“Three more mouthfuls and finish getting ready, then we can play chess if you like.” Ethan makes the offer as he helps himself to toast.

Lucy beams from ear to ear and guzzles three large forkfuls of the eggs, then a fourth for good measure, which clears her plate. “I’ll go get the chess set.” She scampers from the room.

“Neat,” I mumble. “Thanks.”

“I’ve always found bribery to be an effective strategy,” he replies. “Especially with children.”

“I don’t suppose you can always resort to pulling out toenails,” I observe as I sip my tea.

“No, you’re right. Cristina would never stand for it. And, talking of coercion and retribution...”

“Were we?”

“Well, I was. Kristian Kaminski has requested a meeting.”

“Requested?”

“Demanded,” he clarifies. “He’s coming here this afternoon.”

“Here?” I gape at hm. “You invited him here? To Caraksay?”

He shrugs. “Home soil.”

“We’d better hide the painting, then.” *Death of Atalanta* is still on the wall in the hall.

“I don’t think so. I want him to see it and know exactly who shafted him.”

“He’ll have worked that out, surely. That’s why he wants to talk to you.”

“Probably, but he can’t be sure. He will be by the time I’m finished.”

“But why?”

He smiles at me. “Justice needs to be seen to be done, Miss Lowe. Which is why I’m inviting you to sit in on the meeting. So you can see it, too.”

MR KAMINSKI ARRIVES BY HELICOPTER. Not one of ours, the chartered service circles the island twice before descending to land in the courtyard. I’m watching from the tower room window when the man I assume to be Ethan’s rival mob boss hops down onto the cobbles.

He’s not what I was expecting. He’s much younger, to start with. Around thirty, I’d say, with wavy dark-blond hair and a slim but athletic build. He’s

immaculately dressed in a charcoal-grey suit, expertly fitted so the bulge of his concealed handgun is barely visible, and black leather shoes which gleam, even from this distance. Handmade, Italian, would be my guess.

He's too far away for me to make out the details of his features, but I get the impression he's a handsome man, and he certainly bears himself with a commanding presence to rival that of Ethan Savage himself. And Nico, obviously. He may have stepped into the lion's den, but he strolls towards the castle with the elegant, confident grace of a Regency rake entering a ballroom.

Nico emerges from the main entrance to greet him. He looks up and catches my eye just before he ushers our guest inside.

Time to go downstairs. I wonder if I should have made an effort to smarten up. Too late now. I smooth the wrinkles out of my chinos—well, some of the wrinkles—and make my way down to the hall.

Aaron is already there, along with Tony. Nico offers me a smile when I join them and pulls out a chair for me. Cristina follows me in and takes a seat beside her husband. Mr Kaminski places himself opposite Ethan, directly below the famous masterpiece hanging on the wall.

If he's spotted it, he gives no sign of it.

Ethan scans the room while Mrs McRae and her assistant, Janey, bustle around laying out coffee cups and fancy little biscuits. Seemingly satisfied that everyone is here who should be, he sits and fixes Kaminski with a steady gaze.

"You've met my associates already," he states. "This is my wife, Cristina Savage."

"Ah, yes. Formerly Cristina Bival," he murmurs in his perfect but accented English. "We have met before, some years ago, when we were both children. It was in Leningrad, I believe. I am delighted to renew our acquaintance."

She smiles regally, like the Mafia queen she is. "Such a small world, Mr Kaminski."

"Quite." He fastens his moss-green gaze on me. "I don't believe we've met...?"

"I'm Molly," I blurt.

"Ah, yes. Molly." He leaves it at that. He knows exactly who I am.

"So, Mr Kaminski...?" Ethan is clearly keen to crack on.

"Kristian, please."

“Kristian. What brings you to the UK?”

“Business.”

“I gather you’ve remained in this country since our last... encounter.”

“That’s correct.”

“It can’t be because you like the climate.”

He smiles. “Have you visited Poland recently?”

Ethan returns his smile but without the merest hint of warmth. “Quite. So, you requested this meeting?”

Kaminski gets straight to the point. “I did. I owe you an apology.”

Ethan’s eyebrows lift. “Please elaborate, Kristian.”

“My brother-in-law has caused you some... inconvenience. I am sorry for the trouble.”

Ethan makes no pretence at not understanding. “As you should be. You gave me your word that you would keep that fuckwit under control.”

“I did, and I regret that he—”

“Those were the specific terms under which I released Glodowski to you. Alive. I was under the distinct impression that Miss Lowe, Molly, would hear nothing more from him.”

“I appreciate that, and I did relocate him to Warsaw. But unfortunately, he still managed to make a nuisance of himself.”

“Orchestrating an international art theft. Still active in the family business, obviously,” Ethan remarks.

“So I understand.” Kristian spares a glance up at the wall behind him. “His taste cannot be faulted, though. It is exquisite, is it not?”

So much for him not noticing...

“You knew what Borys was up to?”

Kristian shakes his head. “Sadly, no. Had I been involved, the original would still be in my possession. I became aware of the situation when I received an irate telephone call from a Sheikh Mustafa Saeed Al-Quraheen several days ago, claiming that I had relieved him of five point seven million euros and demanding that it be returned. Naturally, I was somewhat taken aback. I sought an explanation.”

“As you would.” Ethan is giving nothing away.

I can’t work out if he believes Kaminski or not.

“The sheikh was helpful, and my brother-in-law, too, was most forthcoming. Eventually. You will understand, he is feeling somewhat aggrieved at the most recent turn of events.”

“The German police want to talk to him,” I chip in. “Will your government hand him over?”

Kristian shakes his head. “I’m afraid I cannot permit that. A matter of security, you see.”

“In other words, Kristian is worried about what else his idiot brother-in-law will spill once the police have him custody.” Nico mutters the explanation to me under his breath.

“But if the extradition order is granted...”

“It won’t be,” is Kristian’s simple response. “But please be assured, I shall deal with Borys myself.”

“You had your chance,” Ethan growls. “You blew it. And worse, you pissed me off.”

“I have apologised for that.”

“Did you? I heard an apology for what Borys did, not for your own actions. Or lack of action, should I say?”

“Then allow me to rectify that at once. I am sorry.” This is delivered through gritted teeth.

I sense that apologising does not come easily to Kristian Kaminski.

“I hope that this... difficulty will not affect our alliance.”

“We don’t have an alliance,” Ethan remarks. “Not anymore. I need allies I can rely on to keep their word.”

Kaminski’s patience is clearly as frayed as Ethan’s. “And I need allies I can rely on not to undermine my reputation,” he snarls, “and who will not seek to destroy my business interests. Your intervention has caused me considerable inconvenience and expense.”

“Expense? Ah, I see.” Now Ethan’s smile is genuine. “You gave the sheikh his money back.”

“I saw no other option,” Kristian spits. “I trust this is now the end of the matter.”

“Not quite. I want Borys Glodowski back.”

Kristian takes his time before answering. “I wish I could oblige you. Believe me, I have no desire to retain his company.”

