



THE CARAKSAY
BROTHERHOOD
BOOK 6

SAVAGE RECKONING

INTERNATIONAL BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

ASHE BARKER

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THE CARAKSAY BROTHERHOOD : BOOK 6

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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

I shouldn't still want her. She damn near shot my foot off.

She was provoked, but even so...

I never expected to see her again after our affair came to a disastrous end, but as they say, it's a small world. A world of shattered trust and smouldering grudges, and now our paths have collided again.

She wants me gone, but I won't be obliging her. I have my own agenda as far as the lovely doctor Megan Alexander is concerned, as well as a mission to complete for the U.S. government. A mission that involves getting up close and personal with the notorious Savage crime organisation at a time when they are at their weakest.

I thought I left Gabriel Sawyer behind, along with the wreckage of our explosive affair. He ruined my life, destroyed my dreams, wrecked my career and had me thrown in jail. If I never see Gabriel Sawyer again in this life it will be too soon. But Fate has a twisted sense of humour, and now he's back, as devilishly handsome as ever and calling me 'darlin'.

Sparks are going to fly.

He says he's sorry. He swears to me that he's changed. But with trust hanging by a thread, should I take a chance? Is this just another of his games? Will he break my heart all over again?

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PROLOGUE

Megan

I'M IN LOVE.

Captain Megan Alexander rolled over in her bunk at Fort Carson US army base in Colorado and stared at the ceiling. Her stomach fluttered. She hugged herself and repeated the affirmation, as if to just make sure it was true. After all, at almost twenty-seven years old and with barely a romantic liaison to her name so far, this was momentous news, and she needed to get used to it. Try it on for size, explore the notion and make sure it actually fitted her.

She allowed herself the luxury of basking in this heady haze for a while longer as the base came awake outside. She wasn't on duty until eleven hundred hours so could take the time to simply be, to savour this new reality.

I'm in love, she repeated, as if her mind hadn't heard her the first time, or had failed to fully grasp the implications, the enormity of it. *And I'm getting married. Me, a married woman. And to a colonel, no less.*

Well, probably. Definitely. That's the way these things go, isn't it? It's just a matter of time now before it becomes official. Before he actually asks me. Or maybe I should ask him. This is the twenty-first century, after all...

She swung her legs out of bed. The colonel in question, one Ed Baker, was due here at ten. They'd probably spend a happy half hour or so tumbling across her bunk, then on to the officers' canteen for whatever was left of breakfast. Megan sauntered into her en suite shower and caught sight of her sloppy grin in the mirror.

Get a grip, girl. It's just sex. The good sort, obviously, but even so...

Except, it wasn't just sex. Making love with Ed was much more than that. It set her tingling; her soul was alight. He was... He was... just everything. So what if he was a bit older than her. And a senior officer. And so what if she only met him a few weeks ago when he'd been transferred to her base after a distinguished tour in Afghanistan? They were in love, and that was all that counted.

It had been classic Hollywood stuff. Eyes meeting across a crowded target range, a crackle of awareness that had nothing to do with the tons of high explosives stacked in the armoury next door. The firearms instructor had paired up the class, and Megan found herself with Ed, taking it in turns to aim at the silhouetted figures a hundred yards away while they covered each other. By the end of the session, she was smitten. And so was he.

He sought her out, in the canteen, or the officers' mess. They ate together, chatted, compared their mutual love of heavy rock and dislike of tapioca pudding. He was her soulmate. They had been brought together by Fate.

He was the first to declare how he felt. He'd whispered "I love you" after they'd slept together for the first time, though Megan would be the quick to agree there had been little in the way of sleeping that night. Ed had quite simply swept her off her feet.

True, he hadn't mentioned marriage, and neither had she. Yet. But it was only a matter of time. They were meant to be together; she could feel it.

He was built like a Greek god, an Adonis on steroids. Dark-blond hair, icy-blue eyes, chiselled jaw, and abs that could cut diamonds. Pretty much every female on the base was in lust with Colonel Ed Baker. The other women whispered about him when they thought Megan wasn't listening, because obviously they all knew what was going on. Neither Megan nor Ed made any attempt to hide the fact that they were seeing each other, but that didn't bother the top brass or affect their lives as soldiers because their roles were so far apart.

Megan was in the medical corps, having entered the military as a doctor, just qualified and fresh out of college. She intended to specialise in emergency and trauma care so had headed straight for the US Army at the first opportunity. Ed was an intelligence and explosives specialist with a talent for deactivating bombs. He'd made a name for himself in the international peace-keeping force in Afghanistan dealing with al-Qaeda insurgent attacks. And as luck would have it, they were both scheduled to fly

out to the Helmand province in the next month for a tour of duty. Megan would be stationed at the military hospital in Kabul rather than in actual combat, but she had no doubt their paths would cross frequently.

And later, when they returned to the US, they would marry. They might both stay in the army where she would carve out a glittering career as a surgeon and Ed would climb the ranks to the heady heights of a four-star general. And much later, when active service was all over, they'd retire to a nice little house in a quiet suburb somewhere. Megan fancied Washington. They'd enjoy their grandchildren while she did charity work in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and Ed played golf, or maybe he'd go into politics. Not that they'd discussed it yet, and of course, Ed might have other ideas. But their future would be along those lines, she was sure of it.

On that heady, confident note, she dressed quickly then slipped out of her room to check the mail depot. She was expecting a letter from her auntie Jacqueline in the United Kingdom. Since her parents' death a few years ago, Auntie Jackie was her only relative, and Megan liked to stay in touch. It was what her mother would have expected.

“...OF course he's married. All the best ones are...”

Megan grinned. It wasn't in her nature to eavesdrop, but the two female corporals sifting through mail at the next table were making no attempt to keep their voices down.

“Ginny says he's a proper man-whore. Shags anything with a pulse.”

“I have a pulse,” came the optimistic reply. “He can share my bunk anytime.”

“Get in line. Or take a number. Sex-God Baker will be with you when he has a moment.”

“I heard he was boning one of the medical officers. Lucky cow...”

The voices faded as the women found their mail and moved away.

Megan stared after them. Had she heard right? Had they actually mentioned the name Baker? That was odd, because as far as she knew there was only one Baker on the base, and she was sleeping with him. Who was this other 'man-whore'? And did Ed know about it? With gossip like this bouncing around, someone could too easily mix the two Bakers up, and that wouldn't do Ed's career any good. There'd be rumours, and...

She checked her watch. If she hurried, she just had time to nip over to the

base hospital block and check the records there. Every soldier on the base was registered with the medical facility, it would only take a moment to pull up all the Bakers and find this other guy.

THE NURSE on reception barely glanced at her when she nipped through the front office and into an empty consultation cubicle. There, she fired up the network computer and logged in to the medical records system.

A, B... Luckily, she didn't have far to scroll to get to the Bs. Megan located them quickly, then started to hunt through. Babington, Backhouse, Bagshaw, Baker.

Edward Baker, aged thirty-six, rank : Colonel. The record listed the key details of Ed's military career, and Megan would admit to being impressed. A career soldier, he had getting on for twenty years' service and had been decorated for bravery twice. He'd never mentioned that. There was not much in his actual medical history. A couple of bouts of influenza and a mild case of malaria years earlier. She moved on to check the next guy with a similar name.

Except, there wasn't one.

Bamforth, Banning, Brooks...

She paused, went back and checked again. Still no Baker number two.

This can't be right. She scrolled through the list more slowly, starting again with Ed's record. The details flickered on the screen just as before, but this time something else caught her eye.

Next of kin : Christine K. Baker (wife).

Megan did a double-take. It must be an error, someone input the wrong data, it was easily done.

Except, it wasn't. The army was meticulous in its record-keeping about military personnel, especially with details such as this. In their line of work, it was vital to know who a soldier's next of kin was, that information was checked and double-checked. She'd had that drummed into her during initial training.

Numb, she closed down the record and logged out. There would be an explanation. Perhaps Ed was widowed or divorced. Maybe he'd left his ex-wife's name in the records because... Well, just because.

SHE LET herself back into her room, not able to remember walking across the base to get there. She sank onto her bed, her head reeling. It was the soft knock on her door that dragged her from the confused fog. She looked up as he entered.

“Babe. Beautiful as always.” Ed bent to kiss her, his hand sliding to the back of her neck in that possessive way that always turned her knees to jelly.

He smelled of woodland, mint, and just the faintest trace of leather. His familiar, sexy scent filled her nostrils, invaded her senses with the promise of pleasure. This was her cue to open to him, to wrap herself around him and welcome his presence, beg for more.

He eased her backwards to lay her on the bunk, and she went without protest. Muscle memory was in charge. She parted her lips to kiss him back, reached for him, held on to him as though he would vanish at any moment. It was only when he slid his hand beneath the cotton of her army-issue shirt that her shattered senses regathered.

“Wait.”

“Meggie?” He broke the kiss, raised his head. “You okay?”

That sensual Texan drawl washed over her. She could drown in the seductive rumble of his voice.

“No!” she blurted, more to herself than in response to his question. “We need to talk.”

“Later,” he muttered, palming her breast.

“Now,” she asserted. She untangled her fingers from his hair and shoved at his shoulders. “Let me up.”

“What the hell...?” He rolled onto one elbow and regarded her with irritation. “We’re both on duty in half an hour. Can’t it wait?”

Megan sat up, dislodging his hand as she shifted. She righted her clothing. “No, it can’t wait. I... I need you to tell me about Christine.”

“Who?” He sat up beside her. “What’s the matter, babe?”

“What’s the matter?” She glowered at him, her temper starting to sizzle. “Your *wife* is the matter. Does she know about you? About... this?”

“What wife? What are you talking about?”

Could she blame him for trying? Maybe not, but Megan’s temper soared anyway. Suddenly, she had no doubts. There would be no benefit given, no pathetic excuses or avoiding her questions. No lying denials. Hurt, disappointed, betrayed, humiliated, she leapt to her feet and rounded on him. “I’m talking about Christine. Your wife, your next of kin. I saw your medical

records.”

He met her gaze, but his expression was unreadable. Closed. His affable, sexy demeanour shut down before her very eyes. “Babe, let me explain. It’s not what you think...”

“Do you or do you not have a wife called Christine?”

“Well, yes, she’s in my records, but—”

“Then it is *exactly* what I think. You’ve lied to me. From the beginning.”

“Not lied, as such. It’s more a matter of—”

“Fuck you, Ed Baker.” Megan was sobbing now, screeching at him. All the shattered dreams and wrecked plans, her ruined future cascading about her ears, she hurled her bitterness and frustration in his face. “You let me think you loved me. You said that, actually fucking said it. To get me into bed.”

“No, I do love—”

“Liar! Even now, you can’t help yourself. It’s every time you open your mouth.”

“Megan, you need to calm down...”

Could he have come up with anything worse? Could his arrogance, his towering ego have been any greater? Megan didn’t think so. Caught with his pants down, quite literally, he had the gall to suggest it was *she* who needed to calm down.

“I want you to get out.”

“No. You need to hear what I—” He got to his feet, reached for her.

Megan backed away. “I don’t need to hear any more of your lies. You’re leaving. Now.”

“Not until—”

She made to dart past him. If he wouldn’t go, then she would. But he was quicker. All those years dodging the Taliban hadn’t been wasted. He grabbed her around the waist, and they tumbled to the floor in a tangle of limbs.

Megan wriggled free and scrambled away from him. “Keep your fucking hands off me. You’re a man-whore just like they said. A liar who can’t keep his dick in his pants. I hate you.”

He grinned. The cocky bastard actually grinned. “You didn’t always have such a low opinion of my dick, darlin’.”

Too much. It was... Too. Fucking. Much. He’d destroyed her life, made a total fool of her, then thought he could crack jokes about it. No way. No fucking way.

Near blind with fury and grief, she reached under her bunk for the service firearm which she always kept there, primed and loaded. Her hand was steady when she took aim. "See how funny you find this, asshole."

The shocked expression plastered across his handsome features was the last thing she recalled before the deafening roar of the gun exploded to bring every soldier within earshot running.

That'll teach you to mess with me.

CHAPTER 1

Megan

“HE’LL BE ALL RIGHT. Please, tell me he’ll be all right...”

Tears stream down Cristina’s face. She turns from the inert figure in the bed, her husband, hooked up to countless machines by a spaghetti junction of wires and tubing. Whirring, beeping, lights flashing, vivid green lines flickering across screens, the paraphernalia of a life hanging in the balance.

I wish I could give her the assurance she craves. That’s all she wants from me, because I’m a doctor, I know about these things. Cristina trusts me, which is the reason why I can’t lie to her.

“They’re doing everything they can,” I murmur for want of a better platitude as I scan the gadgetry tracking Ethan Savage’s vital signs, looking for something to indicate improvement. Or even stability.

Blood pressure eighty-five over fifty-three. Heart rate fifty-five beats per minute. Pupils dilated and unresponsive. Not much comfort there. The massive contusion on his temple betrays the probable reason for his ongoing lack of consciousness, but we would have expected some sign of life by now. It’s been six hours since the helicopter crash which put him in this state, and still nothing.

We’re awaiting the results of the brain scans, and until then, there’s not much to say. Not that any of this will satisfy Cristina. She grabs my wrist.

“They won’t tell me anything...”

I wrap my arms around her. Ethan is my patient but also my friend. I owe him so much, Cristina, too. They gave me a home when I needed it, a

purpose, a role as a doctor. I'm almost as emotionally involved as she is.

Well, that might be a stretch. The mutual adoration between Ethan Savage and his Bratva Queen is the stuff of legends. What I wouldn't give to have someone love me like he loves her, and to be able to return that love. It's a fairy tale, now turned into a nightmare dragged near-lifeless from a twisted tangle of bent metal.

"We need to wait," I reply. "The test results..."

"How much longer, though?" She dissolves into another bout of wretched sobbing. "He has to survive. He has to. I can't live without him."

I suspect you're not the only one...

There's an entire criminal organisation depending on Ethan Savage. He heads up an international network of drugs barons, money laundering firms, arms dealers, counterfeiters, vice clubs... The list goes on. And yes, he has lieutenants who can step in, friends, allies, family, but for how long? Ethan is the heart of the Caraksay Brotherhood as we tend to think of it. He's our leader, everything revolves around him.

"I'll go chase up those results." I pat her on the shoulder and pick up my tablet with Ethan's latest data on it. "I won't be long."

On my way to the exit from the intensive care unit, I pass the bed where Aaron Savage, Ethan's brother, also lies in a drugged sleep. His partner, Beth, perches beside him, clutching his limp hand in hers. Aaron was also on board the wrecked chopper, along with Rome and Tony, two more of our men, and a teenage girl, the younger sister of a woman I gather is Rome's current love interest. I know Aaron regained consciousness an hour or so ago and the signs are good. Rome, Tony, and the girl, Natalija, were walking wounded. It's a miracle, frankly, that there are no fatalities. Yet.

The pilot, Magda, is not so lucky. She suffered a catastrophic leg injury and had to be cut from the wreckage. She's likely to lose the leg, though her life isn't in danger as far as I can tell. She's on another surgical ward and will be my next stop after I find out what I can about Ethan's condition.

I meet one of the two designated nurses caring for Ethan just coming back onto the ward. In answer to my questioning expression, she shakes her head.

"I was just about to phone and try to gee them up again."

"Okay. I'll be on ward seventeen. Let me know if there's any change." I let myself out into the family waiting area outside.

And my heart stops. Literally. Stops.

I gape at a ghost, an apparition from my past. Someone I sincerely hoped

never to encounter again in this life or the next. My tablet clatters from my nerveless fingers to bounce on the tiled floor.

“You!” I spit the word at him.

If Ed Baker is surprised to see me, he hides it well. He inclines his head in polite acknowledgement of my presence. He might even summon up a grin, the arrogant bastard.

“Good to see you, Megan. It’s been a while.”

My jaw works, but no sound comes out. I’m quite literally struck dumb.

What the fuck is he doing here, invading my world all over again? Appearing in the lovely new life I built for myself after... after...

“Nowhere near long enough,” I grind out eventually. Then, as the events of four years ago come flooding back, “I should have made a better job of shooting you.”

That same arrogant smirk is plastered across his handsome features, just as before. If anything, he’s even more self-assured, more cocky, more... sexy than I remember. His eyes just as blue, his mouth every bit as full, his jaw still looking as if it were hewn from granite, he smiles at me.

“Better luck next time, darlin’.” He bends to relieve my tablet and presses the button on the side. “Doesn’t seem to be broken.” He hands it back to me.

I snatch it and open my mouth again to tell him to go. To get out of my life once and for all and never so much as dream of coming back. All that comes out is a disappointing “Fuck you.”

I’m dimly aware of the others in the room. Ed always had that effect. He sort of swallows up all the space, all the oxygen, all the attention, as if there’s only him who matters.

Jack Morgan, second-in-command to Ethan Savage and presumably in charge temporarily, clears his throat.

Rome just stares from me to Ed and back again, as though watching a tennis match in slow motion.

Arina, Rome’s girlfriend, is simply open-mouthed.

“You two know each other?” Not much gets past Jack Morgan. He waits, one eyebrow arched, for someone to serve up introductions.

He can wait until Hell freezes over as far as I’m concerned. I gather my tablet to my chest and stride past Ed with as much dignity as my shattered wits can muster.

“Just go,” I hiss, slamming the door behind me.

Gabe

IT COULD HAVE BEEN WORSE. She might have blurted out my previous name, the alias I was using when we last met. Ed Baker is history. Or should that be he never existed at all? He was a cover identity that suited me at the time, but he'd be a complication I can do without right now.

I don't think it would take much to convince the men glaring at me to simply shoot me and be done with it. The merest hint of a false name would be enough.

"What the fuck was that about?"

My three companions observe Megan's retreating back. The girl, Irina, I think, winces at the vicious slamming of the door.

The blond giant who seems to be the one in charge here regards me with his glacial blue stare, clearly expecting an answer to his question. I don't blame him.

"We have history," I offer, hoping he might leave it at that.

No such luck. "What sort of history?"

"It's personal."

"You don't say." His expression hardens. "We have enough to deal with, without you dragging your fucking baggage in here. Megan matters to us, so if she has a problem with you, so do I."

"There won't be a problem."

I'm lying. The last person I ever expected to run into, ever again, probably, was sweet little Megan Alexander, and I have precisely nothing in place by way of a strategy for dealing with her. She's a complication I could do without right now.

But, that said, fuck, she looked hot.

"When I hear that from Megan, we're good. Until then, the jury's out on you, Sawyer."

He turns back to his companion, dismissing me.

I recognise the other man and I can tell by his expression he hasn't forgotten me. I daresay our encounter was fairly memorable. I had just slit the throat of a Mafia vice lord who was supposed to be my boss. The only reason I didn't end this guy and his comrade, who I gather was the famous Ethan Savage himself, was because they seemed to be intent on liberating four teenage girls who would otherwise be auctioned as sex slaves. I assumed they

were on the side of the angels, or at last the same side as me, more or less. I opt to rekindle that acquaintance.

“Good to see you again.” I offer my hand. “Didn’t catch your name last time.”

Clearly curious, he accepts my handshake. “Rome. And this is Irina.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma’am.” I offer her my hand as well, then tip my chin in the direction of the wheelchair Rome is currently occupying. “That because of the crash?”

“Yeah. Busted ankle and wrist. Ankle needs attention.”

“Okay.” Since no one is offering to complete the introductions, I offer my hand to the blond. “And you are?”

He simply glares at me and leaves me hanging. “Jack Morgan,” he growls eventually. “You need to stay out of my way until Megan can vouch for you. Got it?”

I incline my head, though how the fuck I’m going to win her round without offering her my dick on a plate is beyond me right now. She probably wouldn’t even take that.

“I’m going to the crash site, then on to the warehouse.” Jack Morgan continues, barking out his instructions. “I want everyone assembled there in two hours, apart from the guards assigned to security here. Rome, I’ll leave you six men. And you can’t leave the hospital yourself until your ankle’s been plastered so you may as well take command here. We know this is an attempted hit and we’ll assume Ethan was the primary target, so no one is to get to him unless you’re a hundred percent certain they’re on the level. Legit police or crash investigation team, and medics. No one else.”

“Got that, boss.”

“Magda and Aaron need security, too. And we need to hear Magda’s account of what happened. The police will be crawling all over her as well. Make sure someone is with her when she’s interviewed, but otherwise, cooperate with the authorities.”

“Sure. I’ll get down there now.” Rome drops a kiss on Arina’s mouth. “Can you stay here, baby? Keep us up to date with any news.”

“Of course. Anything. Just...”

“Just what?” He’s already trundling his wheelchair towards the door.

“Be careful,” she whispers.

Jack Morgan doesn’t seem to have any instructions for me, so I opt to follow Rome.

I catch him out in the corridor and take hold of the handles on his chair.
“Need a push, buddy?”

“No. And I’m not your buddy.”

“We’ll see.” I take the strain and wheel him towards the lift.

Megan

ONCE OUT IN THE CORRIDOR, I break into a run. I don’t stop running until I’m in the lift heading down three floors to ward seventeen. Mercifully, I have the car to myself, so I lean on the wall and take a breath. A deep breath, followed by another. And another. My heart rate is slowing by the time I emerge by the entrance to Magda’s ward, but only by a fraction. I sink onto a bench and force myself to calm down before I go in there.

He doesn’t matter. It’s over, in the past.

I repeat the mantra again and again.

I did my time. It was another life, back then. No one’s coming to arrest me now.

I spent a year in a military prison for shooting a senior officer. It would have been more, much, much more but for the fact that, whether by skill or good judgement, I only shot him in the foot. That wasn’t a conscious choice; maybe we were both just lucky that day.

I was actually sentenced to five years, but for some reason they decided to release me after one. I was dishonourably discharged from the army, my military career in tatters. If I’d stayed in the US I might have been struck off and not able to practice as a doctor either, but fortunately, my aunt Jacqueline persuaded Ethan Savage to let me come and stay with her on his private island in the Outer Hebrides. She works for him as a cook and housekeeper. It was to be a temporary arrangement, just until I sorted out my head and decided what to do next.

It’s been nearly three years, and my life seems to have fallen into place. I’m now the resident medic for the Savage organisation, sorting out gunshot wounds, knifings, the aftermath of punch-ups, as well as the occasional pregnancy, kidney transplant, Covid pandemic, and now, helicopter crash.