“I know, I know. Your sister is fond of him.”

“She is, but that is not all of it.”

“Then why not hand him over?”

He slants a glance at Aaron. “Would you hand your brother over to me, Ethan? If our situations were reversed?”

“My brother doesn’t try to abduct children or murder innocent women.”

Kristian inclines his chin. “I take your point, but it is a matter of family, of loyalty. And... duty. I cannot agree to your request.”

“Then this meeting is over.” Ethan gets to his feet. “Good day, Mr Kaminski.”

“WHAT NOW?” I ask as we watch the helicopter shrink to a mere dot on the horizon. “Has Borys got away with it?”

“Sounds like he took quite battering at the hands of his brother-in-law,” Nico reminds me. “And the Kaminskis are five point seven million euros down on the deal. I daresay Kristian will be taking that out of his hide as well.”

“That’s just money. He tried to steal my baby. He had my little girl kidnapped, snatched off the street. He sent a thug round to my home; he might have killed me. He would have if you hadn’t come. And he tried to ruin my career, had me thrown in jail. He’s just plain evil.”

Nico slings his arm over my shoulders and pulls me in to him. “I know. And he *will* pay.”

“I... I don’t want him killed.”

“No?”

“No. But I want him to stop. He *has* to stop.”

“I’ll see to it.”

IT’S JUST TURNED four in the morning. I’m awakened by the trilling of my phone. I let out a muffled curse.

“Who could that be at this time?” I stretch out my arm to fumble for the device and realise the ring tone doesn’t sound quite right. “It’s not a call. It’s my alarm.”

The brand-new state-of-the-art security system which Nico had installed at my house had gone live earlier today. It sends an alert to my phone, and his. Is this some sort of a test? I try to remember what he told me about monitoring it.

Nico is quicker off the mark than I am. He sits up and silences his alarm, then brings up the images of the property.

“Holy shit!”

“What? What’s happened?”

“Your place is on fire.”

“No! It can’t be!” I hit various keys until the system presents me with what I’m looking for. And shock turns to dismay. “It’s completely alight. It’ll be gutted. Oh God...” There are flames already dancing through the roof, and every window is illuminated with a bright-orange glow. The brickwork is silhouetted against the eerie brilliance of the fire raging within.

“I need to call the fire service...” I fumble with my phone. “Maybe they can—”

“They’re on their way,” Nico tells me. “The alarm alerts them immediately. See, the first appliance is just pulling up.”

We watch as the firefighters do their thing, swarming around my house in their brightly coloured protective gear, eventually fighting their way inside to quell the blaze from within.

“What about the neighbours’ houses?” I whisper. “Is anyone hurt? I need to go over there, and—” I’m babbling nonsense. We’d need to rouse a pilot, and even then, we’re a couple of hours away from Glasgow. There’s nothing I can do to help.

“We’ll both fly over there, but it looks like they’ve got it under control.” Nico is already half-dressed.

I jump out of bed and throw on the closest things I can find to wear. Yesterday’s jeans and an oversized sweater of his. “Thank God it happened before we moved back in. If we’d been in there, sleeping...”

“You weren’t,” he growls. “I’ll phone Magda.”

THERE’S a playing field at the end of my old street, and that’s where Magda sets us down. I sprint towards the milling throng of neighbours in their dressing gowns, firefighters, and police.

“Sorry, miss. This is a crime scene. You can’t come any further.”

The young police officer seems harried, but he stands his ground, refusing to let me get within twenty metres of my old home.

“But it’s my house,” I protest. “I need to speak to whoever’s in charge.”

He peers suspiciously at me. “Your place?” he repeats. “Are you sure?”

“Of course she’s sure,” Nico snaps.

“Wait there, please.” The officer scuttles off in search of some higher

authority.

I grab Nico's arm. "He said 'crime scene'. I heard him. What does that mean?"

"We'll soon know." He tips his chin at someone behind me. "Looks like the top brass is here."

I spin around again to be greeted by a middle-aged man in protective gear but wearing a white helmet rather than the yellow ones that the rest of the firefighters have.

"The officer tells me that you're the owner these premises, miss."

"Yes. That's right. I was... I was away. I have an alarm system installed and I came as soon as I could."

"You were away? So, there are no persons present in the house?"

I shake my head. "No. My children were with me. The house was empty."

"I see. Thank you. The police will need to interview you, but for now I shall need you to stay back, miss." He turns to leave.

"Wait. Do you know how it started?"

He pauses. "It's early still in the investigation, but at this stage all we know is that an accelerant was used. The seat of the fire was in the dining room. That's all the information I have at present."

"A-accelerant? Did you say...?"

"Accelerant. Yes. I don't yet know what that was."

"You mean, petrol?"

"Possibly. Or lighter fluid. Something of that sort. Highly flammable."

"But it was started deliberately? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, miss. It was. Can you think of anyone who might want to cause you harm?"

"Yes, I—"

"No, I'm afraid we can't. Can we?" Nico interrupts before I can share my suspicions. A sharp nudge to my side reinforces his point.

"No," I mumble. "No one."

I wait until the fire chief has gone back to his duties. "What was that about? They need to know..."

"We don't want the authorities crawling all over our business. We'll deal with Glodowski our way."

"But we can't be sure it was him. Not until they've finished their investigation."

"We know," he insists, "but we'll be glad to have any information their

experts come up with. Meanwhile, the security system I had installed includes state-of-the-art CCTV. If anyone was lurking around tipping petrol through your letterbox, we'll have footage of it."

"WE OUGHT to hand this over to the forensic team."

"Molly's right," Nico backs me up. "They already know we have the cameras."

Ethan nods. "Okay. The image isn't good enough to identify anyone in any case."

We watch again, in silence, as the pair of hooded figures scuttle across my rear garden and around to the French windows at the side. One of them smashes the glass close to the ground and tosses something through the hole. There's brief flash of white, a match being struck, then the door is engulfed in flames. The two fire-starters sprint off the way they came.

If that was all the footage we had access to, we'd be as stumped as the police. But Frankie has somehow managed to hack into a couple of the fancy doorbell cameras along the street and got a clear image of a dark-coloured Renault leaving the area within moments of the fire starting. It was a simple matter to trace the registration plate and pay a visit to the owner.

Marcus Jordan is a small-time crook. Or he was. What remains of him and his brother is now in the hands of what Nico refers to as a 'clean-up team', but not before they confirmed what we suspected. They were hired by 'someone foreign' to torch the house, preferably with the family trapped inside, but they didn't know whether Molly and her kids had been at home or not. They just took the chance and were paid two hundred pounds for their trouble.

At one time I would have balked at the violence, the loss of life. Not now. Those lives could have been mine, my children. The Jordan brothers got what they deserved.

How my perspective has shifted.

CHAPTER 25

Nico

SLIPPING into Poland is not nearly as straightforward as slipping into Luxembourg was, especially with my rig in tow. I can't risk normal airport security, they tend to be sniffy about high-powered rifles on commercial passenger planes, so I opt to go the long way round.