Life’s rich tapestry as doctor to the Mob. It suits me very well indeed, and

I'm damned if some jerk from my past is going to derail it all for me.

No. Way.

I get to my feet and press the buzzer to be admitted to the ward. Because I'm not on the staff here I don't have a pass to access the wards, but the stethoscope around my neck forestalls any queries about why I'm here. I march along the ward until I spot Magda, three beds from the end. A frame on her mattress tents the sheet, raising it over her injured leg. She manages a smile when she sees me approaching.

I pull up a plastic chair and sit.

She reaches out her hand. "Good to see a familiar face."

"I got down here as soon as I could. I was with the others..."

"How are they?" Her smile evaporates. "Did everyone make it?"

I nod. "So far. Thanks to you, I gather."

She closes her eyes, fighting back tears.

I squeeze her fingers on mine. "You did well, bringing the chopper down like you did. If you'd been shot out of the sky at a higher altitude..."

"I know, but—"

"No buts. You saved everyone on board." I still can't quite believe that none of this was an accident. Helicopters crash all the time, it's an occupational hazard for pilots, but they don't get shot out of the sky over sleepy Northamptonshire villages.

I go on to give her a brief report on the other casualties.

Naturally, she homes in on Ethan. "Do they know why he's still unconscious?"

"Not yet. We're waiting for results from the scans."

"Oh God," she moans, close to tears. "Do you have anything on who fired at us? Or why?"

"I don't. Jack'll be working on that. Casey, too."

"The staff told me the police are around somewhere, wanting to talk to me."

"Makes sense."

"Would you be with me when they do? Moral support."

"Of course."

"How much should I say?"

"Jack's instructions to the men were to cooperate with the crash investigators, so I guess that goes for you, too."

"That's right. But not until you talk to me first."

I swing around at Rome's voice. Then grind my jaw when I see Ed sauntering along behind him, pushing Rome's hospital-issue wheelchair.

"Are you still here?" I mutter.

"Seems so, darlin'." He deposits Rome at the foot of the bed then drags another chair over and places it on the other side of the bed, opposite me. "Gabe Sawyer, ma'am." He flashes his million-watt smile at Magda. "How're you doin'?"

My eyes narrow. *What the fuck is he doing, giving a false name?* Before I can call him out, Rome chips in.

"Magda. Do you feel like talking?"

She drags her gaze from Ed and forces an unconvincing smile. "I think so."

"Okay." He sees her hesitancy, appreciates that she's more than little fragile right now. "We'll just take it slow. Can you tell us, in your own words, what happened? I was there, I heard and saw a lot of it myself, but it would be great if you could just go through it, from your perspective, from when you first realised something was wrong."

She nods and takes a few moments to collect her thoughts. "We were maybe forty-five minutes out of Brussels, cruising at an altitude of twelve and a half thousand feet. There was a sudden jolt to the starboard side. Not a lot, and no damage according to the instruments, but enough to worry about. Something had hit us. Too high to be a bird strike. Drone, maybe... Some idiot messing about. I decided to lose altitude as a precautionary measure until I could be sure what was happening. At nine thousand feet, I spotted something coming at us, again from starboard. There was a trail of vapour streaming from it. It was too fast to be a drone. Obviously a missile. I evaded it, just, and carried on dropping. I thought if I could get us on the ground..."

She pauses, takes a shuddering breath. "The next thing, we were hit. I'd just triggered the alarm, I think..."

"You did. The distress call reached Caraksay."

Magda nods. "Good. I don't remember anything after that until I woke up in here."

"You actually saw the missile?" Rome presses her. "No mistake?"

She shakes her head. "Not the one that hit us. I never saw that coming. But the other, definitely. They fired at us three times altogether, scored a direct hit on the third."

"That's a lot of firepower," Ed murmurs. "You have powerful enemies."

Rome ignores him. “You might as well share all of this with the police. There’ll be explosives residue on the wreckage, so they’ll know we were deliberately attacked. What were your coordinates when the first strike connected?”

Magda rattles off a string of numbers that Rome jots down in his phone. “Casey may be able to calculate a possible location for where it was launched from.”

Casey Savage is our resident IT geek. I’m not sure if GIS mapping is a speciality of hers, but it wouldn’t surprise me.

“Is there anything else? Anything at all?”

Magda shakes her head. “The flight log will be in the wreckage somewhere.”

“Yeah, it will. We can get Casey to hack into that if the investigators don’t release it to us.” Rome suddenly changes tack. “What’s the story on this?” He tips his chin at the cage suspending her bedclothes above the mattress.

“I’m down for surgery as soon as a theatre is free. I think... I think they’ll remove the leg. It’s too badly smashed...” She chokes back a sob. “I’ll be a cripple...”

“No,” I say, determined to scotch this right away. “No, you won’t. You may lose the leg...” I’ve seen the preliminary reports, I know that’s a near certainty, “and if you do, you’ll be fitted with a prosthetic. Not ideal, but you’ll walk again just fine.”

“I’m a pilot. What use is a one-legged pilot?” she sobs. “And a prosthetic will cost a fortune. I don’t have that sort of money.”

“Do you think we’d let you pay for it?” Rome’s expression is fierce. “No way. The firm will cover everything you need. And if you have to retrain to fly with one leg, or we have to adapt the chopper to suit, that’ll happen, too. Shit-hot pilots are few and far between, do you think we’ll let you slip away?”

“I thought—”

His gaze hardens. “You thought wrong. Let this lot do their job and fix you up, then we’ll take over and see you back on your feet. And in the air. Is there anything else you need right now?”

She manages to conjure up a trembling smile. “Do you have grapes?”

Rome grins back. “Do I fuck have grapes. Might be able to run to a bar of chocolate if it’s comfort food you’re after.”

“Here. Have these.” Ed digs in the pocket of his leather jacket and produces a pack of Skittles. He hands them to Magda. “Get well soon, ma’am.”

CHAPTER 2

Gabe

IT'S UNNERVING to find Megan seated beside the pilot's bed. I'd hoped our next encounter would be a little more private. I have some serious explaining and more than a little grovelling to do, and I can't see any merit in doing it in front of an audience. Short of better options for now, I pull up a chair for myself and concentrate on charming the patient, only to realise that I'm actually using my real name these days. As soon as I introduce myself to the injured pilot, Megan's astonished glare reminds me that she knows me by another name entirely.

Shit. Could this become any more of a clusterfuck? I decide to brazen it out.

I don't miss her outraged expression, but fortunately for me, Megan lets Rome have the floor while he questions Magda.

I remain silent during the account of the crash. It all sounds like pretty standard battlefield stuff, except that it occurred over a sleepy English village. The last time I checked, the UK is not at war, and the crew and passengers are all alive to tell the tale. I'm impressed by Rome's assertions that the pilot will be taken care of. My research before I flew over here from Minsk gave the impression that the Savage empire was run by a close-knit leadership team, and I now know that Megan and Magda both qualify as part of that.

His questioning complete, Rome swings his chair around and makes for the door. I need to follow him, but I'm keen to start building bridges with

Megan, too.

“We need to talk,” I say, getting to my feet.

“You need to go to hell,” is her terse response. “I’ve nothing to say to you.”

“Megan, I know—”

“Fuck you, Ed Baker, or Sawyer, or whatever the fuck name you’re going by.” She sends me a withering glare. “Just, get out. Disappear.”

I treat her to a sardonic smirk, which is probably not the best approach, but what the fuck...? “I can tell now’s not a good time.”

“It’s not a good lifetime, jerk. Go be a lying, cheating wanker someplace else.”

I admit defeat, for now. “Later, then.” I take a few steps after Rome’s retreating chair.

“Are you still here?” Her gaze could slice diamonds.

“Evidently. It was pleasant meeting you, Magda.” I tip my head at both women and make a hasty exit. Well, as hasty as I can, considering the limp Megan left me with after our last encounter.

I MANAGE to catch up with Rome before he disappears into the lift. “I’ll need details of this warehouse.”

“What warehouse?”

“The one your boss said was to be the venue for his meeting in two hours.”

He tilts his head to look up at me. “What gave you the impression you were invited?”

“You need me.”

His eyebrows disappear under his dark-auburn hair. “You think?”

“I know. And in case you don’t quite get it yet, we’re on the same side, so maybe a bit less with the ‘fuck you’ attitude.”

He shrugs and types something into his phone. A few seconds pass, then, “Jack says you can join the meeting but you go in unarmed.”

“Like everyone else there, no doubt.”

“Don’t be a dick. Those are the terms, take it or leave it.”

Now it’s my turn to shrug. “I’ll take it.”

I HAVE to find my own way across the city to the dilapidated industrial unit that the Savages have commandeered for their temporary base. Rome has an appointment with an orthopaedic surgeon, and everyone else has already left. I get back in my hire car and follow the satnav instructions Rome gave me until I find myself cruising past row after row of corrugated-iron shells. I locate the right one and hammer on the huge roller shutter door.

It rattles up to a height of about six feet to reveal three soldiers, bristling with weapons.

“Jack Morgan’s expecting me,” I inform them.

I’m kept waiting while they check, then instructed to drive right inside the hangar-like space and park at the end of a row of SUVs. I do as I’m told, then join the rest of the assembled force.

I estimate maybe sixty men and an arsenal sufficient to invade a third-world state. In fact, some of the weaponry looks as though it may have recently been used for just that purpose. I take in the usual collection of semi-automatics and handguns, but also crates containing rocket launchers, grenades, and incendiary devices.

“Preparing for war, I see.” I make my observation to a tall, dark-haired man standing alongside Jack Morgan. “Just my sort of party.”

“You’re the guy from Belarus,” he growls. “Heard about your little intervention there.”

“Gabe Sawyer,” I confirm.

“Tony Haigh,” he replies. “How the fuck is this your fight?”

“Maybe I just like taking down the bad guys.”

He eyes me with suspicion. “We *are* the bad guys.”

I shrug. “All things are relative.”

“You police or FBI or something?”

“Or something,” I concede, just as Jack calls the gathering to order by rapping the butt of his Glock on an upright girder alongside him.

We all fall silent.

“Thanks for getting here so quickly,” he starts. “I know some of you have come a long way.”

There’s a general muttering of agreement.

A voice from somewhere close to the back of the crowd chimes up with, “Well, it’s the boss...”

“True enough,” Jack agrees.

He goes on to give the latest update on the casualties, to a chorus of

obscurities, grimaces, and headshaking. It's clear that there's not a man here who isn't prepared to die to avenge the injury inflicted upon the Savage hierarchy. Again, I'm impressed. There was no such groundswell of outrage to greet the untimely passing of Fedor Morozov, and Ethan Savage isn't even dead.

"Right. What do we have so far?" Jack's question is directed to no one in particular, though his arctic-blue gaze falls upon Tony.

"The crash investigators have sent for explosives experts, so we can assume they've found evidence of the missile," Tony informs the group. "Nothing yet on who might have fired it."

"I reckon that's our department," Jack replies. "Casey?"

A slim woman in over-sized glasses steps forward, a laptop under her arm. I've done my research and I know this to be Casey Savage, sister to Ethan and Aaron and a renowned computer hacker. She sets her laptop on a metal workbench and fires it up.

"I pinpointed the likely vicinity for the launch site based on Magda's coordinates at the time of both impacts and her account of the direction the missiles came from. Assuming you can't just set up a rocket launching site in your back garden and start taking pot shots at passing aircraft without anyone noticing, I then went on to listen in on social media traffic for the two hours immediately before and after the attack. I turned up plenty of reports of strange noises, fireworks going off in the middle of the day, that sort of thing, and managed to narrow it all down to an area about one and a half miles square, approximately twenty miles away from the crash site. Jed has a team there now. They're posing as TV news reporters chasing up reports of antisocial behaviour and sniffing out witnesses."

"Who's Jed?" I ask Tony under my breath.

"Jed O'Neill. Casey's husband. He's head of the Irish Mob."

"An ally, then?"

"Fuck, yes."

Jack nods appreciatively in response to Casey's report. "Keep me in the loop. If anyone saw anything, we want to get to them before the police do."

"Got that." Casey continues. "I've also set up scans to monitor all global arms traffic for the last year. I'm assuming that whoever did this has been shopping recently, since they're unlikely to have had this sort of gear stockpiled and no one know about it. If I can find out who's been purchasing missiles and the capability to launch them, or even just making enquiries, we

may have our man.”

“Or woman,” Jack suggests, “But yes, good logic.”

She closes up her computer. “There’s a lot of data to trawl through, and it may take a day or so.”

“As quick as you can, Casey. Anything else before we move on to the other matter we need to address?”

She shakes her head. “That’s it so far.”

“Okay. So, this flesh auction that we gather is scheduled for the day after tomorrow...”

This is the first I’ve heard of a flesh auction. My ears prick up. This is just the sort of shitshow I’m interested in.

Jack goes on. “I organised surveillance over the last week or so. There’s been plenty of coming and going, men and girls. Our intel suggests maybe a dozen women are on the site at this time, with five guards. There could be more still to arrive.”

“Girls or men?” one man wonders.

“Either. Both. We have an issue now, though, around our own manpower. With Ethan and Aaron both out of action, we’re thin on the ground. Our priority has to be tracking down the fuckers who shot our chopper down. Disrupting the auction might have to wait.”

Not if I have anything to do with it. “You have me on the team now,” I say, my voice rising above the general racket. “I can make up the numbers.”

My offer is met by ripples of ‘Who the fuck is that?’ and similar sentiments.

Jack raises his voice above the general muttering and levels his steady gaze on me. “And why would you want to get involved?”

“Trafficking women for sex? That’s dirty work by any standard.”

“Again, why would you care?” Jack’s gaze hardens. “If you don’t mind me pointing it out, you’re hardly Santa fucking Claus yourself. A paid assassin can’t have much room for scruples.”

“Who says I get paid? Maybe I just do it for the shits and giggles.”

“And maybe I’m the sugar plum fairy. Seriously, Sawyer, what’s in this for you? Why would you offer to put yourself out there to help us?”

“Let’s just say I like to live dangerously.” I suggest an explanation, though I can tell by Jack Morgan’s ominous glower he’s not likely to buy that.

Sure enough... “I’ve a better idea. Let’s just say you’re a bullshitter

who's wandered a bit too far from home. I don't know you, Sawyer, and I sure as fuck don't trust you. Give me a straight answer, or you can take a hike right now."

We face off, neither of us willing to give ground. The difference is, I know I need him. He only vaguely suspects he may need me. So, I'm the one to compromise.

"Okay. Can we talk?"

"Go ahead." Jack's beefy arms are folded across his chest. He waits for me to start.

"I mean, somewhere quiet. Private."

One blond eyebrow lifts. "Fuck, I don't have time for this. I'm going back to the hospital. You can come with me. You have until we arrive there to convince me there's a reason for you being here, otherwise you're out."

Sounds fair enough. I nod my agreement.

"Tony, Casey, you two are with me as well." Jack marches past me, heading for the door.

"OKAY. I'M LISTENING." Jack is in the front passenger seat of the SUV.

Tony drives. Casey and I are in the back.

I don't beat about the bush. "You're part right. I am an assassin."

"Worked that out for ourselves." This from Tony.

I remember him from Belarus. He didn't actually witness the ending of Fedor Morozov, that was Ethan and Rome, but he knows first-hand what happened out there.

"So which part isn't right, then?" Jack demands.

"I don't do it for money."

"So you rid the world of scumbags out of the goodness of your heart?"

"Not entirely. The job has some perks."

"Like job satisfaction?" Tony wonders.

"Well, there is that. Plus unlimited first-class travel. And luncheon vouchers. Oh, and did I mention the chance to settle a few old scores?"

In the mirror, I see Jack's eyes narrow. "What scores?"

"Sokolov," I answer. "Him and his filthy trade in human flesh. I've been taking out his *Vors* one at a time, leaving him isolated. Then, when I'm ready, I'll take him, too. The world will be a better place without that psychotic parasite sucking in oxygen."

“What do you have against Sokolov? Specifically?” Jack Morgan is nothing if not tenacious.

“He’s expanding into the US. Or he hopes to. Uncle Sam doesn’t want that, so they struck a deal with me to eradicate him before he becomes a significant problem.”

“You said you don’t work for anyone,” Jack reminds me. “You lied.”

“I don’t *work* for the government. We just... share some common interests. That’s all.”

“Like removing Sokolov?”

“Exactly. So if we—”

“Since when did the US government start hiring mercenaries to do its dirty work?” This is the first time Casey has contributed to the conversation. It’s a fair question.

“Since they didn’t want to be implicated in anything smacking of organised crime. That sort of thing gets presidents voted out of office.”

She’ll be able to check what I’m saying easily enough, and I have no doubt she will. Her husband is one of New York’s most active crime bosses, and the only way he can survive is to have friends in high places. It wouldn’t take me a lot of digging to find which greasy political palms have been crossed with Irish silver to enable the O’Neill organisation to thrive as it does.

Casey’s mouth flattens. She makes no other comment but gets out her phone and starts texting. Her husband will be on the other end.

“So, Sokolov is being targeted by the US government. Is that what you meant about a mutual enemy?”

I nod. “I figured your boss knew more than he was letting on about Sokolov’s activities. Why else was he there, extricating those girls? But I had no opportunity to get up close and personal, not then. I decided to follow Savage back here and offer him a deal. I didn’t expect his helicopter to be blown out of the sky.”

“Do you have reason to believe Sokolov was responsible? Is that why you’re here?”

“Actually, no, I don’t think that, though I wouldn’t entirely rule it out. But from my contacts within his networks, I’m fairly sure the Savages aren’t on his radar. At least, not yet. That could change when he links your organisation to the death of his *Vor* in Belarus, but that was only a day ago. He hasn’t had time to join the dots yet.”

“We killed several of his men in Scotland last week.”

“Ah. So that was you. Sokolov is still ranting about that and promising retribution, but he doesn’t know who to aim it at. So, no, I don’t think he had reason to take down your chopper.”

“Do you have any idea who did?”

I shake my head. “Not at present, but I’d be happy to pool my resources with yours to flush them out.”

“Resources?”

“Networks. Contacts. Intelligence that the US military might hold.”

“You have access to US military intelligence, and you’d be prepared to leak it to a foreign enemy?” Jack’s eyes narrow. He thinks I’m a spy, not to be trusted. He thinks I’d betray my country.

I could point out the ethically grey nature of the Savage enterprises but choose not to. Instead, “Are you an enemy? I have no reason to think so. I’m looking at a mutually beneficial arrangement. My superiors will live with that, while at the same time denying all knowledge if things get awkward. We’re all pragmatists. Whatever gets the job done.”

“You used to be US military. Like Megan.” Casey has been listening intently beside me. She’s still texting but she spares me a sideways glance. “Are you still?”

Shit, she’s sharp. Talk about precision bombing my least defended areas. Rather than an outright lie which will in all likelihood get me killed, I settle for avoidance tactics.

“Loosely,” is my guarded response.

“How loosely?” Jack has turned in his seat to regard me.

“If I’m captured, and they know about it, they’ll do what they can to extricate me. But if shit hits the fan, they don’t know me.” I don’t mention that I still officially hold the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and if I manage to live that long there’s a fair chance I’ll qualify for an army pension.

“What about Megan? She obviously knows you. Is that going to be a problem?”

Jack means, will she blow my cover. “I don’t think so. I need to explain things to her. We have... history and we parted badly.”

“So badly she put a bullet in you. I assume that’s how you got the limp.” This from Casey.

“You know the story, then.”

“We’ve talked. She thinks you’re a shit. From what I heard, she’s right.”

“Not my finest hour, I admit. But the circumstances were complicated.”
Jack chips in again. “I don’t like complicated. Sort it out. And soon.”
“I’m on it.”

CHAPTER 3

Megan

“THE POLICE ARE OUTSIDE. Do you feel up to talking to them yet?”

Magda looks to me, then back at the nursing sister in bright-blue scrubs.

“I suppose I’d best get it over with.”

“I’ll tell them.” The nurse leaves.

“You’ll be able to stay, won’t you?”

“Of course.” I take her hand. “Just tell them what you told Rome.”

We’re joined by two men of middling years who both appear to have indulged in more than their share of staff canteen bacon butties over the years. They puff and pant their way into the room and settle themselves down, notebooks in hand.

“And you are?” One of them, who introduces himself as Detective Inspector Frank Fairclough, eyes me through thick-rimmed spectacles.

“Doctor Megan Alexander,” I reply, offering no further explanation for my presence.

Magda is more forthcoming. “Megan is my friend and colleague. I want her to stay.”

The Detective Inspector makes a tutting sound in his throat which I’d interpret as disapproving but says nothing.

He gestures at his colleague. “This is Sergeant James Connor. We’re here to ask you for your account of the incident earlier today.”

Christ, was it only this morning? It seems as though half a lifetime has passed since the alarm call sounded.

Magda inclines her head. “I was expecting you. Have you found the black box?”

“We have located the cockpit voice recorder, and crash investigation experts are analysing that now. In the meantime, in your own words...?”

Magda recites much the same account as the one she gave Rome, adding in details of the flight path and some technical jargon describing the mechanical aspects of the incident. The two detectives scribble furiously, occasionally asking a question or seeking clarification. It all goes smoothly until Fairclough asks the reason for the flight.

“My boss had been at a business meeting in Brussels,” Magda lies smoothly. “We were on our way home, to the Outer Hebrides.”

“Brussels?” One bushy eyebrow arches. “What was the nature of the business, Miss Botnari?”

“I am a pilot, not Mr Savage’s private secretary. How would I know? It is not my place to ask such things.”

More scribbling. “I see. Then, I wonder if you can account for the presence of a fourteen-year-old girl on the helicopter.”

“Natalija is the sister of one of my patients,” I interrupt. “She was on her way here for a holiday.”

“A holiday?” It’s clear he doesn’t believe a word of it. “Can I assume the young lady will be able to confirm that?”

“You can,” I assert. “Would you like me to locate her for you?”

“All in due course. For now, I prefer to concentrate of the specifics of the crash. Can you tell me why you thought your aircraft was under attack?”

“Well, the two missiles were something of a clue...” Magda suggests.

“Why would anyone wish to attack a civilian aircraft?” the detective inspector persists, seemingly unmoved by the sarcasm in her response.

“Perhaps that is for you to discover, Inspector. You are the detective, not I.”

He makes that odd tutting sound again. “Quite so. And you can be assured we will get to the bottom of this.”

Personally, I doubt that, but best to let him retain his fantasies. Meanwhile, the more the authorities can establish about the weapons used, the better.

“Miss Botnari is looking tired. And she is about to undergo major surgery, so unless you have further questions that really can’t wait...?”

“Of course.”

The pair get to their feet.

“I’m sure we will need to speak to you again, Miss Botnari.”

“Well, I won’t be going anywhere for a while, Inspector.”

“That’s Detective Inspector, miss.”

Magda simply smiles. “You know where I am...” She lies back and closes her eyes, effectively dismissing the pompous little man.

The door clicks shut behind the two police officers, and Magda opens one eye to peer at me. “Have they gone?”

“Oh, yes.”

She opens the other eye and struggles to raise herself up in the bed.

I help her by shoving an extra pillow behind her. “That okay?”

“Lovely. So, now for the good bit. What’s the story on you and Mister Universe?”

“Mister...?”

“The rather beautiful Gabe Sawyer,” she clarifies. “I saw the way you looked at him.”

“I didn’t look at him.”

“Yes, you did. As though you wouldn’t mind seeing him burst into flames. Or maybe gobbling him up for breakfast.”

“I met him once before, that’s all. He... he...”

“As good as that, eh?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The man gets to you.”

I let out a hollow laugh. “That’s true.”

“In a good way?”

“Hardly.”

“So, tell me. Like I told the nice policeman, I’m going nowhere.”

“It was a long time ago...”

“Not long enough, from what I’m seeing. Go on.”

I sigh. Ethan knows what happened back on the base in Michigan. My aunt told him when she was trying to convince him to let me come to Caraksay after the army threw me out. We’ve never spoken of it, but I assume he’s sympathetic. That, or he just couldn’t say ‘no’ to Aunt Jackie.

“He was calling himself Ed back then. Ed Baker. Not sure if that’s his real name. Anyway, he was a colonel, I was a captain. I was in the medical corps, obviously. He was in Strategic Ops, specialising in bomb disposal.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Magda observes quietly.

“I suppose. Anyway, we got together. It only lasted a few weeks, but I was smitten. I’d thought he was, too, but it turns out I was just a stopgap while he was away from his wife.”

“Ah. Ouch.” Magda offers me a sympathetic grimace. “So you kicked him to the kerb?”

“Not exactly. I shot him.”

She gapes at me. “Better still.”

“I think I gave him that limp.”

“Sounds as though you were merciful. You could have aimed for something more vital.”

“I was court-martialled. Locked up for a year, then booted out of the army. I had nowhere else to go, and my aunt convinced Ethan to let me come to Caraksay to stay with her for a while. It was meant to be temporary, but I sort of stayed.”

“You arrived not long before I did.”

“Yup. And now *he’s* here.”

“He won’t be staying,” Magda asserts confidently.

“I hope not, because if he stays, I go.”

“Hmmm.” Her brow creases. “That would be a pity. I saw the way he looked at you.”

“What? Like a naive little fool he could lie to and manipulate?”

“Not exactly. More like he still has the hots for you.”

“No, he doesn’t. He’s a shit-brained ratbag. A *married* shit-brained ratbag, though I feel sorry for his wife. But that’s not my problem. Him and me, we’re history.”

She mutters something which sounds uncannily like, ‘If you say it often enough you might even believe it...’ Out loud, “I don’t suppose you could convince someone to give me more painkillers, could you?”

I check her chart. “Probably. I’ll just—”

The door opens. The nurse comes back accompanied by a porter wheeling a trolley. “Time to prep you for theatre,” she announces gaily.

I STAY LONG ENOUGH to wave Magda off as they wheel her away. “I’ll be here when you come round,” I promise. When she disappears into the lift, I set off in the other direction, heading back to Intensive Care. I find Arina and Natalija in the family room.

“Any news?”

Arina shakes her head. “Cristina is with Ethan. There’s no change.”

I let myself into the ward and check for myself. Ethan’s scan results are back and indicate no hint of brain damage, but still, he remains unconscious. Cristina is ashen with the strain.

“What does it mean?” she asks me. “Is he injured or not?”

“The scans suggest not. We just have to wait...”

“How long?” She’s fighting back tears. “It’s been hours.”

“These things take time,” I assure her. “I wish we could be more... definite. A few days. Weeks...”

“Oh God.” She buries her head in her hands. “What if he never wakes up?”

It’s far too early to be speculating along those lines, but even so, I do wonder about the implications. As I understand it, baby Sebastien is Ethan’s heir, but he’s not even two years old yet. His uncle, Aaron, and of course Jack Morgan, could manage the organisation until he comes of age, but I’ve seen enough of this world to know the sharks will be circling once it gets out that the leader is down. The Savages have enemies, and they’ll all fancy their chances. Even trusted allies such as Cristina’s brother, Marius Bival, and Casey’s husband, Jed O’Neill, have been known to turn when an opportunity presented itself.

Oh yes, we’re moving into volatile, changeable times. And I can’t imagine the presence of my ex-lover is going to help matters at all. He’s the most treacherous of the lot.

I check on Aaron next. He’s conscious and coherent, and his dedicated nurse informs me he’s likely to be discharged to a general ward within a few hours. I’ll need to make arrangements to move both him and Magda to the Richmond, our preferred private clinic near Inverness. There, they can recuperate away from the glare of reporters, police, and just possibly murderous enemies set on finishing what they started.

I return to the family room to find it deserted. I assume Irina and Natalija will be with Rome, maybe grabbing a bite to eat. Perhaps I should join them. I drag my phone out of my pocket just as the door opens.

“What the fuck do you want?” I blurt.

Ed, or rather, Gabe Sawyer, has the gall to grin at me. And my stomach has the gall to do some sort of a ridiculous flip at the sight. He was always a handsome bastard, I’ll give him that, and the last couple of years have done

nothing to dim his attractiveness. He was always a man to turn female heads, and didn't he just know it.

"You," is his simple response. "We need to talk."

"So you said." I'm tempted to just give him a one-finger salute, but that seems childish. Instead, I tip up my chin. "I have work to do, so if you'll excuse me..."

He steps back to lean against the door to the corridor, barring my way out. "Just a few minutes."

"Get out of my way."

"Can't do that. Not yet."

"If you don't let me pass, I'll—"

"I got them to let you out."

"I—" I gape at him. "What? What did you say?"

"You were sentenced to five years. I got them to reduce it to one and release you early. Thought I owed you that much, at least."

"It was nothing to do with you. Don't flatter yourself." *Am I really listening to such bullshit?* "It was good behaviour. I got them to let me out."

"You might have managed to shave a few months off your sentence that way, but not eighty percent of it. I struck a deal with the army, and you walked."

I can only stare at him. He actually fucking believes this crap, the arrogant prick. It might be pathetic if I weren't so fucking mad with him.

"You can't do deals like that. No one can."

"Ah, honey, you'd be amazed what deals can be done when you have something they want."

"Who's 'they'? What do you have that they want? And how does any of that concern me?"

"Come for a coffee with me. We'll talk, I'll explain."

"Any explaining you do needs to be directed at your wife, not me. Now if you'll please excuse me?"

"I have no wife."

"You liar!" I march up into his space and poke my finger into the middle of his chest. "Even now, you can't stop lying. I saw your personal file."

"My doctored personal file, a file describing a fictitious individual. Ed Baker doesn't exist. He never did. Neither does the famous Mrs Baker you got so worked up about."

"Ed Baker looked pretty real to me."

“It was a cover ID. My real name is Gabriel Sawyer.”

“So you say.”

“I was operating undercover back then.”

“On a military base? That’s—”

“That’s what happens when sensitive medical supplies are mysteriously disappearing. It was my job to find the leak.”

“What supplies?” I snort.

“Opiates mainly. Some narcotics. It had to be someone in the medical corps supplying an organised ring operating within the military itself. My assignment was to make it my business to hang around there and let it be known I’d be interested in buying.”

“Assignment?”

“Yes. Like I say, I was operating undercover.”

“But, I never—”

“You weren’t a suspect, Megan. Your boss was, in fact, and I was able to prove it. I wrapped up the case not long after you and I... split up. He’s doing ten years for it, probably in your old cell.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Easy to check. I bet your friend, Casey, could hack into US military personnel records.”

I pause, my mouth open. He’s right about Casey. Could any of this be true?

“But why did you...? I mean, you and me? If it was all just an act...?”

“It wasn’t. At least, not for long. I targeted you at first, sure, I needed a reason to spend so much time hanging around the medics, and you were by far the best company of all of them. But somewhere along the way it became... more complicated.”

“You told me you loved me. You convinced me we had a future together. And all the while you were playing some sort of role. If anything, that’s worse than if you *were* actually married. It was still cheating.”

“I’m sorry. It didn’t start out that way.”

“You were deceiving me all along. I believed we were... we were...”

“In love?” His smile is crooked. “Well, weren’t we?”

“One of us was,” I exclaim, all the old bitterness returning, so pungent I can actually taste it. “You hurt me...”

His grin widens. “I could tell. I still have the scars to prove it.”

“And now you just think it’s funny. You can scoff about it. Are you

proud of yourself?”

“I had a job to do. I was good at it. Still am. But I never set out to hurt you. I’m not proud of that.”

“So, what was I? Collateral damage. Expendable? A means to an end?”

“I know how it looks.”

“How it was,” I correct him. “You were deceiving me all along.”

“Not all of it was lies. I was telling the truth when I said I loved you.”

I gape at him, open-mouthed. Even now, he can’t help himself. He just opens his mouth and out it all comes, one lie after another. “Ed. I mean, Gabriel, stop it. Just stop it.”

He ploughs on with his claptrap. “I never stopped loving you, even after you put a bullet through my foot. I forgive you for that, by the way.”

“Don’t fucking bother. I don’t want your forgiveness, don’t need it. You got what you deserved.”

“I agree. You had a right to be angry. I admit, I hadn’t realised just how... fierce you could be when you were riled.”

“And yet, here you are, pissing me off all over again.”

“I’m hoping you don’t have a gun under the bed this time.”

Weary of this conversation, I drop into one of the sofas and put my head in my hands. “Can you just go? Please? Let’s just make sure we avoid each other from now on.” Shouldn’t be too hard, I’ll be leaving soon to accompany my patients to the Richmond, then back to Caraksay. Gabriel Sawyer won’t be able to follow me there.

He ignores my request. Instead, he lowers himself into the chair opposite me. “I never stopped thinking about you.”

“Oh, right.” *More lies.*

“I wanted to make it up to you. That’s why I had the powers that be review your sentence. What happened between us was my fault, not yours. You just got caught up in it and didn’t deserve to lose your career.”

“But still, I was drummed out in disgrace. Fancy that.” I make no attempt to conceal the simmering resentment in my tone.

“I managed some damage limitation. You had your freedom back, at least.”

“Gee, thanks. How very noble of you. Please, do tell me, how did you manage to achieve that?”

“I already told you, I did a deal. The army wanted me to take on a new assignment. It would be dangerous, highly specialised.”

“What assignment?”

“Infiltrate the Sokolov organisation and destroy it from within.”

I stare at him, horrified. “That sounds...”

“Dangerous? Yes, like I said. There was no one else they could ask, no one else stupid enough. Or with quite the right experience or skill set. So, I had some leverage. I used it, and you walked. I’ve been working on the Sokolov project for the last eighteen months, which is how my path crossed with Ethan Savage’s. I realised we had shared interests, so I came here to offer him a collaboration.”

Now he has my attention. I slant him a suspicious glance. “You didn’t come here looking for me?”

He shakes his head. “I wish I could say I did, but the truth is I had no idea where you were. I knew you left the US to move in with some elderly relative in the UK, but that was it. Running into you was a happy coincidence.”

“I wouldn’t describe it as happy, exactly.”

“It gave me a chance to apologise, to make amends. To explain.”

“Mission accomplished. Now you can go.”

He sighs. “Honey, I’m going nowhere. I have a job to do—”

“Ah, right. Just like before. Does Jack know who you really are, or are you lying to him, too?”

“He knows. And since you and I are on the same team again, at least for a while, how about we call a truce?”

“I’ve a better idea. How about you just stay the fuck away from me. I won’t get in your way, you stay out of mine.”

His mocking grin fades. “It’s a small world we find ourselves in right now, Doctor Alexander. I can’t promise anything.”

“Just fucking try. Right?” I shove myself to my feet. “I have to go.”

This time he makes no attempt to stop me. “I’ll see you around, Megan. Or not.”

“Not.” I manage not to slam the door on my way out.

CHAPTER 4

Gabe

“RIGHT. This needs to be quick. We go in, get the job done, leave no witnesses, and get out.”

Jack’s stony gaze rests on each of us in turn. There are no dissenters.

The debate over whether or not to go ahead with this attack on the flesh auction was heated. Not all the men see it as our fight anyway. Even though the Savages don’t go in for people trafficking themselves, everyone knows it happens, and it’s not our concern. Let the police deal with it, if they can. Added to that the current lack of top leadership, they would have shelved the problem for the time being.

That wouldn’t suit me. I’m right here, right now, and I want to get my hands on these murdering bastards. The UK branch of their little enterprise is probably the most lucrative they have. Its loss will be a major blow to Sokolov. Solid intelligence of an event such as this sale is as rare as hen’s teeth. It could be months before I stumble on another break like it, and I’m not about to waste the opportunity. I managed to convince Jack Morgan that the mission was viable with me as part of the command structure. He’s given me the benefit of the doubt, but it was close. I have a lot to prove.

Jack, Tony, Rome, and I, along with a marksman by the name of Nico, flew up to the Scottish Highlands together earlier today in the one remaining Savage helicopter. The rest of the Caraksay ‘army’, thirty-three of them in total, is to join us in a few hours, having made the journey by road. The plan is to rendezvous after hours in a National Trust car park not far from the barn

where tonight's fun and games are to be held.

I must say, I've led lethal missions in less picturesque spots. We're surrounded by rolling moors cloaked in purples and golds set against a majestic backdrop of towering mountains with snow still on the summits. The crashing roar of a waterfall in full flow can be heard somewhere close by. We've even had a visit from a stag, who regarded us with casual disinterest from a hundred metres away before ambling off into the forest. It was ironic, I suppose. We're packing a hundred times more firepower than the average hunter to cross his path, yet he saw us as no threat to him.

He was right. We're hunting different prey tonight.

The five of us are hunkered down in a secluded hollow between two huge glacial rocks, with a good view of the barn where the auction is to take place in just six hours' time. Nico is setting up his equipment. The intention is that he will use his marksman skills to take out as many of Sokolov's men as he can from a safe distance, while the rest of us go in hard and close. Our task will be easier if the bad guys are confused by a surprise sniper attack. We can pick them off at close quarters while they're trying to work out where the bullets are coming from.

There will be no survivors. No prisoners. No witnesses, unless you count the women we intend to free. Tony went in and did a reconnaissance when we first got here, and we know there are seventeen women, aged from about fifteen to maybe thirty. The plan is to get them out safely and move them fast to the Savage headquarters in Glasgow, and from there arrange onward travel either to return them to their homes or to a place where they can resettle. The men are bringing a minibus for that purpose.

Currently, there are nine Sokolov soldiers who can be seen wandering aimlessly around the perimeter of the barn. There's no organised patrol and not much obvious by way of discipline or a command structure. It's possible the key leaders are already dead, courtesy of their last little spat with the Savages, which will make this a lot easier.

We shall see.

The sale is due to begin at twenty-two hundred hours, so we can safely assume any punters who intend to bid in person will be here by then, but not that much before. They won't be keen to hang around in this remote spot any more than we are. We've scheduled our assault for half an hour before the start, in the hope that will minimise the number of people we have to kill. We'll be taking out punters and traffickers alike.

I'm to lead the team going in from the front through the main barn door. Jack is heading up the men at the rear, and Tony is in charge of anything that happens outside. Though his ankle has been set now, Rome is still confined to a wheelchair or crutches, so he's our 'eye in the sky', operating the drone we'll use to observe proceedings from a distance, pick off any of the gang making a run for it, and alert us to anyone arriving, whether police or punters, or even unsuspecting locals.

We're all set. Now, we wait for the party to begin.

AT TWENTY-ONE THIRTY PRECISELY, Nico fires the first shots, taking out the two goons assigned to guard the doors. Two bullets in rapid succession lodge themselves neatly in the men's skulls, and they crumple to the ground right in front of a party of Albanian thugs just arriving and no doubt looking forward to a spot of shopping. The Albanians go down next, like half a dozen skittles, in the hail of gunfire that follows as my team charges in to lead the first wave.

At the head of my men, I hit the barn door at a dead run, first spraying it with machine-gun fire then booting it open with a splintering crash. I somersault through the wreckage, picking out targets on the move. We can't fire indiscriminately with so many potential innocent victims likely to be caught in the crossfire. We counted eight punters inside so far, and with the remaining seven Sokolov goons, our objective is clear.

Fifteen bodies required. Less than a minute later, that tick box is checked. Jack's raised arm silences our guns, and we take stock.

The space had been set out with seats arranged in a circle around a raised platform in the centre. Potential buyers had congregated in the front row, hoping for the best view. And were annihilated where they sat with barely a bullet returned. We suffered no losses. Our task was made easier by the fact that the women had not yet been brought out to be put on display, though their screams of terror can be heard coming from beneath our feet.

We already knew that they were being held in some sort of underground storeroom. There's a trapdoor beside the makeshift stage, which Jack hauls open with a thud. The din from below ceases, and Jack kneels to peer down into the void.

"It's okay. We're going to get you out of there. Get up here as quick as you can."

There's no movement from below, so Jack calls out again. "We need to hurry. Can you get out or do you need help?"

A lone voice replies. "W-we're shackled to the walls..."

"Fair enough." Jack holsters his gun and goes down.

I decide to follow him. There's a rough staircase, probably put in quite recently when the premises were brought into their current use. Once I'm down there, the space is lit by a single swinging light bulb which casts eerie shadows, dancing over the terrified women lined up along both sides of the narrow space. Each is naked from the waist up and secured by a metal cuff around her ankle to a chain running along the stone floor.

"Toss some bolt cutters down, someone." Jack crouches to examine the chain.

"Check the bodies for any keys," I add. The ankle cuffs are secured with padlocks, and it will be easier to unlock those than rely on brute force.

The bolt cutters are first to arrive, and we set to, Jack lopping through the chain and me directing each woman up the steps as they are freed. Meanwhile, someone has managed to find a set of keys and is removing the metalwork that remains around their ankles while they wait in the upper barn for transport to arrive. Each woman is remarkably calm, in the circumstances, which I attribute to stunned bewilderment rather than confidence in their rescuers.

Jack and I follow the last woman up the stairs to find just a couple still waiting. The rest have been loaded into SUVs to be taken across the moors to the National Trust car park where their minibus is waiting.

The girl in front of me stumbles on the stairs.

I catch her by the elbow. "Steady, honey."

I help her to the top where she takes in the scene of carnage and lets out an unearthly wail. Shock is setting in at last.

The dead bodies have been dragged inside the barn and piled up on the stage. The plan is to incinerate the lot, and the barn with them. There'll be no more flesh auctions here. Most of our men have already left, it's just me, Jack, and Tony still here mopping up. Tony grins down from the stage where he has been pouring accelerant over the corpses.

"Anyone got a match?" he calls.

Jack tosses him a cigarette lighter. "Give us a moment to get the women outside."

I throw my jacket around the wailing girl, who looks no more than about

seventeen, and usher her out the door. Jack herds the remaining two out, and we sprint for the one SUV still waiting, the doors open.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, a message from Rome. *Black van approaching from west.* More punters on their way to the show.

“We’ve got company arriving,” I yell out to Jack who is right behind me.

“Seen it. Tony, get your arse in gear. We need to go.”

There’s a whoosh. Heat caresses my back when the barn goes up in flames. The inferno is raging within seconds, bright-orange flames lighting up the inky blackness.

“They’ll be able to see that from the moon.” Jack chuckles as we dive into our vehicle.

The women are huddled in the back seat, still wide-eyed but less obviously terrified now that it seems they have, indeed, been rescued.

Tony clammers into the back with them, while Jack and I are in the front. Jack drives, and we head for the car park. Once there, it takes just a few moments to transfer the women to the minibus for their journey to Glasgow.

The helicopter is also waiting, the rotors slowly spinning. We watch the minibus leave and throw the keys to our SUV to the men still there, then we jog over to the aircraft. Nico and Rome are already on board.

We soar into the air. The barn is silhouetted against the night sky, flames now reaching twenty or thirty feet high. A suitable funeral pyre for a filthy trade.

“Nice work,” Rome observes. “I downloaded the drone recording. You can watch it back later.”

Jack’s stony gaze rakes across all of us. “We did okay. Now we can get back to the day job. Finding the bastards who shot our helicopter down and making them pay.”

“It could have been Sokolov,” Nico suggests, ramming a lump of gum in his mouth. “In which case...” He gestures back towards the inferno raging below.

Jack shakes his head. “It’s possible, but I doubt it.” His focus lands on me. “You done here now?”

I meet his fierce gaze. “Not necessarily. Sokolov’s little enterprise was my main target, and I still intend to take the head off the snake itself, but I’m in no rush. I can stay and help you out with your other problem.”

He gives a curt nod. “You did okay back there.”

It’s as much as he’s going to offer by way of praise, but it’ll do. He can

see he needs me, that I can make myself useful, so I'm in.

Or nearly. "Did you square things with Megan?"

"We talked."

"That's not what I asked. Is she cool with you being around?"

No point lying to him. He'll check. I rock my hand from one side to another to indicate 'maybe'.

"I don't want her upset," he snarls, then raps on the partition behind the pilot. "Caernbro Ghyll."

I smile to myself. We're headed for the Savage's headquarters in Glasgow, the mansion which was once their family home, now serving as offices and accommodation for the organisation's key lieutenants and their families. If I'm being allowed in there, that means I'm one of them, at least for now.

CHAPTER 5

Megan

“I’M NEEDED AT CAERNBRO GHYLL.”

The message from Jack was clear. The rescued women are to be temporarily housed at the mansion, and some of them are likely to need medical attention. Clearly, there’s no prospect of presenting any of them in a normal medical facility without inviting unwelcome questions, so it’s up to me to dole out the TLC.

Beth hands me a coffee. “Don’t worry about us, we’re fine.”