Rome is with me, at Ethan's suggestion, to help out with any language issues at the border crossings. We fly to Moldova by private jet, where our ally, Marius Bival, has a vehicle waiting for us. Marius is Ethan's brother-in-law, and luckily, they get on a lot better than Borys and Kristian appear to. He heads up the Moldovan Bratva and is a useful contact whenever business brings us to Eastern Europe.

Then we travel overland through eastern Ukraine. We cross the Polish border close to Lviv then head on northwest towards Warsaw.

"The Kaminski compound is north of the city," Rome informs me, studying the map.

"I know that," I growl. Does he think I came over here blind? I've scrutinised every inch of the Kaminski stronghold using drone footage provided by Marius. I selected my spot days ago.

"Drop me at the foot of that hill to the west," I tell him.

"Right. Then what?"

"Then you fuck off somewhere with the van and stay out of sight until I call you."

"How long do you think...?"

“How the fuck would I know?” A stakeout can be just a couple of minutes or several days. It all depends on what the target is up to that day.

“What if you need backup?”

“I won’t.”

He shrugs. “Fair enough. But you’ve got two days, then I come looking for you.”

“Okay.” With luck, I’ll be done long before that.

I disembark from the nondescript white van and heft my canvas bag of tricks over my shoulder. I give Rome a cheery wave as I start to jog up the steep, wooded incline.

I climb for maybe an hour, pausing periodically to check the line of sight. The ideal angle will give me a view right into the Kaminski mansion, but I have no way of knowing which rooms will be occupied by Borys. I do know, though, that the master bedroom is on the other side of the house from where I mean to set up, and the second-best room is right in the centre of the first floor on this facade. As the elder Kaminski, Oscar, is in residence here—and rumoured to be at death’s door—we’ve assumed he’ll be ensconced in the master suite. My hunch is that Kristian will have relegated his brother-in-law to less grand accommodations, hopefully on this side of the mansion.

We shall soon see.

I pick my spot. A secluded patch of woodland about a mile from the closest track. I’m not expecting to be disturbed by passing hikers or bird-spectators, and the trees’ canopy offers protection against being detected from above. There’s no defence against thermal imaging cameras, but I have no reason to expect that sort of tech out here.

I take my time setting up my rig, making use of natural materials to conceal the glint of metal. I note the position of the sun and tug several branches down to provide shade, using thin wire to hold them in place. Once I’m satisfied that I won’t be spotted from any direction, I settle in to watch the house.

My long-range scope is as powerful as they get, delivering me crystal-clear views from my perch over a mile away. I estimate the distance to be around two thousand metres, on the long side, but as there’s virtually no cross wind, and I’m positioned above the mansion, it will be fine. Obviously, if the weather changes, my strategy will need to be amended, but for now this is good.

For the first hour or so there’s almost no activity in or around the house. I

have a clear view of the main gate and of the guard stationed there who never moves from his position. I'm on alert when the front door opens, but it's only a middle-aged woman, some sort of housekeeper or servant, who takes a meal to the man at the gate then goes back inside.

I've been set up for over three hours before I actually spot Borys. He passes the window in one of the downstairs rooms. I consult the plan I have of the house. He's in the dining room. I focus my scope there and observe him tucking in to what looks to be some sort of goulash.

My stomach rumbles, but I ignore it. I never eat while on a job, disturbs the concentration.

The angle isn't quite good enough to take him out from here, but it's close. If he'll oblige me by coming over to the window again...

He finishes his meal and leaves the table to disappear back into the bowels of the mansion. *Shit!*

An hour or so later he hasn't reappeared, but a movement away to my left catches my attention. It's a car. No, two cars, and they seem to be approaching the Kaminski property.

I swing my scope around to take a good look.

They're police. Interesting.

They reach the gate and are confronted by the armed guard. There's some sort of exchange, which involves the guard making a phone call to fuck knows who, then he opens the gate to allow the vehicles to enter. They roll to a stop in front of the main door. Two uniformed men exit each vehicle.

The housekeeper answers the knock. There's a brief exchange on the doorstep, then she closes the door on the four officers and goes back inside. A couple of minutes later the door opens again and Borys steps outside.

Bingo!

I squat behind my rig, my eye to the scope. I have his heart in my crosshairs, and I slowly increase the pressure on the trigger. This is it, the moment of utmost concentration, calm. I cease to breathe...

Fuck. One of the police officers has moved between me and Borys. I relax my trigger finger.

I'm too far away to be able to hear what's being said, but there's clearly some sort of altercation going on. Borys is angry, squaring up to the police officers.

One of them calmly draws his weapon.

Oh no you don't. He's mine...

Borys backs off, his hands in the air. Again, I have a moment, a window of opportunity when he's separated from the officers. I squeeze the trigger...
...and stop.

They're handcuffing him. Borys is being arrested. Did Kristian change his mind about that extradition order?

The officers are on either side of him now, marching him towards their lead vehicle. I have another clear shot, and this time I take it.

My target crumples, writhing on the ground.

The police officers throw themselves down next to him and swing their weapons in every direction. They've no idea where the shot came from, but I expect they'll work it out soon enough. I need to be on the move.

But not until I complete the task. I settle in again, adjust the scope a fraction, then fire off the second shot, taking out his other kneecap to match the first.

The police can have him. I've made my point.

CHAPTER 26

Nico

SIX MONTHS LATER...

“SELL IT.”

“I don’t want to. It’s my home.” Molly picks up her paintbrush and applies a few flicks of colour to the canvas she’s working on. The skeletal image of a tree in winter is just starting to emerge. “Lucy loved it there.”

“Was your home. You haven’t lived there for months. You live here now. With me. And Lucy’s happy here.”

True, she’d have been happier if we’d stayed on Caraksay, but we get over to the island every couple of weeks or so. And she spends her weeknights at her school as a weekly boarder. She absolutely loves it there. After all the fuss at the beginning, who would have thought it?

‘Here’ is our apartment at Caernbro Ghyll, a spacious two-bedroomed flat overlooking the rose garden. We moved in soon after I watched Borys being carted away by the Polish *policja*. We have it on good authority he’ll spend the next couple of years at least languishing in jail in Warsaw while the lawyers bat the extradition process back and forth. Lynne Meadows assures us it can be a lengthy process, but the chances are the Germans will get their way in the end.

“Why don’t you rent the house out?” I suggest.

She shakes her head and refills her brush. “Sounds like more bother than it’s worth. I’d have to deal with tenants, and repairs, and—”

“Do it through an agent. I can recommend someone.” We manage a massive portfolio of properties, I’m sure one extra little house won’t be a problem.

She abandons her work for now. “I suppose the place does have bad memories...”

“Very bad,” I agree.

“And, since the insurance company paid out in full for the repairs following the fire, it’s in pretty good condition. I wonder how much...?”

“At least a thousand pounds a month,” I suggest. I know. I’ve checked.