Aaron was transferred to the Richmond earlier today and is now ensconced in his own private room for a few days of recuperation while his injured shoulder settles down. Beth and I accompanied him in the private ambulance, and we’re both relieved to be back in Scotland. Magda is expected to be transferred here in a day or two as well, following the amputation of her right leg just below the knee. She’ll need more than a few days to recover and adjust, but I’m determined to be there for her. We all will.

“I’ll need a car,” I mutter, keying the number into my phone. I arrange to have one of the company vehicles dropped off in half an hour, which will give me time for final checks on Aaron before beginning the long drive south to Glasgow.

I TAKE the opportunity to call Ethan's consultant, Mr Renny, while I'm on the road, but there's no change. His breathing is stable now, and there's no longer talk of a ventilator. That's a massive relief, but the brain scans are not turning up anything to explain his continued lack of responsiveness. I'm glad there's nothing obviously sinister, but the longer this goes on the more worrying it is.

"Some patients just take their time," the consultant assures me, and I know he's right.

Even so, I don't like it. The good news, though, is that Mr Renny is prepared to consider allowing Ethan to transfer to the Richmond as well, once it's been established that there's no specialist treatment required which can only be delivered in a major teaching hub.

"Let's observe him for the next couple of weeks, then reassess."

Sound reasoning. I agree and thank him. "Please, could you let me know at once if anything changes?"

"Of course."

He ends the call, and I'm left with my own thoughts for the next three hours. It's just me, with only the tedious asphalt of the A9 and Radio Two for company. A bleak prospect, no wonder my thoughts drift so easily to the handsome liar who I'd firmly believed was out of my life forever.

Still, I'll be safe enough at Caernbro Ghyll. Small mercies, but I'm thankful all the same. I can do without the distraction.

I've decided to believe his tale about operating undercover, especially since Casey was able to corroborate his account of the reasons for my early release. Apparently, a 'technical discrepancy' arose, the exact nature of which was not specified in the confidential report she unearthed. She was also able to dig out details of the drugs ring operating out of the medical corps, and my old boss's arrest and conviction. There was no record of Ed—sorry, Gabe—being discharged from the army, but neither could Casey find clear evidence of his current rank and status.

None of that excuses the fact, though, that he lied to me. However solid he might think his reasons were, he manipulated me, using me as part of his mission. I was just a means to an end. He wormed himself into a relationship with me so he could spy on my colleagues, and presumably slept with me for no better reason than that he could. I was younger then, certainly more naive, and I fell for his charm.

Gabriel Sawyer is nothing if not charming. He always was, and mad at

him though I am, I can see nothing has changed. Women gravitate to him; he's a magnet, and I was just caught up. I was flattered because he seemed to choose me. I thought he genuinely cared for me, and when he told me he loved me... I never doubted him, not for a moment.

I was a fool. And I was in love. A *bad* combination.

Now, I'm just angry and bitter. The humiliation still stings, the personal and professional carnage still scattered about my feet like an upturned rubbish skip. My career was left in ruins, and my heart was broken. And now, here he is again, with that devastating, sexy smile, that sensual Southern drawl that still makes my insides twist and churn, and he's saying he's sorry.

And I'm saying, 'So what?' Sorry doesn't fix anything, not that I even need fixing. I still have my medical licence and work I love. My medical career may be unconventional, but I work with people I like and respect and I make a difference here. I don't need or want apologies, especially not from Gabriel fucking Sawyer.

Thus fortified, I bask in the glorious scenery of the Cairngorms and tell myself—again—that life is pretty good, all things considered.

It's early afternoon when I finally crunch across the gravel in front of Caernbro Ghyll and roll to a halt. Exhausted, I climb out of the car and take in the scene of activity before me. A van emblazoned with the name of a swanky department store in the city centre is parked at the foot of the entrance steps, and two men are unloading what looks to be half their stock.

I skirt around them to make my way inside, to find Jack's wife, Ruth, in the entrance foyer, her baby girl perched on her hip. Ruth is inspecting the delivery and issuing orders to the deliverymen.

"Take that pile upstairs. Yes, the east landing, just like before. Those can follow, but I need to check them first..." She pauses to nod to me. "They're all upstairs. I put them three to a room, in the east wing."

"Right." I cast an eye over the piles of packages piling up in the hallway. "Been doing a spot of shopping?"

She scrapes her fingers through her loose blonde hair. "I've got seventeen semi-naked women upstairs, and Jack wants me to 'look after them'." She etches the speech marks with her fingers in the air. "I thought I'd better start with some clothes, given that this place is packed to the gills with horny men."

“I see. Good thinking.”

“So, Jack gave me the number of a woman he knows in that posh shop in town, and I rang her first thing. We’ve got jeans, tops, underwear, shoes. Do you think it will do? Is there enough to go round?”

I pick my way through the piles of new clothing to give her a hug and take the baby from her. “And some. Can I help?”

“You’re already helping by taking baby Faith. Jenna will be back soon. She had to go supervise a brewery delivery at the pub, but she said she’d organise the catering, at least until Janey can get here from Stirling.”

Jenna is Tony’s girlfriend. She lives with him here at Caernbro Ghyll but runs her family’s pub in the city centre. Janey is a sort of trainee cook, a protégée of Ethan’s currently at catering college in Stirling. Putting her in charge of the kitchen is a good move.

“You’ve sent for Janey?” I jiggle the restless infant on my hip.

“Yes. Then, once we have them all fed and watered, and decently dressed, we can start on contacting the families. A few of the women speak English, but most don’t. I was hoping Cristina might be able to help, but obviously, with Ethan being so ill...”

“We need Arina.” One-handed, I wrestle my phone from my pocket.

“Arina?” Ruth lifts an eyebrow.

“Of course, you haven’t met her. She’s Rome’s...” I trail off. “Well, she’s with Rome. And she speaks Russian.”

“That sounds like just what we need. I was going to ask Rome to translate, but with all that’s happened to these women, I’d prefer to keep it to just females being around them if we can. They’re all pretty shaken up. Fragile.”

I can get behind that. I fire off a text to Arina. *Can you come to Glasgow? Right now. Get one of the guards to organise a car. We have freed female prisoners here and need a Russian translator.*

Her answer comes back almost immediately. *On my way. Stefan arranged it. Be there in an hour.*

Stefan? Ah, right, Arina never calls Rome by his usual nickname. I send a thumbs-up emoji and pocket my phone again.

Ruth is back to directing the deliverymen. “All of these need to be upstairs. Follow me.” She takes her baby back from me and with her spare hand picks up a carrier bag by her feet. She sets off up the main staircase, the men following carrying armfuls of ladies clothing.

She reminds me of the Pied Piper, but a bit more efficient. Comes of all that police training, I suppose, before she decided that she preferred to marry a villain rather than catch them. I pick up my medical bag and fall in behind.

THE EAST CORRIDOR IS BEDLAM. The women may have been allocated rooms, but they seem to have little or no inclination to stay in them. They have mainly congregated in one bedroom, perching on the beds, chairs, windowsills, anywhere they can find. The chatter of anxious voices reaches us, but mostly they speak in Russian, or that's what I think it is. I can't understand anything that's being said.

The room falls silent when we arrive in the doorway.

Ruth marches straight in and sets baby Faith down on a rug, then returns to the door to relieve one of the men of a pile of blue denim. She dumps that next to Faith and picks up the top package. She opens it and shakes out a brand-new pair of Levi jeans which she hands to the woman closest to her. She continues to unwrap new designer jeans and distribute them, until the women get the idea and move to help her. An assortment of bright-coloured designer tops are passed around, tried on, approved, and claimed. The same with the underwear and eventually the shoes. Within about twenty minutes, they've been transformed from a woebegone bunch of half-naked waifs to seventeen smartly outfitted females.

I nod my approval at Ruth, who is already moving on to her next challenge.

"Can anyone speak English?" she calls above the general hubbub.

About half the women raise their hands.

"Who can translate?"

Four hands remain aloft.

"Right, then. I'm relying on you to make sure everyone understands what is happening." She tips the contents of her carrier bag onto the bed. Six mobile phones tumble out. "These are for all of you to use to contact your families. Let them know you're safe and will be home soon." She pauses to allow for the translating.

As soon as the message is conveyed, a melee ensues when everyone tries to grab a phone. Chaos erupts but is short-lived as the phones are passed around, and eventually, everyone who appears to want to has phoned home. There are tears, laughing, and no shortage of heartfelt hugging.

The penny has finally dropped. This is real. This is what salvation looks like.

“You’re very good at this,” I whisper when Ruth picks up her baby and steps back, out of the throng.

“I had experience,” she mutters back, a reference to the fact that she was also held prisoner here once. “I remember what was important to me.”

“Do you know if anyone needs medical care?” I really should get started, now that some of the most pressing priorities are dealt with.

“No, there’s nothing obvious that I’ve seen. But you could use the box room at the end of this corridor as an examination room, and I’ll send the women along a few at a time.”

By the time I’ve set up my makeshift consulting room, Arina and her younger sister, Natalija, have arrived, which makes things generally easier. The next hour is spent briefly chatting to each of the women, Arina translating as required. I check vital signs and note down names and ages while Ruth establishes what she can about their wishes for the immediate future. No one is to be kept here any longer than necessary, and Ruth is already phoning round about chartering a private flight to Moldova. From there, the women can be helped to travel onward to other Eastern European states. The lack of travel documentation will be an issue but not insurmountable. Decent forgeries can be purchased quite readily, and for an ex-copper, Ruth is embracing that aspect of her task with no apparent discomfort.

Jenna and Janey take charge of the kitchen, and the women begin to venture downstairs to eat or explore the rest of the house and grounds. The Savage soldiers who live here have been instructed to keep their distance, so the women are left to wander about at will. I can tell Jack isn’t especially delighted at this turn of events, but he bows to his wife’s judgement in the matter.

“They don’t need guarding. No one is going anywhere until we’re ready to fly them out. Meanwhile, they need their freedom. They need to know they are safe. The grounds are secure, you’ve no need to worry.”

Jack Morgan growls, as usual, but doesn’t interfere.

My own usefulness is coming to an end. The women are in remarkably decent shape, given their ordeal. Clearly, they were seen as valuable merchandise, and reasonable care was taken not to damage them. Two of them are pregnant, a state which predates their kidnapping, fortunately, but

showing no ill-effects as a result of their abduction. I'll keep a close eye, but that's all that's needed.

Exhausted, I take myself off into the wing where the offices are housed. There's a small lounge with a sofa where I can stretch out for a while. I make a few phone calls to check on my other patients, then settle back with my feet up and my eyes closed.

I wake with a start. There are voices coming from the next room. Jack's office. I consult my watch. Twice. I can't believe I've been asleep for over two hours. I scramble to my feet and straighten my clothes while the number of different voices increases. I recognise Tony, Nico, Rome, and Casey. I hadn't even realised she was here. She must have arrived while I was busy. Or sleeping.

I open the door into the corridor intending to slip away. I could do with checking in with Ruth again, just to be sure the women are all okay, and then maybe head back to the Richmond. Better still, Caraksay.

"Ah, there you are. I've been sending out search parties trying to find you."

I swing around and drum up a smile for Jack. "Sorry. I was taking a break. Did you need me?"

"Meeting in my office to debrief and plan out the next phase. We could do with your input."

"Sure." I follow him into the office, then pull up short. "What's he doing here?"

I glare at Gabriel, seated at the table between Casey and Tony, and looking for all the world as though he actually belongs there.

He settles back in his chair and treats me to that lazy smile of his. "Hi, honey. How're ya doing?"

I ignore him and turn on Jack. "Why is he here?"

"He's helping us for the time being. Do you have a problem with that?"

Yes! He's a lying, cheating asshole.

"I..." I snap my mouth shut and shake my head.

"That's good. Have a seat, then. We need to get started."

There's only one spare chair, which happens to be dead opposite Gabriel. I slide into it and make a point of exchanging nods with all the others present. Anything to avoid eye contact with *him*.

Jack takes his seat at the head of the table. "Right. Listen up."

Silence. We wait for whatever is next.

Jack starts with me. "Update on Aaron, please."

"Of course. He's at the Richmond. His shoulder was dislocated, but it's been reset, and no nerve damage as far as we can tell."

"How long before he's back?"

"A week, perhaps."

"Can that be four days?"

I appreciate the urgency, and I know Aaron will be itching to be out of there, too. "Yes, probably. On light duties."

Jack gives me a curt nod. "We need him here. What about the others?"

I update everyone on Ethan and Magda. My report is met by grim silence, broken by Rome.

"The bastards will pay for this."

"Oh, yes," Jack agrees and raises an eyebrow at Jed O'Neill, seated opposite him the other end of the table. "You have something for us?"

"Sure do. We tracked down the launch site close to a disused quarry. Remote place, lots of 'keep out' signs that seem to do the trick. All packed up and gone by the time we arrived, but the tracks were there. They would have had a van, probably, but no more than that."

"I'm checking CCTV in the vicinity for any sightings of a vehicle that fits the bill," Casey chips in from beside her husband. "Nothing so far."

Jack inclines his chin to acknowledge her input. "Go on."

Jed continues. "Two men, probably. And they knew what they were doing. We know from the crash investigation that the weapon used was a FIM92 Stinger. A portable surface-to-air missile that can be launched from the shoulder."

"They're manufactured in Germany and Turkey," Casey informs us, "under licence, and used by almost thirty countries worldwide. There are a lot of them about."

"We only need to find one," Jack observes.

"I'm on it. The manufacturers are both secure, so most likely it's an ex-military weapon. There are a few routes that the weapon could have taken to get into our enemy's hands, and I'm tracing them."

"When you say 'a few'..."

"Three or four. I've already ruled out two."

"Good. Keep at it. Anything else?"

"Sokolov," Casey informs us. "He's in the UK."

Jack's eyes narrow. "Where?"

“London currently. He flew in late yesterday. My sources say he’s here to settle the score with whoever destroyed his flesh business and re-establish his line.”

“Does he even know who he’s at war with?” Jack enquires.

Jed takes up the tale. “He knows Ethan was in Minsk, and he’s assuming it was him who killed Fedor. He’s also convinced Ethan murdered you as well, Gabe, since you disappeared from the scene.”

Gabe smirks. “Stupid bastard. Can’t he even put two and two together?”

I listen to this with astonishment. I knew Ethan, Tony, Aaron, and Rome went to Belarus to rescue Arina’s family, but I hadn’t realised Gabriel was there as well. Before I can ask what the hell is going on, Jack continues.

“I want eyes on Sokolov. I want to know who he talks to, where he goes. Tony, can you sort that?”

Tony nods, and Jack continues.

“Sokolov is not our primary target since we don’t think he organised the hit on the chopper, but I don’t want him on the loose on our doorstep, taking us by surprise. If he or any of his known associates even look in our direction, we’ll take him out. Agreed?”

Everyone nods.

“Meanwhile, theories. I want a list of every known asshole who potentially could have launched that fucking missile. Anyone we had run-ins with. Disputes, deals gone bad. Who might have a motive, however feeble?”

There’s no shortage of ideas.

“What about the Morrisons? That property deal in Birmingham...?”

“Or Dmitri Verkov? We took over his clubs last year, and he wasn’t best pleased about paying protection.”

“Luis Carlos wanted an alliance with us to bolster his crackpot money-laundering operation, but Ethan turned him down flat.”

“The Jacobses never got over us moving in on their operation in Aberdeen...”

Casey is making notes. She’ll be delving into all of these and anyone else we can possibly put in the frame.

“Whoever it was, they’ll know by now that they failed in their mission, and we can be fairly sure they’ll try again.” Jack rakes his steely blue gaze round all of us. “The moment those bastards break cover, I want to know.”

This meets with a chorus of murmuring as the meeting breaks up. I get to my feet to leave.

“Meggie?”

I haven't heard that name since before that fateful day in my quarters. It belongs in another time, a time when I was loved, in love. Happy. Today it hits me like a punch to the gut.

“Don't call me that,” I snap.

Gabriel holds up his hands in a mock surrender gesture. “Sorry. But do you have a moment?”

“Not really.” I turn on my heel and follow Casey and Jed out into the hallway. I half expect him to come after me, but he doesn't, which leaves me free to make my escape back to the sanctuary of my temporary consulting room upstairs.

The women remain in rude good health, so there really is nothing for me to stay for. I'm probably more use at the Richmond so I pack up my bag, say goodbye to Ruth and Arina, and head back down to my car.

The sight of Gabriel Sawyer slouching against the bonnet stops me in my tracks. I grit my teeth and march up to him.

“Will you move, please?”

“Where are you going?”

“Does that concern you?” I open the boot and drop my bag in.

“I was hoping to scrounge a lift.”

“Go to hell.”

“I was thinking more the Richmond. That is where you're going, isn't it?”

I glare at him. “How do you know that?”

“Ruth mentioned it. Shall I drive?”

“No. Now get out of my way.”

He doesn't move. “You told Jack you had no problem with me.”

“I lied. Now, if you'll excuse me...” I unlock the driver's door. “I have patients who need me.”

“And I need to meet with Aaron Savage, get his account of the crash. Jack thought it would make sense for us to drive up there together, but I could always tell him that you didn't agree and I need a separate car.”

“You need a separate universe as far as I'm concerned. Just stay out of my way.” Even as I spit my venom at him, I know it won't wash. My feelings are still raw. It hurts to be around him, and it would suit me never to lay eyes on Gabriel again. But business is business, and if he truly does need to speak with Aaron then it makes sense to travel together. I'm a team player above all else. We all are. I'm going to have to suck it up.

He grins at me. He knows. He fucking knows.

“Let me drive?” He holds out his hand for the keys. “You can get some rest.”

“Fucking hell!” I drop them into his palm. “Don’t even talk to me. Right?” At least I can pretend to be asleep for the next few hours.

THE IMMORTAL AND uncannily apt words of Whitesnake, who don’t seem to know where they’re going any more than I do, fill the car, soothing my frazzled nerves. The lyrics actually speak to me, help to harden my resolve to resist this man whatever it takes.

We always shared a love of heavy rock, so it’s no surprise that his choice of road trip music matches mine. Even before we left Caernbro Ghyll he’d linked his phone to the media system and chosen a playlist. So far I’ve had no complaints.

Meat Loaf, Iron Maiden, Def Leppard, we’ve had a medley of pounding rock anthems, and it suits my mood well enough. Gritty, resilient, maybe a tad bloody-minded. It would be so easy to succumb to his sexy charm all over again, to get sucked in, chewed up, and eventually spat out. Just like before.

Not me. Not again. Not ever.

Gabe’s attempts at conversation dry up after the first half hour. I steadfastly ignore his attempts to draw me out, his enquiries after my aunt, my current practice as a Mafia medic, my aspirations for the future. None of it is remotely his concern, and he’s only pretending to be interested in me. I recline my seat and close my eyes and leave him to talk to himself. The arrogant bastard probably thinks he gets a better conversation that way in any case.

My self-imposed isolation is shattered by his sudden exclamation of “What the fuck?” followed by the slamming on of the brakes. The car shudders to a grinding halt.

I open my eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Gabe is exiting the car but pauses to yell over his shoulder, “There’s a kid back there.”

A kid? What kid?

I unfasten my seatbelt and follow him out onto the hard shoulder.

Gabe is jogging back the way we just came, and at first, I can’t see anything. Then, there’s a movement a few yards ahead of him. I shade my

eyes and see it clearly. Not 'it'. Him.

A small boy, perhaps five or six years old, is sitting on the side of the road.

Jesus Christ, did we hit him?

I grab my medical bag from the boot and set off after Gabe. We're on the A9, a dual carriageway in the middle of nowhere. We must have been travelling at sixty or seventy miles an hour. If we hit a child...

By the time I get there, Gabe is on his haunches speaking to the little boy.

"Did you get lost, buddy?"

He shakes his head. "My mummy..."

"Okay. If you tell us your name and where you live, we can help you find your mummy again."

The boy just stares at Gabe, his mouth working but no sound coming out.

"You're scaring him," I snap. "Let me have a go."

Gabe makes to move over, but the child suddenly reaches for him, grabs his hand, and hangs on tight.

"My mummy," he repeats, beginning to sob. "My mummy..."

"Shall I call the police? An ambulance...?" I reach for my phone.

"Do you know where your mummy is, bud?"

The child nods and points to somewhere over Gabe's shoulder. He gets to his feet and starts to cross the road, towing Gabe behind him.

"Whoa. Steady. You can't just wander about in the road," I begin, but Gabe and the lad are already halfway across the carriageway. Luckily, there's nothing coming either way. I trot after them. "Where are you going?"

"Search me," Gabe tosses back. "He seems to know— Holy fuck!"

He scoops the boy up in his arms and jogs the remaining few feet to the other side of the road where the edge drops away sharply. Gabe is staring down into the valley below us. I come up alongside him and see what he's seeing.

A car, about twenty metres below us, on its side. "Oh no..."

"Is that your mummy's car, son?" Gabe is gentle with the trembling child, but firm. He sets him down on the ground and crouches in front of him. "Is Mummy still in there?"

He nods.

"You stay here, with this lady. I'll go and see if your mummy's all right." He's already scrambling over the edge when he yells back to me, "Did you phone the police and ambulance?"

“Doing it now.” I make the call, then crouch to hug the child who is sobbing beside me. “Can you tell me your name, love?”

“N-Noah,” he gulps. “I’m five.”

“Well, Noah, you’re a very brave and clever boy, and your mummy will be so proud of you. Did you climb all the way up here on your own?”

He nods. “Mummy was asleep. She wouldn’t wake up.”

“Do you know how long ago it was when the car crashed?”

“It was dark...”

I do a quick calculation in my head. It’s late afternoon now, and daybreak is around seven-thirty at this time year, so assuming just one night, that makes it at least nine hours since...

Dear God.

I peer over the edge again. The car is balanced on the driver’s side, and the passenger door is wide open. I can’t see Gabe, so I assume he is inside the vehicle.

“Gabe. Gabe.”

There’s no response. I need to get down there, see if there’s anything I can do, but I can’t leave Noah here on his own.

I turn to him again. “Noah, will you be a brave boy again and wait for me in my car? That one over there.”

He looks along the road to where our Audi sits slewed across the hard shoulder. Slowly, he nods.

I take his hand and lead him over to the car. The rear door is unlocked, so I help him inside. “Soon, a policeman will come. Or an ambulance driver. Will you tell them where we are? Point to your mummy’s car like you did for us.”

He gives me a tearful nod. I hate leaving him by himself, but a life could be at stake down in that valley. I shut the car door and set off at a run.

I slither down the incline to where the car teeters on its side. I spot Gabe through the windscreen, leaning over the inert form of a woman strapped into the driver’s seat. I bang on the roof to get his attention. “What’s happening? How is she?”

“Trapped but conscious. Do you have a sharp knife in that bag?”

“Of course. Why—?”

“Seatbelt’s stuck. Can you smell that?”

“Smell what? Oh, Christ!” My nostrils are suddenly filled with the stench of petrol. Grasping the urgency, I dig in my bag for the razor-sharp scalpel I

have in there. “Here.” I reach up to pass it through the open door, then dart around to inspect the underneath of the vehicle.

Spilled petrol has pooled in the bracken, and liquid still dribbles from the ruptured fuel pipe. The stench is everywhere. One spark would be all it would take...

“Gabe, hurry. You need to get out of there.”

“I’m not leaving her. She’s alive.”

I watch through the windscreen as he slices the seatbelt apart and tries to lift the woman free. She lets out an agonised scream. I can’t see the problem from where I am, but I’m willing to bet it’s nothing that won’t be helped by a slug of morphine. I dig in my bag again.

“Can you administer an injection?” I know all of the Savage soldiers are trained to give shots in an emergency, so maybe...

“Sure. What do you have?”

“This.” I load up a syringe and pass that through the door. “It goes in a muscle. Her arm will be fine.”

“Got it. Meggie, you need to stand well back. This thing could go up any time.”

“Just get a move on.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Soft murmurings come from the stricken vehicle, Gabe speaking to the woman inside, soothing her as he does what he can to execute a rescue.

I watch, my heart in my mouth, listening for the sound of sirens to signify help is coming. I almost sob with relief when I spot movement inside the car. Gabe is somehow on his feet, the woman dangling from his arms. He straightens so he is head and shoulders out of the door.

“Let me help.” I climb up on the bonnet to be able to reach in.

“I told you to stand back,” he mutters but succeeds in hoisting the motionless body up and halfway out. Whether from the pain or the morphine, she seems to be unconscious now, which is probably for the best.

I grab her shoulders and hang on, while Gabe manages the rest. He scrambles out and hops down to the ground, then reaches for the woman. Together, we scuttle along the valley to a safe distance, then sink into the soft bracken.

“Holy shit,” Gabe breathes. “Is she...?”

“Let me see.” I do some quick observations, just as the woman starts to regain consciousness. Blood pressure worryingly low, heart rate elevated.

Obvious compound fracture to the left tibia, and I suspect internal bleeding, too. *Where's that bloody ambulance?*

“Noah,” she murmurs through cracked lips.

“He’s safe,” I assure her.

Gabe sits up. “Where’s the boy?” he mouths.

“In our car. You go and check on him, I’ll stay here and look after her.”

He doesn’t argue. By the time he’s scrambled back up the incline to the road, the reassuring whine of the emergency sirens hovers on the slight breeze.

CHAPTER 6

Gabe

THE LAST TIME I was in an emergency department it was when the woman now dozing beside me, her head resting on my shoulder, damn near shot my foot off. That was a military hospital, and I have to say, the facilities in Raigmore hospital in Inverness are somewhat better than those offered by the US Army. I stretch out in my seat and consider making another trip to the vending machine for my third hit of frothy coffee.

“Do you have any change?” I wonder

“You used it all,” she murmurs sleepily. “I could go—”

“Was it you? It was you, wasn’t it?” We’re interrupted by the arrival of a dishevelled-looking individual who appears as though he hasn’t slept for a week.

In reality, I guess it was just the one night, but his face is haggard.

“Mr Mathison?” I ask.

The woman in the car has been identified as Mrs Helen Mathison, aged thirty, on her way home to Dundee from visiting her mother in Inverness when her car went off the road. The cause of the crash has yet to be discovered, but it seems no other vehicles were involved, and she’s stone-cold sober. The last news we had was that she was in theatre where surgeons were working on her shattered leg, but otherwise she’ll be fine.

Noah is spending the night in the children’s ward for observation but seems uninjured. We were planning to go across there and say goodbye to him, then maybe continue our journey to the Rothwell. We’ve told the police

all we could, which wasn't that much, really, so there's no point hanging around here.

"Yes. Dick Mathison. You were there, when she crashed?" He offers me his scrawny hand to shake.

I accept it. "Not when she crashed. We arrived later..."

"But you got her out. They told me you saved her."

"Well—"

"I don't know how to thank you. Both of you."

"Really, there's no need. We just—"

"Noah told me you stopped. Everyone else just drove past, but you stopped."

"I spotted him, that's all."

"Not many people would have got involved..."

Personally, I doubt that. This is the remote Scottish Highlands, not the Bronx. People keep an eye out for each other in these places, especially a five-year-old boy, abandoned and alone at the side of a main road. Any passing motorist who saw Noah sitting there would have done the same as we did. Mr Mathison clearly doesn't share my faith in human nature. His effusive thanks and glowing promises to tell the papers about the Good Samaritans who saved his family from certain death echo behind us as we eventually make our escape.

"He had a point, you know." Megan hops into the driver's seat for the rest of the journey to the Richmond but doesn't start the engine. "If you hadn't been paying attention and spotted little Noah..."

"Maybe I have you to thank for that. You certainly couldn't be accused of distracting me."

"Whatever. And you got Helen out of that car. Christ, when I think what could have happened. All that petrol..."

"As long as no one lit a match we were fine. And don't forget, I used to do bomb disposal for a living."

"You always used to be a cocky bastard as well. Nothing's changed."

Is it my imagination, or were the words delivered with a little less rancour than before? "Everything's changed," I correct her. "*I've* changed."

"No one changes that much," she argues. "But even so, what you did back there..."

"What we did. I recall you were there as well, even though I distinctly told you to get back."

“I’m a doctor. It was my duty to—”

“You disobeyed me. You could have been hurt.”

“So could you?” She stiffens in indignation. “What do you mean, disobeyed? Who do you think you are to be issuing orders?”

I shrug. “I’m the man who loves you. Who cares if you live or die. Who was prepared to do anything to get you out of jail. And if you ever scare me like that again, I’m the man who’ll put you over my knee and paddle your bare butt, who’ll make you scream until you’re hoarse then fuck you until you forget your own name.”

“I—” Her jaw drops. She gapes at me. “What? What did you say?”

“You heard. Are we actually going anywhere tonight, or shall we just stay here exchanging pleasantries?”

“You arrogant, conceited—”

“Yeah, yeah. Christ, you’re beautiful when you get worked up. Maybe we should stay here a while, and—”

“Shut up. Just, shut up.” She starts the car and jerks us out of the hospital car park.

“It’s too late to speak to Aaron tonight,” Megan informs me as we approach the Richmond. “I could drop you at a hotel. There’s a Holiday Inn not far from here.”

“Where will you go?”

“I usually scrounge a family room at the clinic when I’m there overnight.”

“That’ll do me, as well, then.”

“Oh no. They’re like gold dust, I’ll be lucky to get one, let alone two.”

“We only need one,” I point out. “Unless you snore. I don’t remember that you did in the past, but—”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We can’t share a room.”

“I don’t see why not.”

“It wouldn’t look right. It would be... unprofessional.”

“When did you start caring what people think?”

“I don’t, but—”

“Are you scared of me?”

“No!”

“Yourself, then?”

“Why would I be scared of myself? You’re not making sense.” She swings the car through the huge wrought-iron gates into the clinic’s extensive grounds.

“You’re worried you won’t be able to resist me,” I suggest as the car comes to a halt in the almost empty car park. “You never could before.”

She glares at me. “I know better now. You’re deluded, Sawyer. Deranged, even. Don’t flatter yourself.”

The vehemence in her tone is enough to make me laugh out loud, but I restrain myself. “Fair enough. Now we’ve got that settled, who do we need to talk to about that room?” I exit the car and saunter towards the main entrance, taking care to rearrange my rampant cock in my jeans. All this talk of shared rooms, it has to stop...

IF THE NIGHT sister on duty is surprised to see us arriving in the middle of the night, she conceals it well. I get the impression they are not exactly wedded to routine here and just take what comes. She recognises Megan and is happy enough to hand over the key to one of their relatives’ suites.

We let ourselves in, and the first thing I spot is the twin beds. Megan is on it, too.

“That one’s yours,” she announces, pointing to the one by the door. “I’ll get undressed in the bathroom.”

She scuttles off, slams the door behind her. The sound of the bolt sliding home reverberates around the compact space.

I do a quick circuit of the suite and find the tea- and coffee-making facilities, just like in a hotel room. I pick up the kettle and carry it over to the bathroom door.

“What do you want?” she snaps in response to my knock.

“I want to fill the kettle.”

“You’ll have to wait.”

I shrug and set that project aside, while I take off my shirt and drape it over a chair, to be followed by my boots and socks. I’m just unfastening my belt when she re-emerges.

“You could have waited until I was in bed,” she complains, though I can tell she’s making an effort not to ogle me.

I have no such scruples, but her perfectly decent oversized T-shirt and loose shorts are not designed to excite. Even so, my cock has other ideas. I

hitch a hip on the hospital-issue dresser and watch her moving about the apartment.

She picks up the kettle and fills it, then pads over to plug it in. “You shouldn’t have coffee at this time. It’ll keep you awake.”

It won’t be just the coffee keeping me awake. Maybe I should have taken up her offer of a hotel after all.

Despite Megan’s best efforts, the slim outline of her body is clearly apparent beneath the shapeless top, and her tantalising long legs are setting all sorts of filthy fantasies running in my head. A particularly vivid image of these same legs wrapped around my waist comes to mind, and it’s all I can do not to groan. Is it that long since I got laid? Yeah, a couple of months at least.

And if I’m honest, no one has ever quite matched up to the memory of the sexy young doctor whose life I so comprehensively wrecked.

“You have some new tattoos.”

Her remark interrupts my hike down memory lane. “One or two, yes.” It came with the territory of infiltrating the Sokolov Bratva. I need to look the part.

“What do they mean?” she asks. “This one, for example.” She points to the crimson-and-black dagger etched on my right shoulder.

“That marks me as an enforcer, with kills under my belt. See, the notches on the hilt?”

She moves in to inspect the image more carefully. “Oh. There are four...”

“I’ve yet to add Fedor Morozov. The Sokolov *Vor* I offed in Belarus,” I add when I see puzzlement flicker across her face.

“Does that count?” she wonders.

“They all count, baby.”

“Hmm. I don’t remember this one either.” Now she indicates the white dove soaring across my left pectoral muscle. “What’s this for?”

“I just liked it,” I lie. No way am I telling her the truth, that the dove represents her, the beautiful creature that I let slip through my fingers. It was inked there in an uncharacteristically sentimental moment, and she’d never believe me in any case.

“You’ve been shot,” she announces suddenly, having spotted the scar below my ribs. “That wasn’t there before.”

“I picked that up eighteen months ago in a skirmish in Syria,” I explain. “It matches the one on my foot.”

Her face falls. She steps away.

I mentally curse myself. Why did I have to bring that up?

Her features redden, and she drops her gaze. “I... I’m sorry about that. Really. I should never have...”

“It’s okay. It’s done. Over.”

She shakes her head. “No, it isn’t. I’ve seen the way you limp. I did that to you.”

“You were provoked, even I can see that.”

“I was a professional soldier. I should never have used a weapon in anger. I just... lost my temper. I was so... so...”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. It was all just a game to you. It meant nothing, but to me it was...”

I take her chin between my finger and thumb and tip her face up. “What was it, Megan?”

At first, I don’t think she’s going to answer, and I can’t blame her. Then, “It was everything. I loved you. I’d never loved anyone before, not like that. And you just made a mockery of it. Of everything, my future. *Our* future.”

“Megan, I...” How many times in the four years since that day have I wished I could wind the clock back and do it all again, live that day over and get it right this time? Even if the eventual outcome was the same, could I have been less crass? More sensitive? Could I have somehow managed not to crush her the way I did? Might we even have salvaged that future somehow?

“I shouldn’t have said that. Please, can we forget it?”

If Hell ever freezes over, maybe...

She tries to wriggle free. “We should get some sleep.”

I take a step closer, frame her face between my hands. “I’m sorry. I wish...”

“So do I, but it’s too late now.”

“Is it?”

“Gabe, please, we can’t—”

My mouth slants across hers, and I swallow whatever she was about to say.

She stiffens in my arms, and if she tried again to be free, I wouldn’t stop her. Wouldn’t blame her. But she doesn’t. She doesn’t want that any more than I do in this moment.

I trace the outline of her lips with my tongue, and the years melt away. I remember, and I’m back there on the base in Colorado, the sweltering heat of

the El Paso sun on my back, a warm, willing woman writhing beneath me. Her mouth opens on a gasp, then a moan. Her fingers tangle in my hair, holding on to me while she kisses me back.

I slide my arm under her hips and lift her. Two paces, and we're at the bed, I have no idea which one. I kneel on the mattress, set her down, and stretch out alongside her on the narrow divan. Just like old times, she clings to me, wraps her legs around me, and we roll together. I grab the hem of the T-shirt and raise it, past her hips, past her ribcage. Her perfect breasts spill from beneath the thin fabric, still the exact right fit for my palm.

I tear my mouth from hers to latch on to her nipple. She lets out a strangled cry. Her body arches against mine. I tug the shirt right up and over her head, then toss it onto the chair with my clothes before we roll again, and now, she's on top, rearing above me like the angel she is.

So beautiful. So fucking beautiful...

"I loved you, too. I'd forgotten how much." Her eyes are half closed, her head dropping back between her shoulder blades.

I reach up to take both soft breasts in my hands. Her nipples are between my fingers, firming and hardening as I pinch them.

"Gabriel, we shouldn't," she breathes, momentarily, before she lowers herself down to kiss me again.

She might be right, but I can't think of one single reason why. I don't ponder that point. Instead, I relinquish my hold on her just long enough to fumble in my jeans for a condom. And wish my ears would stop ringing.

I locate the foil packet and reach for the waistband of her shorts. The ringing seems to become louder, more insistent.

"Gabe, is that...?"

What?

"My phone..." She shoves against me. "Gabe, my phone's ringing."

Shit. I blink, my scattered senses gathering fast. I roll onto my back with a grimace. "Do you need to answer it?"

Silly question, we both know that.

She sits up, suddenly self-conscious, her arms wrapped across her chest. "I think... I left it in the bathroom."

"I'll get it."

By the time I return with the trilling killjoy in my hand, she's found her T-shirt and pulled it back on again. She takes the phone from me with a muttered "Thanks," and hits the green button.

“Beth? Is something wrong? Is it Aaron?”

I check my watch. It’s half past midnight, so unlikely to be a social call.

“No, I don’t know anything about that. No, I wouldn’t have thought so either.” There’s a short pause in which Megan meets my eyes, her expression concerned, then, “I’ll call Mr Hussein and double-check. Meanwhile, tell him to hold off.” Another brief pause. “Okay, I’m on my way.”

“What’s happened?” I demand as I dragl my shirt on.

“Some doctor’s arrived wanting to give Aaron more sedation or pain relief or something. Beth wasn’t entirely clear but wasn’t sure why he needed more drugs so rang me.”

“Sedation? I thought he was doing well now.”

“Exactly. His consultant is Mr Hussein, but he’s probably at home in bed. I’m going to give him a call anyway to find out if he prescribed any change in medication and why.”

I nod and head back into the bathroom to retrieve Megan’s clothes. When I return, she’s just hanging up the call.

“Mr Hussein didn’t order any change.”

“Phone Beth back. Tell her I’m on my way.” I leave her to make the call, get dressed, and follow as quick as she can while I sprint for the door.

Aaron Savage’s room is two floors above the family suites. I take the stairs three at a time to arrive on the corridor where he’s located. It’s deserted, apart from an orderly pushing a cleaning trolley.

“Which way is room thirty?” I demand.

He points behind me and plods on.

I charge along the corridor checking room numbers. Eighteen, sixteen, fourteen. *Shit. Wrong way.*

I spin around and retrace my steps just as the orderly wheels his trolley into the lift.

“Fucking moron,” I snarl when I jog past him.

I burst into room thirty to find a man in hospital garb sitting up in the bed, and a petite woman pacing the floor, a phone in her hand.

“Aaron?” I bark.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Gabe Sawyer. I’m on the team.”

“Since when?”

“It’s recent. Are you okay?”

He scowls but nods.

“Where’s Megan?” the woman wants to know.

“On her way. What happened to the doctor with the sedative?”

“He just left, a moment before you arrived.”

Just left? I saw no one except... Fuck!

“Tall, skinny? Pale-blond hair?”

“That’s right,” Beth confirms. “Did you pass him?”

Too right I fucking did. “If anyone apart from Megan comes in, hit the panic button.” I’m already halfway out the door.

“But—”

I race back along the corridor to the lift. He was just shoving his trolley in when I passed hm. I run that image through in my head again. What button did he press?

I close my eyes, recreate the scene. G. He pressed G, for ‘ground’.

I don’t wait for the lift to come back up. Instead, I head for the stairs again and rattle down them at breakneck speed. Luckily, the hospital is more or less deserted at this time of night, so I don’t meet anyone coming up. I burst out of the double doors on the ground floor into the brightly lit foyer. The night-time security guard blinks at me from behind the main desk.

“Sir...?” he begins.

“Did an orderly come this way?”

“An orderly?”

“A porter, with a trolley?” I scan the entrance hall for any sign of the bogus medic.

“I don’t think—”

He’s lying. There’s nowhere else the guy could have gone, and this so-called guard must have seen him. I’ve no time to fuck about. I approach the desk and draw my handgun. In my experience, the barrel of a Glock firmly planted between someone’s eyes will do wonders to jog their memory.

This occasion is no exception. The guard points to the outside door, stammering. “Th-that way. He was r-running, and—”

I’ve heard enough. I charge outside, just in time to spot the shadow disappearing around the corner into the ambulance bay. I set off at a dead run, skidding around the corner to crash into the trolley which has been abandoned. I pause just long enough to shove it into a space behind a large wheeled bin and carry on running.

CHAPTER 7

Megan

WHAT WAS I THINKING? Christ...

I fling my clothes back on and stamp into my shoes, no socks, berating myself as I go. I can't believe I did that. I was there, cavorting on the bed with Gabriel fucking Sawyer, when... when...

It may have been nothing. It could have been an innocent mistake, some new staff member doing the night rounds. Maybe they got a bit confused.

Who am I trying to kid? This is a slick, modern hospital where clients pay a small fortune for the very best medical science has to offer. They don't make mistakes like that.

I arrive at Aaron Savage's room to find him out of bed and Beth close to tears. They both round on me when I enter.

"What's going on?" Aaron demands. "That bloke...?"

"The doctor?"

"No. The other one. American by the sound of it. Sawyer?"

"Gabriel," I confirm. "He's—"

"I know who he is. Beth just filled me in. What's he doing here?"

"He helped Jack and the others to destroy the sex-trafficking market, the gang who had Arina. Now, he's stayed on to help track down the ones who shot down the helicopter."

"What the fuck does it have to do with him?"

That's a good question and one I can't answer with any degree of confidence. All I know is that Jack seems to trust Gabe, and for some reason,

so do I.

“He’s on our side.” It’s the best I can come up with. “Where is he anyway?”

“Fuck knows. He shot out of here like the place was on fire. That was ten minutes ago.”

I sink into a chair. “Okay.” Gabe can take care of himself. I turn to the matter in hand. “Tell me what happened.”

Beth takes up the tale. “It started earlier this evening, around seven. That doctor came in, said he needed to top up Aaron’s fluids.”

“His what?” I snatch the notes from the end of the bed. “What fluids?” I scan the chart for any clue but find nothing apart from the usual obs, all of which seem as expected.

“That’s what I said,” Beth continues. “He said Aaron was showing signs of dehydration and needed extra fluid. It could be provided through his drip. He set that up, then left.”

The drip stand and empty fluid bag are still there. I make a mental note to have the bag tested to find out what was actually in it.

“Soon after, Aaron fell asleep.” Beth continues. “One moment he was chatting to me, the next, he was out like a light. I decided to leave him to it and settled down in the chair to have a nap myself. Next thing I remember, the doctor was back. He seemed surprised to see me and told me I should leave. I said I wasn’t going anywhere. He said he needed to examine Aaron but couldn’t explain why it was so urgent he had to do it in the middle of the night. I was irritated but not suspicious at that stage.”

“Did he examine him?”

“No. Aaron was asleep. I said he shouldn’t be disturbed. The doctor then changed tack and said he needed to give him some pain relief. He had a syringe.”

“What was in the syringe?”

“I don’t know, but I couldn’t see why Aaron needed pain relief. He was sleeping like a baby, obviously not in pain. And yesterday, we decided...”

“Yes, I remember.”

Aaron had been adamant he didn’t want any more drugs that made him sleepy. He was anxious to get back to work. Mr Hussein had known that and agreed that further medication could probably be avoided unless anything went wrong. Aaron was on observations only for a couple of days with a view to discharge as soon as possible.

“So I told him we didn’t want the medication, but he insisted. Said I should let him do his job. He was quite... well, he wasn’t very polite. So, neither was I. I told him to get out, and he told me not to interfere.”

Aaron comes in here. “I was out of it, but the raised voices disturbed me. I was half awake and heard Beth tell the guy to wait until the regular doctor could get here.”

“Raised voices?”

“Yes.” Beth nods. “He was yelling at me, so I yelled back. I was sure he wasn’t on the level. Who talks to a patient’s relatives like that, especially in a posh place like this? I got between him and Aaron, and I phoned you.”

“It’s a good thing you were here,” I say. “But, Beth, you could have been hurt.”

“I never thought about that. Aaron was out cold, and...”

Aaron reaches for her hand. “I always knew you were a force to be reckoned with. But, fuck, what if he’d stuck you with whatever was in that syringe?”

“It wasn’t me he was after.”

“No, but you got in his way. Christ, Beth...” He wraps his arms around her and buries his face in her neck.

Feeling somewhat surplus to requirements right now, I try to concentrate on the possible assassination attempt. “I’d like to know what it was he tried to inject you with.”

“I might be able to help you there.”

I whirl round at hearing Gabe’s voice. He’s lounging in the doorway, an empty takeaway coffee cup in his hand. Except, it isn’t empty. He offers it to me, and I spot the syringe rattling around inside.

“Where did you get this?”

“He dumped it when he tried to run away. He was posing as a porter, and he hid this on his cleaning trolley. I retrieved it. Thought you might be interested.”