“Hmm. I’ll think about it.” She returns to her work, just as my phone trills in my pocket.

“It’s Ethan.” I hit ‘answer’. “Hi, boss.”

Molly waits in silence, then raises an eyebrow as I end the call. “What did he want?”

“Us. At a meeting tomorrow, on the island.”

Her brow creases. “What sort of meeting?”

“With Kaminski.”

Now she looks even more perplexed. I can’t say I blame her.

“Why?”

My first guess would have been that Kaminski was wanting to enlist our support in some way to get his brother out of jail. The return of the painting might have done the trick, but if that’s what’s on his mind he’s already too late. Ethan had it delivered by courier to Edouard Montrou weeks ago.

Molly reads my mind. “He must know *Death of Atalanta* is back in Nuremberg. It made the national news.

There had been headlines at the time. ‘Mysterious return of stolen masterpiece’. It sent shockwaves reverberating around the art world, Kaminski can’t have missed it.

“We’ll know soon enough. You don’t have to come if you don’t want to.” I work for the Savages, I’m at Ethan’s beck and call. She isn’t.

“I’ll come. And it’s a Saturday, so Lucy can come, too.”

ETHAN SENDS the chopper for us. Jack and Rome join us in the cabin, having also been summoned.

“Do you know what this is about?” I ask Jack.

He’s Ethan’s second-in-command so is usually clued up.

“No, and neither does Ethan. Kaminski requested the meeting out of the blue and suggested that we have someone on hand who’s fluent in Polish.”

“Namely, me,” Rome chips in.

“Kaminski speaks perfect English. Why would he need a translator?” I wonder aloud.

Jack merely shrugs.

WE ARRIVE with plenty of time to spare, so we are all assembled in the great hall when the distant drone of an approaching helicopter heralds the arrival of our guest. Rome goes outside to do the meet and greet.

He returns with Kaminski and another man in tow, presumably the associate who requires an interpreter. That assumption is blown out of the water when Kristian introduces his companion.

“This is Basyli Bartosz, my underboss.”

Bartosz is built like a brick shithouse, as my mum would have described him. She grew up in the shadows of a Yorkshire weaving mill and had a colourful turn of phrase.

Blond with a buzzcut, Bartosz folds his arms across his massive chest and takes up his position behind his boss’s chair. “Good day, gentlemen,” he mutters. “And ma’am.” He nods in Molly’s direction. His English is accented, like that of Kaminski himself, but in no major way lacking.

“Won’t you take a seat, Mr Bartosz,” Ethan suggests.

“Thank you, but no.” He remains where he is.

The rest of us settle in chairs around the huge oak table, and Ethan begins proceedings.

“What brings you back, Kristian? I had thought our business was concluded. At least, I hoped so.”

A tacit warning not to seek to engage us in any negotiations regarding his brother-in-law’s current plight.

“It concerns that matter we discussed previously. We had unfinished business.”

“Did we?”

Kristian inclines his head. “You will be aware that Borys was arrested. I have reason to believe one of your men may have been in the vicinity at the

time..." He's referring to the long-distance kneecapping right in front of his house.

Ethan isn't biting. "I see." He neither confirms nor denies it. "And this concerns me how?"

"I am not sure how closely you follow news items in Poland. I fear this latest chapter has not made the international bulletins." He flicks open a document holder he brought with him and retrieves a newspaper. "Yesterday's *Gazeta Wyborcza*," he explains, laying the paper out on the table and shoving it towards Ethan. "You will see Borys has made the front page."

The grainy image of Borys Glodowski graces the lower section of the page, but the headline and story are all in Polish. Ethan hands the newspaper to Rome.

"He's dead," Rome announces, scanning the closely typed print. "It says here he was found hanging in his cell in Wronki jail. Foul play is not suspected, though Glodowski is known to have made enemies in the Middle East."

Ethan's steady gaze meets that of Kristian. "The Saudis killed him?"

Kristian shrugs. "It is early days. Naturally, the *Śłużba Więzienna* are investigating."

"The prison authority in Poland," Rome puts in helpfully.

Ethan probes further. "What do you think happened, Kristian? Was he suicidal?"

Kaminski shakes his head. "I feel confident in saying my brother-in-law possessed a highly developed sense of self-preservation. Would you not agree, Miss Lowe?"

Molly jumps in her seat, clearly caught off guard to be directly addressed. "Oh, er, yes. Yes, probably. I mean, I don't know..."

Kaminski continues. "The Saudis have their money back, but of course there is always simple revenge as a possible motive."

"Perhaps." Ethan's gaze never wavers, "though the sheikh has been silent since his embarrassing error in judgement was exposed. Still, his reputation was badly compromised, and he could have been smarting from that."

Kaminski affects a sad demeanour. It fools no one. "Alas, Borys made many enemies. We shall never know for certain."

"If you're suggesting that I somehow orchestrated this, then you are mistaken. If I'd wanted him dead, that could have been achieved weeks

earlier. As you said, we were in the vicinity.”

“Quite so. And may I say, that was an excellent piece of marksmanship. My compliments to your assassin.”

His gaze may have flicked my way, I can’t be sure.

“You will be pleased to know he never walked again after that, and I gather the doctors informed him that there was little prospect of him ever doing so other than on crutches. Such a tragedy.”

Ethan rests his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers in front of him. “Why did you come all this way, Kristian, just to tell me about this? Why not simply send the newspaper cutting by email?”

“I felt the news was better delivered face to face. I wanted to be certain there was no remaining misunderstanding between us, Ethan.”

“Misunderstanding?”

“Indeed. I appreciate that you had felt short-changed by our previous bargain. I gave my word, and you felt I had broken it. You had good reason, and I have told you I regret what happened. I felt obligated to make matters right, and I trust you will agree that the debt has now been paid.”

Ethan is silent for a few moments, digesting what isn’t said but clearly implied. Then, “I see.” He leans back. “How has your sister taken this news?”

Kristian shrugs. “She is distraught, naturally. She will get over it.”

“Does she know that you had her husband killed?”

He never wavers. Never turns a hair. “As I said, she will get over it. We do what we have to do, Mr Savage, and life goes on.”

“I suppose it does. Thank you for your diligence in this matter.” He starts to get to his feet. “One of my men will see you to your helicopter.”

Kristian isn’t budging just yet. “There just remains the issue of my five point seven million euros.”

Ethan settles back down. “How so?”

“Now that the loose ends have been almost all addressed, I would appreciate the return of the money I was obliged to part with in order to placate Sheikh Mustafa.”

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s a considerable sum of money, Mr Savage. You have it, and it rightfully belongs to me.”

“Think of it as compensation. For the trouble you put me to.”

“Mr Savage, I must insist...” He grinds the words through gritted teeth.

Now Ethan is on his feet. “You don’t get to come here insisting on

anything, Kaminski. I consider this matter closed.”

“Like fuck!”