I dig a sterile sharps box out of my medical bag and transfer the syringe. I can send the contents for analysis, though I’m pretty certain we’ll find some sort of barbiturate, probably enough to fell a carthorse. It sounds to me as though the earlier ‘fluids’ was more likely an attempt to administer a sedative to put Aaron out of action, with a view to returning later to complete the job when he assumed he’d be alone, defenceless, and with no witnesses. Beth had ruined the plan.

Gabe turns his smile on Aaron and Beth. “Didn’t get time to properly introduce myself earlier. Gabriel Sawyer.” He offers his hand to Aaron, who takes it, but not without some hesitation.

“I suppose I should be glad you were here,” he mutters, the closest he’s going to get to thanking him.

“Don’t mention it.” If Gabe notices the surly attitude, he chooses to ignore it. He shakes Beth’s hand, too. “You did well, ma’am, raising the alarm like that.”

“I just wish I could have stopped him getting away.”

Gabe’s smile doesn’t waver. “Oh, he didn’t get away.”

Silence. We all stare at him.

“Then, where...?” I begin.

“I caught up with him trying to hotwire a motor in the car park.”

“Is he dead?” Aaron growls. “Tell me you fucking killed him.”

“Well, I did consider it but thought that would be a bit of a waste, at least until we had a chance for a nice little chat. I decided to hang on to him for a while.”

Hang on to him? “Where is he now?” I hardly dare ask, but someone has to.

“In the boot of our car.”

“In the...?” I can only stare.

Aaron’s scowl transforms into a beaming grin. “I could get to like you.”

“Good to hear. So, I was wondering where’s the best place to take our bit of baggage. Somewhere nice and quiet...”

“Caraksay,” Aaron says without hesitation. “In fact, that’s where we’re all headed. Security’s spread too thin when we have people scattered all over the place. We need to regroup.”

“But, what about—?”

Aaron interrupts any protest I might have made. “I can recuperate back on the island. So can Magda. You have the facilities to care for her, once her surgery is complete, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.” I’m pretty well equipped, and anything more I might need we can buy. “She should be out of critical care by tomorrow.”

“Right, then,” Aaron continues, all business now. “What about Ethan?”

“That’s trickier. He’s still in a coma.”

“On life support?”

I shake my head. “No. He’s breathing fine on his own.”

“Could he be moved to Caraksay?”

“I honestly don’t know. It might not be safe.”

“It certainly isn’t safe to leave him where he is.” Concussion or not, Aaron is firing on all four cylinders now. “I’m going to talk to Jack, and meanwhile, I need you to consult with Ethan’s doctors and find out how soon he can be moved. Involve Cristina as his next of kin. Whatever it costs, I want my brother safe on Caraksay where these bastards can’t get to him.”

“I’ll get on it right away.”

I’m already ticking off the list in my head. I’ll need to go back to Northampton and get things moving. As well as bringing myself up to speed on any medical issues, there will be private ambulances to order and consultants to placate. It won’t be straightforward, but I’ve handled trickier situations. Probably.

MY CLINIC on Caraksay is at capacity. I have three patient beds, each now in use for victims of the crash. As well as purchasing a ventilator—fortunately they are in plentiful supply after the surge in demand during Covid—I’ve also hired two agency nurses for a month to enable the round-the-clock care Ethan’s condition requires.

The ventilator is a precaution, but I don’t expect to need it. Ethan’s condition is stable, which is the only reason Mr Renny finally agreed to release him into my care. That and Cristina’s insistence that her husband’s recovery would be massively enhanced if he was in his own home with his family around him. He arrived by helicopter a few hours ago and is now comfortably installed with Cristina at his bedside and a personal nurse to monitor his every breath and twitch.

I remain confident our king will recover. It’s just a question of when.

Magda has been on Caraksay for a couple of days now and is already venturing out of bed. It will be a few weeks before we can pursue the prosthetic she needs, but that will come. She seems stronger every day and in decent spirits, considering.

From a medical point of view, Aaron is my biggest problem. He refuses to remain in bed and spends more time in conference with Jack and the others than he does in my sickbay. I make it a point to do his obs every few hours, but that’s about as much as I can manage and then only with Beth’s support.

As for me, I’m exhausted. I’ve been flying back and forth between then

Outer Hebrides and Northamptonshire for the last three days getting everything organised and I wouldn't need to take my second glove off to count the number of hours' sleep I've had in that time. That needs to change. I take a final circuit of the clinic before telling Cristina and the nurse I'll be in my cottage if anyone needs me.

I intend to sleep for a week.

When I first arrived on Caraksay, I shared my aunt's cottage. It got a bit crowded when Janey joined us, too, but we managed. Then, when the clinic was constructed a couple of years ago, I had living quarters built on. Just one bedroom, a living-space-cum-kitchen, and a bathroom, it's compact but does me fine. I even have a view of the ocean, something I never even thought I wanted until I had it. There's something incredibly soothing about sitting by my window in a rocking chair I scrounged from Auntie Jacqueline, watching the waves, the seabirds, the seals, and occasional dolphins. And it's there that just as I finally nod off, I'm jolted back into wakefulness by a loud rapping on my door.

CHAPTER 8

G abriel

I'VE TRAVELLED PRETTY MUCH ALL over the world, first in my 'official' military career, and more recently in my less formal role. I've seen deserts, jungles, frozen wastelands, and lush forests and I've fought for my life in all of them. Even so, my first sight of the Savage empire's Hebridean stronghold takes my breath away.

Remote, rugged, jaw-droppingly beautiful but wild as a cougar, this place is beyond impressive. The chopper circles twice before landing, so I have ample time to take it in, from the majestic castle perched on the highest point to the ancient dwellings scattered about the lower hillsides, to the craggy cliffs and isolated shingle beaches. The place is simply breath-taking.

And impregnable. I can see at once why Ethan Savage located his headquarters here, why he chose this place to raise his family, and why his brother insisted that we regroup here when danger threatened. Caraksay castle has stood tall for centuries and will be here for many more years to come.

It's isolated, though. Over an hour from the mainland by helicopter, more by boat. I appreciate seclusion as much as the next hired assassin, but even that has its limits.

We land in the forecourt right in front of the main entrance to the castle. I hop down onto the cobbled ground, followed by Jack Morgan, Aaron Savage, Tony Haigh, and the one they all call Rome. The women are already here, having been ordered back to their island stronghold for safety when the threat

became real. There's a welcoming committee already assembled, and each of my companions is soon embracing their wives, girlfriends, children.

There are a surprising number of children. I count four boys aged from perhaps six to around twelve, as well as three much younger ones. An older woman seems to be in control of the youngest children while the boys dart about being alternately hugged and roughed up by the men. It's impossible to work out who belongs with who, and maybe it doesn't much matter.

I assume Megan is here somewhere, but she doesn't turn out to greet us. I quell any disappointment, and rather than standing around like a spare part, I hoist my duffel bag on my shoulder and head for the steps leading up into the fortress itself. I gather this is where I'm to be quartered. I find myself in what I suppose was once the great hall, now a curious combination of conference room, dining space, and basketball court.

A middle-aged woman carrying a huge pile of folded laundry hustles in from a door at the far end. She halts when she sees me.

"Ach, ye'll be the American, then?"

I suppose she's speaking in some form of English, but I'll be damned if I understand a word she says. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

"The American. That'll be ye, then. Ye'll be i' need o' yer bed an' a bite tae eat, aye?"

This time I recognise the words 'bed' and 'eat' and decide this sounds promising. "Yes, ma'am. If you could just—"

"Aye, well, follow me, then." She bustles past me and starts up the huge central staircase. Halfway up, she pauses to peer back at me. "Well, are ye comin' or no'? We dinnae have all day tae faff about here, ye ken."

I catch the gist of her meaning and set off after her.

I'm allocated a room on the first floor. Or would that be better termed a chamber? Despite the outwardly austere appearance of this ancient structure, the accommodations are exceptionally comfortable. A huge four-poster bed dominates the space.

My guide dumps a fresh set of sheets in the middle of it. "I'll be back tae make up yer bed. Just ye make yersel' comfy, like..."

The magnificent bed is complemented by sturdy period furniture. I'm no expert, but I recognise old when I see it. And stately.

The stone-flagged floor is strewn with colourful rugs, and the plastered walls are hung with tapestries which I have no doubt are centuries old. Where once candles or oil lamps lit the space, there is now sympathetically designed

modern lighting and underfloor heating. The Savages don't rough it, and neither do their guests.

"This'll be ye, then," my guide informs me. "Bathroom's through there. When ye're ready, come down tae the kitchen an' I'll fix ye something' tae eat."

"I can wait until—"

"There's nae mealtimes here, hinny. Folks just come down when they're hungry an' see what's there. I've a nice bit o' gammon on today, an' if ye've any sense ye'll be first i' the queue. Ye have a look o' a man as likes 'is food."

I blink and struggle to decipher all of this. I get the sense there is some urgency recommended, and already my guide is rushing off to get on with whatever she does around here. Everything, would be my guess.

It's clear there's no formal protocol at Caraksay. It's every man for himself, and that suits me well enough. I dump my duffel on the bed and set off to explore.

I start by wandering along the upstairs hallway until I find an open door. I peer in, to find a sleek, modern office with a conference table big enough for a dozen or so. I assume this to be the hub of the Savage empire and at first wonder why it isn't better guarded, before I remember how secluded this place is. None but the Caraksay inner circle will ever come here.

I move on, passing doors that I assume lead to the private apartments of Ethan Savage's closest family and associates, until I reach the end of the hallway. Here, another door stands ajar. The sound of a baby's crying drifts from within.

Curious, I peep in. The older woman I noticed outside is seated on a rocking chair comforting a wailing infant while another baby kicks and gurgles on a mat at her feet and a sturdy toddler does laps on a bright-red push-along tricycle. The movement in the doorway must catch her eye. She glances up and smiles at me.

"If you're looking for the men they'll be down in the hall, probably."

"Thank you, ma'am. I just heard the baby and—"

"Aye, she's a fine pair o' lungs on 'er, 'as young Faith." She coos at the child who is quietening down at last. "She's wanting her dinner, I daresay. Mummy will be up in a moment, yes, she will. She will..." The latter part of the sing-song sentence is for the baby's benefit, who seems to be only partly mollified by the promise. She is already breaking out in a fretful whimper

again.

I rake through my memory. “Faith? That’s Jack’s little girl, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” the woman explains. “Baby Faith, named after me. Who would ha’ thought that, eh?”

“I see. Are you her godmother then, or...?”

“I’m Faith Sampson, Beth’s mum. This here is Baby Faith Morgan, and the wee princess on the floor is Roisin. Her mum is Casey, an’ her daddy is Jed O’Neill.”

Ah. British mob royalty.

“An’ the wee heathen charging about the place is young Sebastien, Cristina and Ethan’s lad.”

The boisterous toddler shoots in front of me, tooting at the top of his lungs. I step back out of his way.

“You have your hands full, I can see. Are you the nanny, then?”

“Ach, no. I just help out where I can, especially now, when everyone is so distracted. And with Magda so poorly...”

“Magda? The pilot?”

“And nanny. Sort of.” She gets to her feet, the grizzling baby pressed to her chest. “I might just go an’ see if I can find Ruth. Would you mind just watching these two for a minute?”

“What?” I eye the diminutive figures with all the suspicion I’d normally reserve for an unexploded roadside device. “But—”

“I shall only be a wee moment...” She scuttles past me before I can mount a decent argument and scoots off along the corridor.

“Wait. What if...?” Too late. I’m on my own. I turn to regard the enemy.

Sebastien is a sharp boy, clearly a chip off the old block. He knows a helpless victim when he sees one and homes in for the kill. “I need potty.”

Jesus!

“Now!” he squeals, dismounting the trike to hop from one foot to the other.

What the fuck? I never had this bother with the Taliban.

“Where is it?” I scan the room for anything resembling a kids’ loo.

“There.” He points to a tiny bright-red potty tucked under the changing table. “Quick, quick...” He’s already tugging his shorts down.

I’m galvanised into action. I dart across the room to grab the potty just as he drops into a squat right beside little Roisin.

“Don’t pee on the baby,” I yell, dashing back to shove the potty under his

bottom in the nick of time.

There's the satisfying splatter of toddler pee hitting plastic while Sebastien grins up at me, clearly well pleased with his efforts. He finishes and stands, only to start closely examining his prize possession as though he might be the only male on the planet possessed of such equipment.

I resist any mention of going blind. What do I know anyway? Instead, I drop to my haunches, move the potty to a safe distance, and reach for his shorts to pull them back up.

"Nice work, mate." *Dear God, let the crisis be over...*

Sebastien wobbles off, and I allow myself to breathe, only to be jolted back onto full alert when a bright-pink beachball hurtles past Roisin's head.

"Whoa, be careful." I scoop the baby off the floor, but she seems fine.

Meanwhile, Sebastien is in hot pursuit of the beachball, whooping.

He kicks the ball and lands on his rump. Immediately, he's up again and chasing it across the playroom, shouting something incomprehensible. He manages to dribble it in my direction, and I do the only thing possible in the circumstances.

I kick the ball back.

Sebastien is overjoyed. The game is on. He charges about like a thing possessed, screeching, kicking, falling over, jumping up again, spinning in small circles, and generally creating mayhem. And I'm not much better. I bob about the room, toeing the ball back and forth, all the while holding baby Roisin to my chest to keep her out of the line of fire. She clings to my shirt, her tiny fingers curled in the expensive fabric, cooing happily to herself.

"If proof were needed that Yanks can't play soccer, this is it."

I spin around at the soft Irish brogue. Jed O'Neill is framed in the doorway, a mocking smile plastered across his face, with Casey Savage peering around him.

The pair saunter in.

"You weren't thinking of using my daughter as a rugby ball, were you?" Jed goes on to enquire.

I hand the baby to her father. "Well, now that you mention it..."

Casey bends to hug Sebastien. "We heard you shrieking halfway down the stairs. Are you having a good time?"

The toddler nods happily and proceeds to clamber back onto his trike. He resumes his laps of the room, waving to us each time he passes.

Jed turns away from the boy to mutter for my ears only, "Jack's about to

go and have a word with your man from the hospital. He said if you want to join them, you're welcome."

I nod. "Where?"

"Dungeon. Do you know the way?"

"No, but if you—"

"I'll show you," Casey offers. "Jed can stay with the kids."

Her husband holds baby Roisin above his head, and she giggles. "We'll show young Seb how we play football on this side of the pond, won't we, darlin'?"

That settled, I follow Casey out of the playroom and back down to the main hall. I'm expecting some sort of secret passage, perhaps a huge iron door leading down into the bowels of the castle, but instead she leads me outside and around the outer wall. We pass a barn, now converted into a workshop for the helicopters and a garage for quad bikes.

"We don't bother with any cars on the island," Casey tells me, "so we don't need roads. It's over a mile from one end of the island to the other, though, and it takes two hours to walk all the way round, so the bikes are useful if someone's in a hurry."

"Does everyone come and go by helicopter, then?"

"No. We have a small harbour on the other side of the island and half a dozen or so launches. We keep a larger transport vessel on the mainland for bringing supplies over, and men if we need to. Your guest arrived in the hold of that boat this morning."

"Ah." I'd wondered how he was moved across here but left the arrangements to Jack.

"And there's *The Lydia*," she goes on, "My father's yacht, moored just outside the harbour. You'll see it from around this next corner."

"Your father? I thought—"

"Oh, he's dead now. He commissioned the yacht and named it after his wife, and my aunt. Ethan and Aaron's mother."

"I see." *Not your mother, then?*

She airily waves away my puzzled expression. "It's complicated. We had the same father, but our mothers were sisters."

Cosy.

We round the corner, and she points out to sea. "There's *The Lydia*."

A beautiful ocean-going superyacht floats at anchor about a mile out. She must be thirty metres in length, and at around one million dollars a foot, I

estimate the value of that particular floating beauty to be around a hundred million dollars.

And they say crime doesn't pay. I can name plenty of Mafia dons who would argue differently.

"It's this way." Casey trots down a short flight of stone steps to an imposing door at the bottom. It could be straight from the set of a medieval period drama, thick, dark oak studded with iron. The handle is a solid metal ring dangling from a hinge.

In stark contrast to the archaic appearance of the portal, it's locked with a digital keypad. Casey keys in the code then grabs the ring and twists it. There's a grating sound, then the door swings inwards to reveal more steps leading down into darkness. She reaches in and flicks a light switch. The illumination from a single, unshaded lightbulb casts eerie shadows on the walls. The dimness is barely alleviated.

"I told Ethan it needed a hundred watts down here." She gestures me forward. "Bottom of the steps then straight forward. Lights will come on as you go. You'll hear them before you see them."

"Are you not coming?"

She shudders. "I stay away from the wet work if I can. I'm more use with a keyboard than thumbscrews."

"Thumbscrews? Your family stick to the traditional approach, then?" I slide past her and take the first two steps down.

"Maybe. To be honest, I prefer not to ask. I'll be locking this door behind you."

"Okay." I descend to the bottom and wave back up at her. "Thanks for the guided tour."

The door clangs shut behind me, blocking out the outside world. I take stock.

I'm in a narrow, dank corridor, more of a tunnel, really. The walls are stone, huge blocks which have stood the test of centuries. I'm no expert on English history, or Scottish, for that matter, but this place must be at least eight hundred years old. I imagine medieval labourers toiling with pulleys and ropes to drag those massive lumps of rock from wherever. Did they quarry them here, on the island, or somehow ship them from the mainland? How long would it have taken to build this castle? And why did they bother? What was here in ancient times that needed guarding?

I turn these questions over in my head as I make my way deeper into this

subterranean world. Casey was right about the lighting. It's obviously motion-activated, illuminating each section as I get to it. I reach the end of the tunnel and I could go left or right. My mind is made up by the faint voices drifting from the right. I follow the sound.

The voices become louder, more distinct. I recognise Jack's tone, and, I think, Tony's. I draw nearer and can pick out Aaron, too.

"Hey," I call out.

A head pops out of a doorway about twenty paces ahead. It's Tony. "Where the fuck have you been? We've been waiting for you."

I quicken my steps to join them in a windowless, whitewashed room. I do a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn, taking in the sloping floor which falls away to a drain at one end, and the crude workbench along one wall strewn with a selection of tools. A couple of hammers, chisels, six-inch nails, an electric drill, bolt cutters, and several screwdrivers. It doesn't occur to me for one moment that anyone is considering doing a spot of carpentry down here.

There's also a tap set into the wall with a hosepipe attached, and a couple of buckets, presumably for sluicing the place down as required. A coil of rope sits next to the buckets, and some hessian sacks.

In the centre, in pride of place, is a metal table. The legs look to be adjustable, and there are straps dangling from the corners and the middle.

I'm in the Savage kill room. All we need now is our star guest.

Right on cue, Jack and Tony leave the room, to return a few moments later dragging the semi-conscious body of the man I last saw when I bundled him, bound and gagged, into the car boot back in Inverness.

I give him a shit-eating grin. "Hey. How've you been?"

I'm not really expecting an answer at all, so the muttered string of expletives is something of a bonus. Shows he's feeling chatty.

"That's nice. We're making friends, I see." Aaron obviously gets the gist, too. He grabs the man by his hair and drags his head back, so he has to look at us. "We really should be on first-name terms."

"Fuck you," comes the response.

Aaron backhands him across the jaw. "Try again."

No answer this time, so Aaron draws back his fist to have another go. "What's your fucking name, asshole?"

The man thinks better of further defiance. "Mitchell. Greg Mitchell."

We exchange a look.

"You're English?" Jack snaps.

Mitchell tries to nod, but Aaron's grip on his hair puts a stop to that. Jack jerks his thumb at the table. "Let's get him on there."

CHAPTER 9

G abriel

MITCHELL PUTS UP A FIGHT, but it's hopeless. In moments his thrashing, squirming body is slung on the table, his wrists and ankles secured by the straps. Another thick leather band is pulled tight around his waist to keep him more or less motionless.

Jack is leading this interrogation by unspoken consent. He positions himself at the foot of the table to regard the would-be assassin.

"So," he begins, "shall we start with what we know?"

"You've made a mistake. You need to let me go..." Mitchell struggles violently against his bonds. His eyes are wide, and bloodstained spittle drools from the corner of his mouth.

"As I was saying, what do we have so far? One, you tried to inject Aaron here with a noxious substance..."

"I'm a doctor. I was doing my job."

"Does your job involve injecting patients with ketamine? Enough to fell a carthorse?"

"It was a sedative, to help him sleep."

"We analysed the syringe. It contained ketamine. A dose so big, Aaron would have been dead within thirty minutes." Jack pauses. "Any comments?"

"You're lying. Or someone set me up. I've told you, I'm a doctor and—"

"Fuck this bollocks. Who do you work for?"

"I work for that hospital..."

"What hospital?"

“The... The...”

“You can’t even remember the fucking name of the place. Let me jog your memory. Bolt cutters.”

Mitchell lets out a scream of pure terror, while Tony selects the correct tool from the work bench.

He does a couple of experimental snips as he hands the cutters over. “Shoes off?” he enquires.

“Yes. We’ll start with a couple of toes, see how that works.”

Tony tackles the right foot, and I grab the left. We unlace the tatty trainers and drag them off, together with his socks. Jack eyes the exposed feet thoughtfully.

“Big toe first,” he announces. “Hold his foot still. The right one, I think.”

Tony seizes Mitchell’s lower leg and presses it down against the metal tabletop, and Aaron takes the selected toe and separates it from the others. Jack positions the jaws of the bolt cutters ready to take it off at the base.

“Last chance,” he informs Mitchell with a smile.

“I told you, I— *Aaaah!*”

Jack squeezes the cutters and severs the toe with one satisfying crunch. The digit rolls across the table, and Jack catches it before it would have dropped onto the floor. He holds it between his finger and thumb, dangling it in front of Mitchell’s face, but the man is too busy screaming to properly appreciate the sight.

“Is there some duct tape over there?” Jack asks.

Aaron produces a roll from the workbench.

Jack makes no more ado. He drops the severed toe into Mitchell’s gaping mouth, then tapes his lips shut. The ensuing silence is oddly tranquil.

Jack leans over the stricken man. “So, we’ll leave you to chew on that for a while, consider your position, so to speak. Maybe you’ll feel more like cooperating by the time we come back. That’s if you don’t bleed to death in the meantime.”

I think there’s a chance he might. Blood is pumping from the stump and dripping onto the floor. The crimson pool is spreading fast.

“It would be a pity to lose him so soon in the proceedings,” I observe.

Jack scowls. “You’re right. Pass me one of those buckets.”

I oblige, and he releases the injured foot from the constraints to prop it on top of the upturned bucket balancing on the table. He then wraps a length of rope around Mitchell’s calf and pulls it tight to form a crude tourniquet.

“There. That should hold you for a while. Try not to thrash about too much.” He pats Mitchell companionably on the cheek and leads us out of there.

“SO, WHAT DO WE HAVE?”

The question is addressed to all of us, seated around the table in the great hall. Casey has joined us, along with Jed.

“Name’s Gregory Mitchell,” Aaron begins. “Claims to be a doctor.”

Casey’s laptop is open. She types rapidly. “Could be true. We have a Gregory Mitchell qualifying from medical school in Edinburgh in twenty ten. Twelve years ago.” She continues to scroll down the records. “A couple of BMA investigations, suspected of drugs offences, nothing proven. Finally convicted for insurance fraud in twenty eighteen, got caught signing forged sickness certificates, sentenced to two years.”

“That sounds like our man. Anything in his prison record?” Jack presses her.

“Served his time in HMP Albany on the Isle of Wight, released after fourteen months. By then he’d been struck off the medical register. Spent the last couple of years since he was released working as a security guard in London. Nightclubs mainly.”

“Who does he work for?”

Casey clicks away, then, “Bingo. Holy shit!”

We cluster round the laptop. “What have you found?” Aaron wants to know.

“Our man shared a cell in Albany with Ozzie Cartwright.”

“Ozzie...”

“Forger and counterfeiter. I vaguely remember him. He used to work for my stepfather. Ozzie was younger then, just learning his trade...” She brings up a prison-issue headshot. “Yup, that’s him, twenty-odd years older but definitely him.”

“Your stepfather...?” I begin, still struggling to make sense of the complicated Savage family tree.

Casey nods. “When I was born, my mother was married to a guy called Jerome Archer. A right bastard. He used to beat her near senseless pretty much every chance he got. He ignored me but seemed to hate her. When I was four or five, after one particularly bad episode landed her in hospital, we

fled. My mother brought me to Scotland to stay with her sister who was married to Graham Savage, Ethan and Aaron's father."

"I see. And...?"

"Long story short, we stayed. Graham took one look at my mother and said we weren't going back. We moved into the Savage mansion, and I grew up in Glasgow with my cousins. It was much later that we discovered they were actually my half-brothers. Graham and my mother had a thing, once, and I was the result. That's probably why he stepped in and protected us both. When Archer came looking for his wife, Graham sent him packing. He wasn't best pleased, but there was nothing he could do. The Savages were a lot more powerful than the Archers, and he needed the alliance the marriage had given him, so he couldn't afford to upset Graham."

"Is the alliance still in place?"

Aaron nods. "In theory, though in practice we don't do much business with them now. The Archers used to control drug-trafficking routes through Asia, and my father wanted access to those. We've since developed our own contacts. The Archers were dabbling in money laundering and needed our clout with the UK finance authorities. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement at the time, but my father never trusted Jerome, and he loathed us after Aunt Lia left him. The families drifted apart. There's been no contact for years."

Casey agrees. "I never kept in touch. Never had so much as a birthday card from him."

Tony scratches his chin thoughtfully. "Perhaps Jerome Archer didn't forget the Savages, though. Remember Felix Fuller?"

Jack's expression sharpens. "That thug who had Jenna beaten up? He was in the cells at Caernbro Ghyll for a while, I remember."

Tony nods. "Rome and I interrogated him. He came up with some weird and rambling tale about being paid to kill Ethan, or Ethan's father. He was confused, and a lot of it didn't make sense, especially as the old man had been dead for years. But he mentioned the name Archer, so I sent him across to the island for Ethan to speak to him."

Aaron takes up the tale. "I remember. The man was a crackpot, like you say. Rambling. He hated Ethan, though, and was eaten up with bitterness about something that must have happened years before. We couldn't make much sense out of him, so we got rid after a day or so."

"It could be a coincidence," Jack muses. "Two links to the Archers..."

“We don’t believe in coincidences,” Casey asserts. “Do we?”

“TELL ME ABOUT JEROME ARCHER.” Jack paces the floor of the kill room, regarding Gregory Mitchell with seemingly dispassionate indifference. The duct tape has been ripped from his mouth, and the severed toe now lies in a grubby teacup waiting to be joined by more appendages in due course.

“Who?” Mitchell groans. “I don’t know any Jerome Archer.”

“Ozzie Cartwright then. Your old cellmate from the Isle of Wight”

His eyes widen. It’s clear he recognises the name.

“I can’t remember... It was years ago.”

“Not that many years. Think hard, Gregory. You only have nine toes left; it would be a pity to lose more.”

“I.. I can’t...”

Jack shrugs and picks up the bolt cutters again. “Left foot this time. We’ll take two, I think.”

“No! No, please...” Mitchell is shrieking again. You’d think he’d have learned by now, there’s only one way to stop this.

It appears not. Jack is obliged to snip off his other big toe, then the little one for good measure before he finally babbles something useful.

“Ozzie got me a job, on the doors. When they found out I was a doctor... used to be a doctor... they gave me other jobs to do. Patching their men up, mainly. Gunshots, stabbings...”

“Poisonings?” Jack suggests helpfully.

“Just that one time,” Mitchell whines, abandoning any further attempts at denying his part in things. “It was mopping up, like.”

“Mopping up? You mean, after the helicopter failed to do the job?”

He nods vigorously. “Yes. They should all have been dead. The old man was furious that anyone survived.”

“Old man? You mean Archer? Jerome Archer?”

More nodding. “He wanted them finished off. All of them. I was supposed to take out Savage himself, but there were too many guards, so they sent me after the other one.”

Aaron’s jaw flexes.

“You’d have been going back for Ethan later?” Jack suggests mildly, as though a career in cold-blooded murder is the most natural thing in the world for a defrocked doctor to move on to.

“Yes. Maybe. I never meant—”

Jack grasps his chin and forces him to cease his ridiculous, self-pitying whining. “Who shot down the chopper? Were you there?”

“No! I swear. I never even knew till later. Only after, when it came on the news about the crash...”

“Who was it then? Archer? One of his men?”

“I don’t know, I swear...”

Jack straightens. “Take his fingers. One at a time, right hand first.”

Aaron does the honours this time. The screams are ear-splitting, but soon the teacup is overflowing with severed digits. All the while, Mitchell begs for mercy and swears he doesn’t know who fired the missiles. I’m inclined to believe him, and eventually Jack comes around to the same way of thinking. He drops Mitchell’s severed thumb into the cup along with all four fingers from his right hand.

“We’re getting nowhere here. Take this piece of shit back to his cell.”

Tony and I do as he asks. Mitchell is more dead than alive, but we drag him along the dark corridor and dump him on the floor in the middle of his cell before returning to the kill room to dispose of the spare body parts and help with the cleaning up.

“If there’s a chance we’ll want to talk to him again, it might be a good idea to let Megan have look at him,” Aaron suggests.

Jack shrugs. “She can do something about the blood loss if she feels like it. No pain relief or infection control, though.”

“I’ll see to that,” I volunteer. It’s a good excuse to go and seek her out since it’s clear she won’t be coming looking for me anytime soon.

MEGAN ISN’T at the clinic. I find one of the agency nurses shipped over from the mainland in the consulting room. There are two of them, their role to assist in patient care until the casualties are on their feet again, to relieve Megan of the entire burden. Currently, they only have Magda in their care, but I gather Ethan is to join us in the coming days. The nurse tells me that Megan went back to her cottage to get some rest.

It turns out her living accommodation is annexed to the surgery, so I saunter round the back and knock on the door.

She answers, looking as though she just woke up. Her eyes are bleary, her hair tousled from the pillow. She squints around the door at me.

“What do you want?”

“You,” I answer. “The prisoner could do with some attention.”

Her brow furrows. “What happened to him?”

“The usual. Missing a few bits and pieces.”

“Christ,” she mutters. “Okay. Give me a minute to get my bag.”

She doesn't invite me in, but I follow her indoors anyway. It gives me a chance to take in her domain while she collects the supplies she needs.

The cottage is compact but comfortable. The door opens directly into her living space which sports a sofa, a table with two chairs, and a kitchenette at one end. A microwave, kettle, washing machine, and fridge seem to make up all the equipment, and I remember what the housekeeper told me about everyone just grabbing what they want from the main kitchen. I don't suppose a busy mob doctor has much time for cooking anyway.

Megan returns looking slightly more awake. Damp tendrils of flaming auburn hair frame her freshly washed face, and she's changed her top. She's carrying a leather medical bag almost as big as she is.

“Let me,” I offer.

“I can manage.” She sweeps past me. “What are you doing in here anyway? I thought I told you to wait outside.”

“Sorry, didn't hear you.” *Not strictly true.* I fall into step beside her.

“There's no need for you to follow me around like a poodle,” she snaps.

I ignore her tetchiness and try to work out what got up her ass. Last I recall, we were getting on pretty well until we were interrupted by Beth's phone call. Since then, it's been all go and no opportunity to take up again where we left off.

We reach the outer entrance to the underground cellsd and Megan keys in the code to unlock the door. Clearly not her first visit down here.

“Is this part of your usual duties, then?” I ask as I follow her down the steps.

“What?”

“Patching up tortured prisoners so they can go another round.”

“Is that what you think I'm here for?” She stops at the foot of the steps to glower at me. “You said he needed my help.”

“Yeah. Jack wants him kept alive.”

“When Jack Morgan gets a medical degree, he can call the shots as far as my work is concerned. Until then, I'll decide what requires to be done for my patient.”

“He’s not a patient. He’s a condemned prisoner.”

She glares at me. “Perhaps it would be best if you wait here.”

“Not a chance.” I stalk past her and lead the way to the cell where we left Gregory Mitchell.

The cell door also has an electronic lock, and Megan shoulders me to one side while she types in another code. She swings it open to peer within.

Mitchell is still where we left him, curled in a ball on the stone floor, moaning to himself and clutching his fingerless right hand to his stomach. A growing pool of blood surrounds him.

Megan mutters something incomprehensible and rushes to kneel beside him. She lifts each eyelid in turn, then glances in my direction. “What’s his name?”

“Mitchell. Gregory Mitchell.”

“Mr Mitchell? Can you hear me?”

“Nothing except a strangled moan.

“Mr Mitchell? Gregory? My name is Doctor Alexander. I’m here to help you. Can you hear me?”

His eyelids flicker. He looks up at her with a sudden and entirely unwarranted flare of hope. “Please...” he groans.

“I’m going to make you more comfortable,” she tells him, digging in her bag. She retrieves a syringe and a small bottle of colourless fluid and proceeds to draw some up into the syringe.

“What’s that?” I ask. “Jack said no pain relief.”

“Jack can go fuck himself.” She checks the measure, then reaches for Mitchell’s left arm. She sinks the needle into the muscle and slowly depresses the plunger. That done, she discards the used needle into a sharps container and proceeds to try and drag Mitchell across the floor by his shoulders. “Since you’re here, you might as well give me a hand. Help me get him onto the bunk.”

“What’s the point?”

“Either help me or get out.”

I concede the point and take over at the shoulders end. “You grab his feet.” *What’s left of them...*

Between us, we manhandle the inert form onto the stone bunk built into one wall. Whatever Megan gave him has knocked him out cold. He doesn’t move a muscle when she sets to dressing his injured feet, swathing them in pristine white clinical gauze and bandages. She does the same with his right

hand, all the while her features set in an expression I find hard to decipher.

Not anger, especially, and not empathy either. I finally put my finger on it. Resigned acceptance.

“It had to be done,” I tell her. “We needed the information. The Savages needed it.”

“I get that.”

“But?”

“But did you have to be quite so... brutal?”

“It worked. We now know for sure who was behind the shooting down of the chopper.”

“Well, I suppose that’s something,” she mutters and gets to her feet. “I’m done here.”

I straighten as well. “Okay. I’ll stay, in case he wakes up and says anything more.”

Megan glances back at the man on the bunk. “He won’t be waking up again.”

“What? Why? You stopped the blood loss.”

“I gave him a double dose of morphine.” She checks his eyelids once more. “I’d say he’s already gone.”

I gape at her. “You killed him.”

“If you like. You said he needed help, and I gave it. It’s over.”

“But, Jack wanted to—”

“Jack can go to hell. I’m a doctor, sworn to do no harm. I wouldn’t have ever delivered that poor man up to them to continue what they were doing. I put him out of his misery. It was all I could do for him in the end.” She snaps her bag shut and marches past me. “Don’t worry about telling Jack. I’ll do that myself in my report.”

I take a moment to check for myself. Sure enough, Mitchell is dead. I hare off after Megan who is already at the top of the steps leading to the outside.

“Hey. Wait...”

She quickens her pace, so I break into a run. Even so, she’s almost back at her cottage by the time I get close enough to grab her arm.

“Let go of me.”

“We need to talk. About what just happened.”

“No need. I’ll write it up.” She tries to shake me off, but she might as well try to hold back a double-decker bus. She’s no match for me, and I’m

still with her when she reaches her door.

“Excuse me.” She tips up her chin as though daring me to push the matter.

Bring. It. On.

I shove her through the door and into her cottage, then back-heel the door shut behind me with a crash. “I said, we need to talk.”

“Get out of my house.” She shakes off my grip on her elbow, but only because I’m ready to let her go now. “I did my job. Now you go and do yours, whatever that is.”

“Your job, your *one job*, was to keep Mitchell breathing,” I snarl. “Whose side are you on?”

“Sides?” She rounds on me, her anger blazing in her eyes. “Don’t you dare talk to me about sides. About loyalty. Ethan Savage let me come here when I had no one, nowhere else to go. He did it for my aunt, out of loyalty and friendship. I know how much I owe him, and I’d never let him down. Or any of them. A lot happens here that I don’t like, things like *that...*” She gestures back towards the castle and the dungeon. “But my loyalty is clear. Solid.”

“Yeah. Right,” I sneer. “So solid that you remove our only witness from the picture because *you* decide he’s suffered enough.”

“You asshole. You cock-sucking maggot. What do you know about loyalty? You’re just pond life. Slime.”

I execute a mock bow. “If you’ve quite finished stroking my ego...”

Megan lets out a shriek and flies at me, but I’m ready for her. I grasp her by the wrists and swing her around to fling her onto the sofa then drop on top of her. I make the mistake of letting go of one of her wrists and get her fingernails raked down my cheek for my trouble.

“You fucking hellcat...” I grab her flailing, lethal hand and capture both wrists in my fist, then pin them to the cushion above her head.

“Get off me. I’ll scream, and—”

I don’t doubt she will, and that will bring a dozen armed and hardened criminals rushing to her aid. I do the only thing I can think of on the spur of the moment to avoid ending up being flung into the ocean along with Gregory Mitchell.

I cover her mouth with mine.

CHAPTER 10

Megan

WHAT THE...?

I shut my mouth, try to seal my lips against the invasion. I twist my head from one side to the other, desperate to throw him off, to escape the punishing kiss. It's hopeless. He's twice my size, and I'm just wasting my energy.

Who else would use a kiss as a weapon? I squirm at the very idea, the audacious, outrageous mockery of it.

His mouth gentles, and I think for one moment he's going to let me go. He doesn't. He slants his head, deepens the connection somehow, caressing my lips with his until muscle memory takes over and I part for him. He takes no persuading to push his advantage. His tongue probes my mouth, teasing, tangling, tasting.

I go still, because, why the hell not? Fighting is futile.

No, my head protests. This is not right. You need to stop this.

But the rest of me isn't listening. The rest of me is lapping this up, quite literally.

My tongue curls around his. I arch my body, press my breasts to the hard planes of his chest. My nipples swell into points, tender and aching, rubbing against the fabric of my cotton blouse.

His vicelike grip on my wrists loosens. I'm free, but I don't resume my attack. Instead, my fingers are in his hair, raking through the dark strands, once again finding the silkiness I used to adore.

He breaks the kiss, raises his head to murmur something.

I don't hear. "What...?"

"Bedroom?" he repeats.

"Through there."

He's on his feet and lifting me as though I weigh nothing. Three strides are enough to cross my living room, and three more bring us to the foot of my bed, still rumpled from my nap earlier. He tumbles the pair of us onto it.

Now's my chance. He's no longer pinning me down. I could roll away and call a halt to this madness. That's what I should do. Definitely.

Instead, I watch, mesmerised, while he removes his jacket, then his shirt. The tattoos I admired at the Richmond are displayed for me again. I reach for the white dove on his chest, unaccountably drawn to that image. His body shudders under my touch.

"Megan..." he rasps.

I cover his mouth with my fingers. "Don't. Don't talk now. Not yet."

His answer is to take my fingertip between his lips and suck on it.

I fall back onto the mattress, my eyes on his. We neither of us break eye contact while he unbuttons my blouse and spreads the two sides wide, then tugs the lacy cup of my bra down to release my breast.

His eyes narrow. His slate-grey irises darken. He leans forward to flick my nipple with the tip of his tongue. "So beautiful," he murmurs. "I never forgot..."

I writhe when he takes the taut bud in his mouth and sucks. I squirm when he deepens the suction, sending a heady pulse of pure sensation straight to my clit.

His deft fingers undo the button on my practical work pants. He slides them down my hips, and I wriggle helpfully. I can't get naked fast enough. When he releases my nipple long enough to push my trousers right off, I slide out of the blouse and sit up to unhook my bra.

His lop-sided grin is positively sinful. I don't care. The years melt away, and I'm back in my quarters in Fort Carson. It's as though the intervening years never happened. I flop back down, waiting.

He doesn't waste any time. I'm glad. It's as though we're both frantic, caught up in a tsunami of frustrated lust, the dam only now breaking to consume the pair of us. He sheds his jeans and boots and joins me on the bed, taking my mouth with his all over again.

I shove him onto his back, and he lets me. I go with him. I'm on top now,

kissing him as fiercely as he kissed me earlier. I straddle him, relishing the sensuous feel of his solid, toned abdomen scraping against my wet pussy.

“Jesus,” he moans and flings me back onto the mattress. “Christ, I’ve missed you.”

I missed you, too. I told myself I didn’t, but it wasn’t true. I never stopped longing for you. For this...

“Open for me, honey.”

I spread my thighs wide, and he settles between them. The head of his cock is at my entrance. I raise my hips, seeking him.

“Wait,” he murmurs and props himself on one elbow.

I let out a mewling complaint, even though I know he’s only taking the time to unroll a condom over his length. That accomplished, he positions himself again in readiness, then drives forward in one long, smooth stroke.

I arch, cry out at the sudden fullness. It’s been a long time, so long. Too long.

My body reshapes around him as though he’s always belonged inside me. I lift my legs and wrap them around his waist, hook my ankles together in the small of his back.

He takes it slow at first, each thrust filling me to the hilt. I clench my inner muscles around him, seeking more friction. I’m clinging to him, holding on as though I’m drowning, as though he’s the only solid life raft in a churning ocean of need and want.

Picking up on my signals, he increases the pace, pounding into me harder and faster.

Yes. More. I thrust back, meeting his rhythm with my own. Years of pent-up longing are unleashed, demanding to be sated. I can’t wait, won’t wait any longer.

Curled of pure pleasure unfurl deep within my core, the sensation building, blossoming as I reach for my prize. My pussy convulses around his solid girth. I squeeze hard, grunting with the effort of grasping for what I need. I ache for him, for this. I think I always have.

My orgasm is there, hovering just out of reach. Just a little more, just a bit harder, deeper. Yes, yes! My vision darkens. I see stars momentarily. My entire body convulses. Waves of sensation pulse from my core right to my fingertips, the ends of my toes. The ends of my hair.

Gabe lets out a hoarse cry and goes still. He’s deep within me, his liquid heat jetting into the latex. His breath is on my cheek, my neck. He kisses me,

mutters something obscene.

For several moments it's as though I'm floating, suspended in some trance-like state. I've never had an out-of-body experience, but I think this may be it. My senses are shattered, my head spinning.

Slowly, gradually, I drift down from the high. My limbs are heavy, my muscles leaden. My pussy still quivers around him, drawing every last shiver of sensation from this glorious event.

Gabe's weight was on me, pinning me down, but he shifts to rest on his elbows. He's no longer anchoring me to the bed, and that feels like a loss, as though I've been set adrift. I try to hold on to him, but he's already slipping away.

He withdraws and rolls onto his back to peel off the condom.

The connection broken, I sit up, my back to him. He reaches for me, his fingertips on my shoulder.

"You okay, babe?"

I answer with a quick nod, embarrassed suddenly and drowning in regret. *How did I let this happen?*

"We ought to—"

"Yeah. I know." He slides from the bed to pad naked across the room.

I take in the lean, athletic grace of him, marred only by the slight limp. My legacy to him from that day when my world ended. "Does it hurt?" I blurt.

He pauses at the door to my bathroom, raises one quizzical eyebrow. "Does what hurt?"

"Your foot. You're limping..."

His lip quirks. "No, honey, it doesn't hurt."

His assurance makes no difference. "I'm sorry. I should never have..."

He tosses the used condom in the trash, then returns to the bed. I try to avert my gaze, but he captures my jaw in his palm.

"Look at me, Megan."

I raise my eyes to meet his.

"Let it go."

"But, I—"

"It's in the past. Over. Let it go, sweetheart. We both did things we regret back then, but it's what we choose to do from here on that matters now."

I shake my head. "We can't just pretend none of it ever happened."

"No one's doing that. We're just leaving it behind and moving on."

Okay?”

I stare at him. Is it really so simple? Can we just decide to wipe the slate clean? Is that how this works? Is that how anything actually works?

It’s as if he hears my thoughts. “This is between us, honey. Our choice, our decision. Live in the past or choose a different future. I know which I prefer.”

I let my mouth curl into a half-smile. “Me, too,” I whisper. “But—”

His finger is across my lips. “No buts. It’s decided.”

I open my mouth to agree, or maybe argue some more, but the moment is wrecked by the trilling of Gabriel’s phone. He winks at me and bends to retrieve it from the pocket of his jeans which are still strewn on the floor next to my clothes.

“It’s Jack,” he murmurs.

I sigh. “He’s probably found the body by now.”