“Jack, see to it that Mr Kaminski and Mr Bartosz leave my island at once. Good day to you, gentlemen.” He marches across the hall to the main stairs and disappears onto the upper floor. He never looks back.

Jack, Rome, and I herd the Polish visitors back out into the courtyard. I half expect the second-in-command-cum-bodyguard to make a fuss, but he doesn’t. Kristian climbs up into the chopper, but Bartosz hangs back.

He turns to me. “It was you, wasn’t it? You shot Glodowski.”

I meet and hold his dark-blue gaze. “And you finally killed him.”

“It was long overdue.” He offers me his hand. “Nice work.”

“I’M GLAD HE’S DEAD.” Molly is sitting in our bed, propped up against the pillows. “I never thought I’d say that, about anyone.”

“You’re too nice.” I drop onto a chair to unfasten my boots. “He needed to go.”

“But to be killed by his own brother in the end...”

“Brother-in-law,” I correct her.

“Whatever. What about the money Kaminski wants?”

“What about it?”

“Maybe we should—”

“He’s not getting a penny,” I insist. I happen to agree with Ethan. It’s compensation for all we’ve been put through, Molly especially. “Ethan says the money’s yours if you want it. Use it for school fees or something.”

“I don’t want it. I don’t need Borys’s dirty money.”

I shrug. “Create a trust fund for Lucy and Noah, call it a legacy from their father.”

“Borys wasn’t Lucy’s father.”

“You’re splitting hairs.” I unfasten my jeans and slide out of them. “Get over here. I want to fuck you.”

EPILOGUE

Molly

SIX MONTHS LATER...

“WOULD HE HAVE LIKED ME, do you think?”

The question isn't aimed at me, but I open my mouth to answer it anyway. Marlowe beats me to it.

He crouches beside Lucy, and together they gaze at the memorial plaque set into the dedicated remembrance wall at Kensal Green cemetery in London. Tristram's ashes were scattered in the gardens here following his funeral, and a few months later, Marlowe arranged for the plaque to be installed. I've only been here once before, but we felt it was right to come again, as a family. I doubt it will become a regular pilgrimage, but every once in a while, maybe...

“He would have adored you,” Marlowe assures her. “He would have been so proud of you, just as I am.”

“Are you sure?” She shifts uneasily from one foot to the other, clearly unconvinced.

“I am.”

Lucy chews on her lower lip, a sure sign she's thinking it through. She seems to accept his assurance and falls silent for a while.

“Did you mean it, Uncle Marlowe? About me coming to stay with you

and Auntie Clemmie in Paris?”

“I certainly did. As long as your mum agrees...”

Lucy spins around to confront me. “I can go, can’t I?”

“Yes, of course. But not quite yet. You’re still too young to be travelling abroad on your own.”

Marlowe agrees. “Wait until you’re little bit older, then we’ll stroll down the Champs-Élysées together and buy ice cream in the Tuileries.”

Her eyes light up at the mention of ice cream. “What are the Twilleries?”

“A garden, in the centre of Paris,” Marlowe explains. “There’s a stall there that sells the most wonderful ice cream.”

He had her at ‘ice cream’.

“I could come now, if my mum would bring me.”

“Your mum’s a bit busy just for the next few months.”

He’s referring to my four-month bump, just starting to show. Baby Isaac is due to make his appearance in just over five months time.

“Oh, that.” Lucy dismisses my pregnancy as old news. “Well, what about Daddy? He could bring me?”

Marlowe shoots me a sharp glance.

“Lucy,” I begin. *Has she somehow not understood...?*

“I meant Nico,” she blurts. “I’m sorry, was I not supposed to say that? I know my real daddy is here, in this graveyard, but—” Her face starts to crumple. “I didn’t mean it. I just thought... I wanted...”

This time it’s Nico who beats me to it. He steps forward to scoop her up into his arms. “Baby girl, of course I’ll be your daddy if you’ll have me. I’d be proud, just like your other daddy.”

“C-can I have more than one daddy?” She snuffles.

“You can have as many as you like, but there won’t be a vacancy for a while, not if I have any say in it.”

She wraps her arms around his neck. “Will you? Will you take me to Paris to see Uncle Marlowe and eat ice cream in the Twilleries?”

“Let’s talk about it, sweetheart. But, yes, if your mum’s happy, and Marlowe, I don’t see why not.”

“Noah can’t come. He’s too young,” she announces with a superior air, her earlier snuffles all but disappeared.

“You’re probably right,” I agree. “Best if he stays with us.”

NICO and I follow Marlowe and Lucy along the driveway leading back to the crematorium car park. She's skipping along beside her uncle, chattering incessantly about her upcoming visit.

"It was kind of you, to say what you said to her. I wouldn't want you to feel pressured, though. I mean, it's big thing..."

"It certainly is. A trip to Paris, ice cream in the Twilleries."

I nudge him with my elbow. "You know what I meant."

"Yes, I do."

"She sort of dropped it on you. Maybe we should—"

"No, she didn't. We talked about this already."

"What?"

"Me and Lucy. We already talked about me being her daddy."

I stop and glare at him. "You never said!"

"I haven't had a chance yet."

"When did you talk?"

"Yesterday. I think it was brought on by us coming here. She's sorting stuff out in her head, sifting through the available daddies."

"She should have spoken to me about it if she's confused, not pestered you."

He slings his arm across my shoulders, and we stroll forward again.

"I'm glad she asked me. Glad she felt she could and wanted to."

"Yes, but—"

"You do know I love the bones of that kid? Both of them." He glances at Noah, a toddler now, asleep in his buggy. "Noah's too young to ever know any different, but with Lucy, well, I wouldn't have pushed her on it, but I do want to be her father, too. I've tried to be a dad to her in every way that matters for months now."

"I know that, and I appreciate it. Seems as though she's noticed as well."

"I guess this means I've got her seal of approval."

"Yes, it looks that way."

"What about yours?"

"Mine? You know you have my approval."

He halts in his tracks and tips up my chin with his fingertips. "Marry me, then."

"What? What did you say?"

"You heard." He brushes his lips across mine. "It's what I want."

"I thought we were waiting to see how things pan out."

“They seem to be panning out just fine from where I’m standing.”

“I know. Yes, but...”

“Molly, marry me. Please.”

I open my mouth to deliver more words of prevarication, more platitudes about taking things slow. That’s not what comes out.

“Yes. Okay.”

He beams at me. “You said ‘yes’!”

I nod. “Yes. I think I did.”

He grabs me around the waist and swings me into the air. “She said ‘yes’!” he yells to the surrounding treetops.

There’s a whoop from Lucy, and even the normally taciturn Marlowe cracks a wide smile. Noah joins in with a high-pitched wail.

“Can I be a bridesmaid?” Lucy demands. She dances around us. “I’ll need a new dress.”

Nico picks her up and swings her round, too. “We’ll choose one in Paris, sweetheart.”

OUR NEWS IS WELL RECEIVED BACK at Caernbro Ghyll. Ruth insists on cooking us a meal to celebrate. We settle down to her pan-fried duck in almond sauce, accompanied by all sorts of fancy vegetables and the promise of homemade tiramisu to follow.

We’re surrounded by our friends. Tony and Jenna, with their five-month-old daughter. Jack and Ruth with little Faith in her highchair, Rome and Arina. Magda and Megan have hopped over from Caraksay for the occasion along with Cristina, Beth, and their respective broods.

“Ethan sends his apologies,” Cristina explains. “He would have been here, but Mrs McRae was worried about Janey. She hadn’t heard from her in a few days and she’s not answering her calls, so she asked if Ethan would call in at her flat in Stirling and check that everything’s okay. Aaron went with him.”

Janey is another of Ethan’s waifs and strays, a girl he ‘rescued’ from a life of prostitution when she was just seventeen. That was three or four years ago now, I gather. She’s training to be a cook and attends catering college in Stirling.

“Not like him to do his own legwork,” Ruth observes. “Still, I know he has a soft spot for Janey. Will they be here later? Should I save them some

duck?”

“Why not.” Cristina grins. “Stirling’s only an hour away.”

“More for us,” Jack mutters. He serves himself a generous helping of dauphinoise potatoes, and growls when his phone rings. “Christ, does he never let up?” He takes the call. “Boss? You’re missing a feast here...” There’s a pause; his features cloud over. “What? What the fuck? Right. We’re on our way.”

“What’s happened?” Ruth reaches for his hand. “What did Ethan say?”

“It’s Janey. She’s disappeared. Ethan seems to think she’s been abducted.”

LOOKING AHEAD

I hope you enjoyed getting to know Nico and Molly as much as I enjoyed writing their stories. Look out for the next book in *The Caraksay Brotherhood* series.

Savage Revenge is Kristian and Janey's story, releasing early next year. In the meantime, why not turn the page for a sneak preview.

SAVAGE REVENGE (CHAPTER 1)

Not so much as a measly card.

I drop the miserable collection of junk mail, balance transfer offers and what looks like the bill for last month's window-cleaning onto the table in the hall. I'll sort them later, by which I mean dump them in the recycling. I'll pay the window-cleaner, obviously because that's my job.

There's the clattering of heavy footsteps on the floor above, then on the stairs. I nod to my tenant who occupies the first floor flat as he dashes past me. Always late, Denny is charging out in the hope of sprinting the half-mile to the station in time to catch the eight seventeen to Glasgow. He makes it occasionally, but won't so much as consider leaving home earlier. A waste of good sleeping time, in his opinion. And no one seems to mind that much if he slinks in twenty minutes late to his first lecture of the day.

The School of Engineering and Mechanics at Strathclyde University is a lot less picky about timekeeping than St. Martha's College of Catering and Hospitality in Stirling. If I'm so much as a minute late it gets written up on my report and I have to make up the time.

The door slams shut behind Denny. So far, no one else seems to be stirring on the three floors above mine, home to a motley crew of students. Jessica and Elaine on the top floor are studying nursing, and the second floor flat houses Mohammad who is doing a PhD in Middle Eastern Politics. I don't see much of him but the nurses are sociable enough when they're here.

I return to my own, solitary apartment on the ground floor. I'm not due in college today. It's a study day, an opportunity to complete my project, due in by ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Mrs Cheshingham, Principal at St Martha's and just about three down from God as far as we humble wannabe chefs are concerned, will be holding court to receive the humble offerings of

her students.

We're all tasked with producing a collection of recipes around the theme of 'Nostalgia'. I've gone for traditional Highland fare, and have even come up with a new twist on black pudding. I'm optimistic it will pass muster, and be my passport to the final year of my course. Who would have thought it? I'm within touching distance of getting a Bachelor's degree in Culinary Arts.

I know who I have to thank for it. My friend, mentor and sort-of-employer, Ethan Savage, who rescued me from a life of prostitution, apprenticed me to his housekeeper and eventually paved the way for me to get a place in college. He even let me have the use of this flat in a house he owns, in exchange for managing the property and the other tenants for him. I get to collect the rents to meet the running costs of the house, and use what's left to pay for my own tuition and living expenses.

It's a good system, works for me.

I wander back into my pocket-sized kitchen, flick the switch on the kettle and sink onto a chair. I briefly turn my mind to what I have left to do for any college project. It's all written up, but I need to include some catchy photographs to illustrate my recipes. I have most of them already, but still haven't managed to pull off a good enough version of my Scotch broth and rustic sourdough cob to want to commit it to record. I'll prepare the recipe again today, after I've been to the market to pick up the fresh ingredients.

But first, I prepare myself a nice cup of tea and wander back to bed. It's not every day you turn twenty-one, it must be an occasion worthy of a lie-in, even if no one has seen fit to so much as pop a card under my door.

I don't surface again until after eleven in the morning. I get dressed, grab a slice of toast by way of breakfast and a nod towards lunch, then I catch the bus into the city centre. The produce market is one of my favourite places to visit, but even so, I'm not convinced it really qualifies as a twenty-first birthday treat.

It will have to do, I tell myself as I browse the stalls, picking out carrots, turnips, tomatoes, potatoes and a juicy neck of lamb. I toss in a sexy-looking apple cream turnover from the patisserie stall in honour of the occasion, and head for the bus stop.

I never intended to stop at Sugar and Spice. Like most folk, I tend to do my adult shopping online, but the eye-catching window display of crimson and black leather caught my eye. They're normally a lot more discreet, as befits

the delicate sensibilities of the good citizens of Stirling, but maybe the place is under new management or something. Whatever, I spot the gorgeous lace and leather concoction on the model and I'm smitten. I open the door and duck inside.

Twenty minutes and the best part of a hundred quid later I emerge, the proud owner of a seriously sexy corset with matching suspenders, stockings and thong. Even better, inspired, I'm hatching a plan for how to celebrate my landmark birthday.

Bugger!

I flick the switch on and off, to no avail. What a time to have a power cut! I grab my phone and check for online notifications.

Sure enough. The electricity company is aware of the unexpected outage and is working on it. They hope to restore power by three o'clock. That stretches to five thirty — apparently the work is more complicated than they expected — then to seven o'clock. And all the while my Scotch broth remains unsimmered, congealing in the pan and my bread sits unbaked on the countertop. When the forecast power restoration stretches to nine o'clock I decide I've had enough. It's my birthday, I have stuff to do, and that stuff includes getting decked out in my new sexy outfit and gracing my favourite fetish club.

Actually, Club Wicked is the only fetish club I know, and even then only because it's owned by my employer. Part of the Savage empire of clubs, restaurants and casinos, I've visited once or twice before, but not for a while. When Ethan, my boss, found out I'd been sneaking into the club he went spare. Maybe he had a point, I was only eighteen at the time. Even so, I was humiliated beyond measure when he declared he hadn't rescued me from prostitution just so I could hang around sex clubs with my pussy on offer.

It was never like that. I was curious, just watching. Banning me from the club did nothing to dim my interest and in the three years since then I've been an avid reader and viewer of BDSM materials. Hopefully, he won't have realised that, as of this morning, I now qualify for club membership, but I'll soon find out.

Despite the nature of the activity, a fetish club is one of those rare places where a woman can go unaccompanied and no eyebrows will be raised. It's safe, well supervised, and strangers hook up all the time. Not that I necessarily mean to actually play...

I do a torch-lit twirl in front of my mirror. Not bad. Not bad at all. The vivid scarlet leather of my gorgeous new corset contrasts beautifully with the black lace of the thong and suspender belt, and the delicate stockings with a seam up the back. I dig around in the back of my wardrobe for a pair of red stilettos and my ensemble is complete.

Tonight, I intend to have a seriously good time.

It's just after nine in the evening when the taxi drops me off at the end of the road where the club is located. I scramble out and pull the belt on my calf-length raincoat tighter around my waist. I hand the driver a ten-pound-note and make my way to the club entrance as gracefully as I can on my five-inch heels. I'm out of practise in the matter of elegant footwear, spending most of my time in crocs or trainers.

I mount the front steps and ring the doorbell. I show my ID, receive cheery congratulations on my coming of age from the sharp-eyed, tuxedo'd doorman, hand over a hundred quid for the guest entry fee, and I'm in. Clearly Ethan had other things on his mind and hasn't yet gotten around to raising the age limit to twenty-five, or even thirty.

I hand my raincoat to the girl in the skimpy maid's uniform who runs the cloakroom, and secure my phone and small purse in the locker she assigns to me. Then, I hit the dungeon.

I find I'm a lot less self-conscious than I expected to be, wandering around alone dressed in almost nothing. I look good, I decide, covertly comparing my outfit to the rest of the women here. Corsets abound, as do miniscule satin shorts, tiny bra-tops, micro-skirts and thongs. Some of the men are decked out in submissive gear, including one wearing nothing but a leather harness who follows his 'master' around on leash.

There are plenty of couples, but some singles like me. I join a bunch of women who have gathered by the spanking benches to observe the flogging of a middle-aged male sub at the hands of his Domme. He writhes and whimpers and begs for forgiveness while she applies a heavy paddle to his bare backside. His buttocks go from pink and quivering to bright crimson and visibly clenching. My insides tense at the sight and something responds in my core, uncurling, softening. Yearning.

The show concludes and I float off to watch another couple indulging in wax play. It's a much gentler pursuit, or so it appears, though the girl on the table does let out breathy little squeals with each drip of colour onto her

naked torso. Her partner uses her body as his canvas, painting her with delicate pastels and vibrant pops of neon.

When that display ends I wander over to the bar and ask for a Coca Cola. I'd prefer wine, but the protocol here is to restrict the use of alcohol. I might grab a glass of rose at the end of the night. Meanwhile, I perch on a tall stool to watch my fellow kinksters.

The usual social norms don't apply here. That's one of the reasons I'm so fascinated by the BDSM lifestyle. Usually, I'm shy to the point of being anti-social. I could no more make conversation with a stranger than I could flap my arms and fly. But here, women approach men and vice versa, inviting brief hook-ups. A spanking here, a spot of bondage there, then they go their separate ways to do it all again. It's gloriously casual, refreshingly carefree and quite uninhibited.

So, why am I not playing? I came here intending to just watch, but the more I see, the more I...yearn.

Why not? No one knows me here, I could simply ask...

I observe those around me with different eyes, especially the men. I quickly dismiss the notion of approaching a Domme, that doesn't float my boat at all. I want a nice, friendly, accommodating Dom who can administer a decent spanking. Who knows, he might even manage a bit more. It's been ages since I enjoyed an orgasm that I didn't have to manufacture for myself. Actually, I don't think I've ever experienced anything but the DIY type.

Sad or what?

Unfortunately, no one takes my fancy. At least, no one who doesn't appear to be already taken. I scan the available talent for the best part of half an hour with no success.

Then, *he* walks in.

At least six foot six tall, dark blond hair, close cut but expertly styled, and wearing a sharp business suit, he makes his way through the dungeon heading towards the bar. He pauses once or twice to exchange a word or two before arriving at the bar and taking a seat a few feet away from me. He glances my way, offers me a slight nod, then orders a beer.

Heat rises from somewhere within my corset to swamp my face. I wasn't self-conscious before, but suddenly I'm consumed by shyness, desperately aware of my provocative outfit, the 'come and get me' vibe I'm unashamedly giving off.

What was I thinking? A man like him must be involved with someone,

anyway. Some gorgeous submissive, someone with experience, trained and ready to offer him the sport he deserves. That's what he's come here for. He'd never look twice at me.

I take a gulp of my drink, my evening souring. I should just go home.

I slither from my stool determined to do just that, and take several teetering steps towards the cloakroom. I might have left it there, but for the soft rumble of his chuckle as I pass a few feet from him. He's chatting to a couple who are buying drinks, smiling, laughing at something the woman says before raising his glass in a salute.

He seems... nice.

Very nice.

I spin on my heel and march over to him before I can change my mind. It doesn't hurt to ask. He can only say 'no'.

Which is exactly what he does say.

"Excuse me, sir. I was wondering if you... if we might..."

He regards me for a moment, his dark grey eyes assessing. His lips curl in a half-smile before he replies. "No, but thank you."

I drop my gaze and that humiliating flush seizes me again. I take a step back, then another. "I apologise. I shouldn't have... I didn't mean to disturb you."

"That's all right, miss." He doesn't sound even remotely disturbed. I suppose desperate would-be submissives must approach him all the time.

I'm an idiot. Since the floor is not offering to open up and swallow me anytime soon, I whirl and make my escape.

"Wait." The commanding voice rises above the muted chatter of the dungeon, but I don't so much as hesitate. I'm almost at the cloakroom door when a firm hand wraps itself around my wrist and pulls me to a stop.

I know it's him even before I turn to face him again. There's something about this man, an aura, a presence. It seems to me he makes the air hum, and I swear my wrist tingles where he's touching me.

I lift my gaze and resist the urge to gasp. His slate-grey eyes glint in the subdued lighting. His jaw is square, firm-set and when he smiles at me a dimple appears in his right cheek. It makes the sharp lines appear even more stark.

What made me think this man was nice? Or even remotely accommodating?

"Sir...?" I begin.

“My apologies.” He bows his head ever so slightly. “I was rude.”

“Rude? I don’t—“

“I would be honoured to spend some time with you, miss...?”

His English is perfect, but faintly accented. I can only stare at him.

“Miss...?” he prompts again.

“I...”

“My name is Kris.” He bows his head. “And you are?”

“Janey,” I blurt.

“I am pleased to meet you, Janey. May I buy you a drink?” That smile again. The dimple deepens.

I shake my head. “I was just leaving.”

“I hope not on my account.”

“No, of course not,” I lie.

“In that case,” he takes my elbow and steers me back into the dungeon, “I would love to take you up on your invitation. It *was* an invitation, I hope?”

“Well, yes, but...” I’m speechless, lost for words and bitterly regretting the fit of madness that got into this situation. “Maybe we should just—“

It’s as though I never spoke. “What were you fancying, Janey? A spanking, perhaps? At least, to start with?”

To start with? Dear Lord, what have I done?

I open my mouth to tell him ‘no’.

“Yes, thank you. A spanking would be...nice.”

He drapes his arm over my shoulders and herds me in the direction of the spanking benches. “Do you have any specific requests, Janey?”

“What do you mean?”

“A bench? The St Andrew’s cross? Or perhaps my lap for a more intimate experience?”

Intimate? I shiver, then, “Your lap, please.”

He alters direction and we end up in a secluded corner where seats and low tables are laid out for club members to relax. “How does this suit, Janey? Intimate enough?”

“Yes, sir. This is fine.” I manage not to stammer. “Should I remove my clothes?” Talk about diving right in at the deep end. I can’t even swim.

“I love your outfit. Please feel free to keep it on if you wish. The thong won’t make any difference.”

“I only just bought it. Today.” I’m babbling, but can’t seem to stop myself.

“You chose well.” He drops onto an armless two-seater couch and pats his thighs. “Whenever you’re ready.”

He clearly wants to get this over and done with, and I agree. Best get on, before one of us changes our mind.

I lean on him and carefully drape myself across his thighs. The seat next to him is empty and I rest my upper body there. I draw in a steadying breath, which leaves my lungs in a whoosh when he palms my exposed buttock.

“You have a lovely bottom, Janey. Can you lift it a little higher for me, please?”

“Of course. Sorry.” I wriggle about a bit. “Is this better?”

“Perfect,” he murmurs. “Are you happy to use the red, amber, green protocol?”

“Oh, yes.” He’s talking about safe words. I never gave such precautionary measures a thought. Good thing one of us seems to know what they’re doing. “That’s fine.”

“Ten spanks, then we talk.”

“Talk? What about?”

“About whether you want more,” he replies, gently stroking circles on my right buttock.

“Oh. I see. Right.” Are we actually negotiating? I’ve read about this...

“Janey? Is this your first spanking?”

“No,” I lie.

“Yes,” he corrects me, his tone firming. “I need to insist that you answer my questions honestly, Janey, or we cannot continue.”

Dismayed, I twist my body round to look up at him over my shoulder. “But, you said—“ I’ve gone from trepidation to desperate longing at the merest suggestion he might pull out of our agreement. “You can’t just—“

That dimple is back. “Calm yourself, Janey. I won’t let you down, I promise. Which is why I need to understand what you want, what you need. If you lie to me, I can’t do that. Do you understand?”

“I think so. I’m sorry.”

“So, I will ask again. Is this your first spanking?”

“Yes, sir,” I mumble.

“Thank you. I shall have to take special care of you, in that case. We wouldn’t want to put you off by being clumsy.”

Clumsy? I can’t even start to imagine this man being less than the deftest of operators but I keep my mouth shut. I don’t want him thinking me even

more naive.

“Ten, then?”

“Yes, please.” I wriggle in nervous anticipation.

“You don’t have to keep still, or quiet. But no kicking and no reaching back with your hands. Okay?”

“Okay,” I confirm.

Despite being ready and prepared, the first spank comes as a shock. The pain is sharp and hot, radiating deep into my left buttock. I let out a squeal and jerk hard on his lap.

His arm tightens around me to keep me in place while he delivers the next three slaps, two on my right buttock and one more on my left. He places the strokes precisely, not hitting the same place twice. I squeak and jerk at each stroke as my arse heats up.

He repeats the sequence, peppering my bottom with sharp, stinging slaps. I lose count somewhere along the way and simply sink into the feeling. It’s euphoric and sort of grounding. The discomfort softens, morphs into something else, something indefinably wonderful. I’m drifting on a potent cloud of sensual self-awareness when he suddenly stops.

“How are you doing, Janey?”

I don’t know how to answer. My mouth feels to be full of cotton wool and my tongue is paralysed. I settle for “Good. I’m good.”

“More?” He enquires.

“Yes, please. More.” *Much, much more...*

He starts again, slowly this time but building. That heady sensation is back in an instant, but somehow it’s sharper, more compelling. My body is attuned to the sensations now and responds to each spank with a powerful surge of what I can only describe as lust. There’s pain, but I’m disconnected from it, as though watching from a distance.

My head is spinning. My bottom is on fire. I’m overwhelmed by sensation, caught up and carried away. I’m floating, drifting, weightless.

The pain recedes and dulls. I’m pleasantly warm, aware of my surroundings but not quite engaged. I feel...good, in a disjointed sort of a way.

Time passes, I’m not sure how much. Minutes, hours? Days?

As my senses clear I realise I’m no longer spread over his lap. I’m upright, snuggling into his chest, swathed in a soft blanket. My bottom is ridiculously sore, but I love the sensation. Even so, I groan.

“How was that, *mała mysz*?”

“Wonderful,” I murmur, wriggling closer.

He nuzzles the top of my head but makes no further comment. He holds me in his arms and waits for me to make the next move. Eventually, my senses more or less restored, I chance a look up at him.

“What was that you called me?” I ask. “*Mala* something...?”

“*Mala mysz*. Little mouse. It is Polish.”

I sit upright. “Is that where you come from, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Are you on holiday?”

“No.”

It seems clear that he has no wish to discuss his reasons for being so far from home, and to be fair he has more than fulfilled his promise not to disappoint me. I have no intention of outstaying my welcome.”

“I should be going...” Which is true. My unfinished project awaits.

“That’s a pity. I was hoping to enjoy your company for a little longer.

“Really?” I can’t think why when this place is filled to the rafters with far more experienced, sophisticated submissives than I am. He could have much more fun with one of them.

He smiles at me again. “Yes. Really. I would like to play some more, but if you must dash off...”

“No, that’s okay.” Never one to miss an opportunity if I can help it, I shove thoughts of Scotch broth aside. “I can stay a while.”

“Excellent. What would you like to try next?”

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FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *Savage Justice*.

If you enjoyed the story, I would really appreciate it if you would leave a review. Reviews are invaluable to indie authors in helping us to market our books and they provide useful feedback to help us work even harder to bring you more of the stories you love.

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You'll find the link on my website at www.ashebarker.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

International Bestselling author Ashe Barker writes erotic romance and spanking romance in a variety of genres including contemporary, BDSM, paranormal, historical, ménage, gay romance and time travel. She is a #1 Amazon Bestseller and all her stories feature hot alpha males and sassy submissives, often with a lot to learn. Kink abounds, and there's enough dirty talk to satisfy the most demanding smut lover. However dark and dirty the setting, love always emerges triumphant, and her stories never fail to deliver a satisfying happy ever after.

Ashe loves to hear from readers. Feel free to stalk her on social media or check out her [Amazon Author Page](#)

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