“Yeah. Most likely.” He captures my gaze before hitting ‘reply’. “I won’t mention the morphine.”

“He’s sure to suspect. He’s no fool. I can’t ask you to lie for me.”

“You didn’t ask me, honey.”

“All the same...”

“Suspecting isn’t the same as knowing. The guy was on his way out anyway.”

“He’ll know when I tell him,” I reply.

Gabriel shakes his head. “Honey, he won’t take it well. His direct instructions were—”

“No pain relief. I know. You said.”

“So—”

“It was my call. My clinical judgement, and I stand by it. I did the right thing.”

“Jack Morgan won’t agree.” Gabriel lets the call ring out without answering. “I’ll tell him I didn’t pass on the message about no pain relief.”

I get to my feet and grab my clothes. “You’ll do no such thing! He’s probably seen the bandages by now, so he knows I was there. Jack will see sense because I’ll explain it to him. Without medical intervention, Gregory Mitchell would have died within minutes anyway from shock and blood loss. It was a delicate balance...”

“There’ll be nothing remotely delicate about Jack’s reaction once he realises you wrecked his chance of getting more information out of that poor

fuck. Megan, I really think—”

“It’s decided. Are you coming?” I’ve dragged on my clothes while we’ve been debating this and I’m ready to go and face the music.

“Wait while I get my pants on. You might like to lose the just-fucked look, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your hair. And your blouse is inside out.”

“Oh, shit.” I run a brush through my unruly mane then tie it back before righting my top.

We leave my cottage together.

Gabe calls Jack back as we march towards the castle. “Yeah, I was taking a leak...” There’s a pause, then, “I see, well, he was pretty far gone. Yes, she patched him up a bit... I thought he was alive when we left but I couldn’t be certain...”

He meets my gaze with a frown.

“Not sure. Yes, if I see her, I’ll pass the message on. See you in five.” He ends the call. “Jack’s convening everyone in the hall. He wants you there as well.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket before he finishes talking. I check the screen. It’s a text from Jack.

Great Hall. Now.

“My summons,” I murmur, quickening my step. It doesn’t do to keep Jack waiting.

Gabriel matches my pace.

I slant a glance up at him. “I’d prefer it if no one knew that we... you know...”

“I thought you didn’t want me to lie for you.”

“This is different. My private life is just that—private. I prefer to keep things professional.” I’ve never had a relationship in the time I’ve been here, and I see no point in complicating matters now. “What happened just now was a one-off. A... a mistake. It won’t happen again.”

“If you say so.” He treats me to a lop-sided grin. “You’ll have to work on keeping your hands off me, then.”

I whirl on him. “My hands? It was you who—”

“Careful, sweetheart. We have an audience.” He nods over my shoulder. “Gentlemen.”

I spin around again. Aaron and Jed are approaching from the direction of

the dungeon, deep in conversation.

I plaster on my game face. “I gather we’re needed in the hall.”

Jed and Aaron fall in beside Gabe and me. We climb the front steps together and enter the castle to find everyone else already assembled around the great oak table.

We all find our seats, and the chatter quiets. Jack’s gimlet gaze is on me.

“Mitchell’s dead,” he announces.

I incline my head. “I see. You can’t be surprised at that.”

“Can’t I? I expected him to last a bit longer. We hadn’t done with him.”

“He lost a lot of blood,” I point out, perfectly reasonably.

“Not that much.”

“And there was the trauma of what you did to him.”

“It’s what you did that interests me, Doctor.” His tone is deceptively soft.

“What did you give him?”

“I tended his wounds, as you will have seen.”

“And?”

“And I gave him something to counteract the shock. He would have died otherwise.”

“He did die. I repeat, what did you give him?”

“Morphine,” I reply.

“You put him out of his misery. How thoughtful.”

“I gave him what was needed to stabilise his condition.”

He strokes his chin thoughtfully. “Well, dead’s pretty stable. I’ll grant you that.”

“It was a delicate balance,” I assert, not for the first time in the last few minutes. “He was very weak. It was impossible to predict exactly how he would respond.”

“I said, no pain relief.”

“I know. Gabriel said. It wasn’t pain relief. At least, not only that. His organs were failing from the shock, and I did what I thought was best for him. You would have lost him anyway.”

“But not quite so soon. We could have—”

My temper flares. “You could have what? Tortured him to death?” I’m on my feet, my fists on the table before me as I lean towards our merciless leader, eyes blazing. “I’m a doctor. I’m sworn to heal, to relieve suffering where I can. That’s what I’ve always done, will continue to do as long as I’m here. I turn a blind eye to a lot of what happens, but when it comes to doing

my job, I don't compromise. I do my best for whoever is in front of me, friend or foe. That's what I did for Gregory Mitchell and I'd do the same again. If you don't like that, just say so and I'll go."

"Go where, Doctor?"

"Anywhere. Away from here." *Christ, what am I saying? I have nowhere else to go...*

"No one betrays us and gets to walk away," Jack reminds me, his voice a low, uncompromising rumble.

"Betray? I never betrayed anyone. Why would you question my loyalty?" I swing my furious gaze around the table as the rest shift awkwardly in their seats. "Did anyone question my loyalty when I helped set up the kidney transplant for Aaron and Beth's little boy? Or when I cared for Casey during her pregnancy, when no one else knew and I respected her privacy? Or when I treated Arina's gunshot wounds or when—?"

"Sit down, Megan." Jack's tone slices through my tirade.

"I—"

"I take it back. Your loyalty is not in doubt. We all appreciate what you do here." There's a new warmth in his words. "No one wants you to leave, least of all me."

I subside back into my seat. "Well, then...?"

"I accept your explanation," he continues. "You will appreciate, I had to ask. It's a matter of discipline."

"I...I suppose so." Can that be it? Is it over?

"Right, so, moving on..."

I let out a breath I never even realised I was holding. Is it my imagination, or did Gabriel, seated opposite me, just pour himself a splash of water and raise his glass to me in a silent salute?

CHAPTER 11

G abriel

I HAVE to hand it to her; Megan Alexander can fight her corner when it matters. My respect for her notches up several rungs. She said she could get Jack Morgan to see things her way, and she has. I know he's not an easy sell, so this exchange, and the outcome, was an indication of Megan's standing in this cut-throat world where trust is in short supply and loyalty is everything.

Courage, conviction, integrity—a heady cocktail. My cock twitches in appreciation.

A one-off? I don't think so. I can't wait to be inside her again. And again.

"So," Jack continues, "apart from what Mitchell told us, what do we have to corroborate any of it?"

"Isn't that fucker's story enough?" Tony blurts. "He pointed the finger at Archer, and it ties in with what Felix Fuller was saying."

"True, but for what we have in mind, we need to be sure. We don't spray bullets around on the basis of an assumption, a probability."

Aaron agrees. "Ethan would want proof before he made a move. Archer's family, sort of. Distant, but..."

Ah, yes, Casey mentioned that he was her stepfather. "He's a relative by marriage? Is that right?"

She nods. "Since his name came up, I've been doing my homework." She opens the laptop in front of her. "I started with his financial affairs. Hacking into his accounts. So far, I've identified fourteen, but I've concentrated on the offshore ones, looking for arms purchases."

I'm impressed. It makes sense to first establish whether Archer could have got his hands on the weapon.

"Like us, Jerome does most of his shopping in the US, but we know this particular piece of kit came originally from Germany or Turkey. I put the word out that I'm in the market for a FIM92 Stinger and found two firms willing to sell me a consignment for a cool half million euros. Naturally, I asked for recommendations. Testimonials, you might say. It's a lot of money."

Jack's lip quirks. "And?"

"And I'm reliably informed that a UK buyer purchased a FIM92 Stinger from Orlando Andretti eight weeks ago. A quick trawl through Jerome's accounts identified the transaction."

"So, we know he has one?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"That's good enough. So, now all we need is a strategy for taking him down."

"We're at war, then?" Tony asks.

"We were at war the moment that missile hit our chopper. We just didn't know who with. Now, we do." He turns his attention to Casey again "Do we know where Jerome Archer is? Where does he live?"

"He has a place in Hertfordshire. That's where we lived when I was little, but he spends most of his time in the city. Or he used to. Not sure where. He was always surrounded by bodyguards, so it would be hard to get to him."

"He can't hide forever. He's our ultimate target, him and his entire fucking operation. But, first things first. Do you know where the missile launcher is now?"

"Can't be certain without actual reconnaissance, but most of his commercial property consists of betting shops and bars, so those don't seem likely as weapons dumps. Jerome also has a scrapyard in south London and a warehouse in the Docklands. Either of those could be a contender."

Jack leans back in his seat at the head of the table. "Okay. Ideas everyone?"

It's a free-for-all.

"We hit them hard and fast."

"Put them out of business."

"Take out their soldiers wherever they are."

"A digital attack on their assets."

The suggestions come thick and fast from all sides of the table. Only when the din dies down does Jack speak again.

“So, here’s the plan.” He waits for silence before continuing. “First, we neutralise those potential weapons dumps. I need both the scrapyard and the warehouse burnt to the ground along with anything and anyone inside. Tony, Aaron, you’ll take a team and sort that. Casey can give you the coordinates.”

“Sure, boss.”

Jack goes on. “The betting shops come next. Attack those outside business hours to avoid civilian casualties, but I want them all closed down. Rome, Gabe, that’s your task. The bars need to find themselves on the wrong side of the environmental health brigade. Rats in the kitchens, dodgy electrics, that sort of thing. Who do we know who can make that happen?”

“I have a contact in the London Mayor’s office,” Jed chips in. “Leave it with me.”

“Thanks. I’ll make cash available for bribes. Whatever’s needed. We have over a hundred soldiers already on the mainland. I’ll arrange for them to be where you need them. By the time we’ve finished, Archer will be frantic. And out of business. It’ll smoke him out, and as soon as he breaks cover, we hit him personally. A bullet in the skull should do it.”

“And financially,” Casey suggests. “Now that I’m in his accounts I can start shifting funds about, putting his money out of reach or giving it away. There are plenty of charities that wouldn’t mind a slice.”

“Do it,” Jack growls.

Casey isn’t finished. “And I can launch a cyberattack on his systems and records. That would cripple him a lot faster than incendiary bombs.”

“The fires are a statement. But I like your approach, too. Get on with it. And I need every ear to the ground for information about Archer’s whereabouts. As soon as he pokes his head out, I want to know about it. Better still, blow it off.” He pauses, looks around the assembled team. “Any questions?”

There’s silence. People begin to get to their feet. We all halt when one female voice pipes up.

“I have a question.”

It’s Beth who speaks. Aaron’s partner. She was seated at the end of the table between Cristina and Ruth, Jack’s wife. She glances around, looking nervous.

“Okay. What do you want to know?” Jack asks.

“Well, this is not my area of expertise, obviously...”

“Obviously. Even so?”

“It may be a silly question, but it’s been bugging me.”

“What is it?” This from Aaron.

“How did they know?”

“Know what?”

“Where the helicopter would be? Or who was on board?”

No one answers immediately, so she blunders on. “I was thinking, while you were in the hospital. I had a lot of time to turn it all over in my head. I could have lost you...”

“Yes, but—”

“We’re way up here, in the Hebrides. We make a lot of trips back and forth, to Glasgow. Or the school run. Regular trips, the same route every time. How often does any of us fly over Northamptonshire?”

Jack is staring at her, his brow creased. His eyes narrow as the implications of her ‘silly’ question sink in.

Beth continues. “Why set up there? It can’t have been chance, or random. They didn’t just ‘get lucky’. They must have known the helicopter’s flight path and schedule to be able to target it.”

“Fuck,” Jack mutters. “A mole?”

Aaron shakes his head. “No one outside our immediate inner circle knew. We didn’t even know until we were on our way home and Ethan phoned Cristina to tell her to expect us. We were shot down less than an hour later.”

“Well, then...?”

“Could that call have been... intercepted.” Beth turns to Casey. “Is that even possible?”

Casey meets her gaze and nods slowly. “It’s possible. And it makes sense. If the weapon was located in the south of England, Archer’s home turf, and he suddenly got wind Ethan Savage was passing through... It would be an opportunity not to be missed.”

“Could we find out?” Jack demands.

Casey is seated again, laptop open. “Hacking always leaves a digital trace. It can be almost imperceptible unless you know to look for it. I have systems set up to monitor all our phones, in case we need to erase incriminating content, obviously, so if anyone had been in there who shouldn’t be, I could isolate that.”

Her fingers dance across the keys, her eyes scanning the screen as

incomprehensible rows of letters and numbers scroll across. Suddenly, she stops. “Fuck. Here it is.”

“What?”

We all gather behind her, as though any of us might decipher the coding flashing on the screen.

“Someone *has* hacked into Ethan’s phone. I have an IP address. It’s subtle. Sophisticated. Not a programme I’ve seen before. Probably custom-built. And it seems to have been going on for a while. Months, at least.”

“Shit. Is it Archer?” Aaron wants to know.

“I can’t tell. Not necessarily. The IP address is in... Manchester.”

“Can you isolate it?”

“Oh, yes. There he is.” A map appears on the screen, a blinking light indicating a location on a housing estate close to the M60 motorway. Casey zooms in using Google Earth. “It’s a block of flats. He’s on the eleventh floor.”

Jack curses under his breath. “I want to know who that bastard is. And who he works for. Gabe?”

“I’m on it.” I’m already striding for the door.

“Wait. I’ll come with you.” Rome is right behind me.

MANCHESTER IS APPROXIMATELY two and a half hours away by helicopter. We touch down on an empty supermarket car park just behind the tower block where we spotted the hacker’s signal.

“Why isn’t this place full of cars?” I wonder as the rotors slow.

“Sunday afternoon,” Rome tells me. “They close at four.”

“Fucking archaic country,” I mutter, though really, we shouldn’t complain. It’s saved us a walk.

The pilot stays with the chopper while Rome and I hop down and sprint across the parking lot and around the base of the block of flats to arrive at the main entrance. We’re spared the bother of forcing our way in by the fact that a woman in a nurse’s uniform is just leaving as we arrive. I nod to her and grab the door before it can close.

We take the lift to the eleventh floor to emerge on a dingy landing that smells of urine and weed. There are three doors, numbered thirty-one, thirty-two, and thirty-three.

I start by knocking on number thirty-one.

It's answered by a painfully thin girl, no older than seventeen at best, with a squalling infant balanced on her hip.

"Oh," she greets us. "I thought you were someone else." She makes to close the door.

My foot in the doorway puts a stop to that. "We're looking for someone."

"There's no one here." She shoves the door harder.

"What about your brother? Boyfriend?"

"What the fuck is this? I told you..."

"We need to check, honey. If you could just let us in it won't take a moment."

"You're not—"

"Excuse us." I barge the door open and step around her into the hallway of the flat.

The girl screeches behind us as we check each room. It doesn't take long. The place consists of a scruffy, untidy lounge littered with empty food wrappers, dirty baby's bottles, and overflowing ashtrays. A plastic mat is spread on the sofa, a nappy and pack of wipes beside it.

"Sorry about this," Rome mutters.

He heads for the one bedroom while I check out the kitchen, then the bathroom.

We turn up nothing.

"Do you have a computer, miss?" Rome asks.

"A what? Do I look like I have a fucking computer?"

I have to admit, it seems unlikely.

"Sorry to have bothered you, ma'am," I say and gesture to Rome. We're done here.

"You want to talk to that nerd next door if it's fucking computers you're interested in," the girl spits. She has to raise her voice to be heard above the yowling baby.

I halt in the hallway. "Nerd next door?"

"Yes. Number thirty-three. He's always gettin' stuff delivered. He'll be on the Amazon Christmas card list, he will."

"What sort of stuff?"

"How would I know? Techy stuff. I sometimes take the parcels in for him if he's not there."

Rome's eyes meet mine over her shoulder. "You've been very helpful, miss." He extracts two fifty-pound notes from his inside jacket pocket. "Here,

treat yourself and the little one. Sorry for the disturbance.”

She gapes at the money for maybe a split second before grabbing it and stuffing it down the front of her top. “Anytime,” she splutters.

Outside on the landing once more, we eye the door to number thirty-three.

“We could just knock,” Rome suggests.

“We could,” I agree, moments before I apply the heel of my boot to the lock. It shatters with a crash, and the door swings open.

We charge into the flat, guns drawn.

The layout is exactly like the one across the hall, but the living room also serves as sleeping accommodation, too, more like a bedsit than a one-bedroom flat. The place may look like a hovel from the outside, but inside it’s a different matter. The furniture and fittings are high-end. Whoever lives here is dripping with cash.

A single bed is tucked beneath the window, a matching solid oak wardrobe at its foot. Two huge armchairs upholstered in fine chocolate-coloured leather sit on either side of the fireplace where a swanky halogen electric fire occupies the grate.

Clothes are strewn everywhere, despite the presence of a perfectly good wardrobe, and I take in the general quality of them. Designer labels abound. High-end trainers, luxury brands. There’s no television, but the music system is Bang and Olufsen.

I resist the urge to whistle my appreciation, but it’s obvious we’re onto something here. A clatter from the bedroom puts a stop to further inspection. We dive for the door and burst in, just in time to see the occupant disappear through the window.

Shit. We’re on the eleventh floor.

We make a grab for him, but he’s already out on the balcony and scrambling over the railing.

“Wait,” I shout, just as he disappears over the edge.

I follow him onto the balcony and lean out. Our man is already one floor down, clambering fearlessly from balcony to balcony. I get the distinct impression he’s done this before.

Fuck! I consider going after him, but I don’t have a death wish. I’m at least twice his weight, and those balconies appear fragile at best.

“Down the stairs,” I yell. “We’ll head him off at the bottom.”

We take all eleven flights at breakneck pace and burst out into the late

afternoon drizzle. Rome is ahead when we dart around the perimeter of the building to the side where the balconies were. There's no one to be seen.

"Fuck. We lost him." Rome spins around three hundred and sixty degrees. "Which way could he have gone?"

I'm about to suggest we separate and search the immediate vicinity when we hear the groan.

"Over there." Rome is sprinting off in the direction of a brick-built outhouse, some sort of electrical installation by the looks of it. A telltale ankle dangles from the flat roof.

"Having a spot of bother up there?" I call out.

More agonised groaning.

Rome spots a bank of wheeled bins against one of the walls and brings one over. He vaults on top of it, which gives him enough height to get his chin over the roof. "It's bad manners to run out on visitors like that," he admonishes.

"Help me," comes the anguished reply. "I think I've shattered my ankle."

We can but hope. Saves us a job. "Can you get him down?" I yell.

"Probably." Rome makes no more ado about it. He grabs the man by his uninjured ankle and hauls him off the roof. He tumbles right into my arms.

"Fuck. You might have warned me," I grumble, setting the wriggling figure down on the ground where I get my first proper view of him.

He's young. Very young. Mid to late teens. And skinny as a rake.

He peers up at me through thick-rimmed glasses. "Hey, man. What's happening?"

"Good question." I take in the smart clothes, somewhat dishevelled now, his expensive jeans torn at one knee. "Whatever's happening, it seems to be lucrative."

"I need a hospital," he whines. "My leg's smashed."

"Tough." I turn to Rome who has now scrambled down from the wheelie bin and is standing beside me. "Did you see all that gear up there?"

"Sure did."

We were only in that bedroom for a matter of seconds, but it was time enough to take in the banks of IT equipment. I couldn't put a name to much of it—several laptops, screens, grey boxes which whirred and bleeped and flashed. Enough tech to launch a lunar mission at the very least.

"And he dropped this when he fell. Found it on the roof." Rome swings what looks like a watch between his finger and thumb.

The youth at my feet is still whining. “That’s my fitness tracker. Give it back, man.”

I take the gadget and turn it over in my hand. “You don’t look like the sort who works out.”

“You gotta take care of your health, man. Sleeping and steps and shit.”

“Right.” I pocket the item. “You won’t be doing any steps for a while. What’s all that other stuff up there?”

“Just my kit,” he answers. “My office. Hey, you better not have left my door open. They’ll nick owt round here.”

Rome and I exchange a look. While we might not give a shit about the local scrotes looting his place, there’s a decent chance that there could be data we need on those devices so we have an interest in making sure they are secured.

Rome produces his phone. “I’ll get a team over here...”

I drop to my haunches. “What do you do in your office?”

“This and that. My ankle, man. I need help.”

“No, you don’t. You’re past help, boy. You need to tell me who you work for and why.”

“What are you saying, man? You broke into my crib. You’ve no right to —”

I grab the ankle which is lodged at a peculiar angle and twist it. The lad lets out an ear-splitting scream.

“Shit. We need to get him out of here before half the fucking neighbourhood arrives.” Rome is already seizing him by one arm. “Help me get him to the chopper.”

We can’t question our captive in broad daylight in the middle of Manchester, so that sounds like the only reasonable plan right now. I grasp the other elbow, and we haul the boy upright, then drape his arms over each of our shoulders.

“Where are you taking me? I need a doctor. Painkillers. I want to go home...”

The complaints continue the entire way back to the car park. He’s still moaning when we bundle him into the helicopter.

“Where to, boss?” The pilot peers at us over his shoulder.

“Back to the island. We can talk to this little shit there.”

CHAPTER 12

Megan

“YOU DIDN’T EVEN GET his name?” Jack paces the office and slants a bemused glance at Gabe.

“No time. He was out of that window before we could stop him, and scrambling down the outside of the building like fucking Spider-Man.”

“Until he fell,” Jack observes. “He could have been killed and he’d have been no use to us then.”

Gabe shrugs. “Well, he wasn’t. But we didn’t have time to properly check all the gear he has in that flat. It looked like Cape Canaveral in there. I wouldn’t mind betting there’s some seriously useful data tucked away in those systems. We could do with sending someone over there. Someone who knows their way around that stuff.”

“That’d be me, then,” Casey remarks. “We need guards on-site to seal the scene.”

“Already sorted. Rome arranged that before we left,” Gabe assures her.

“Right. I’ll go later today then. Jed, can you take care of Roisin?”

Her husband smiles down at the sleeping baby in his arms. “My pleasure, darlin’.”

“Where’s Spider-Man now?” Jack asks.

“In the dungeons.” Gabe gets to his feet. “I was just on my way down to chat to him. He passed out on the way back, so we never got a word out of him.”

“Didn’t you say he was injured?” I put in. “I’ll come with you.”

Gabe's brow creases. "I don't think—"

"Stop that." I resist the urge to thump the table. Just. But they have to get it into their heads that I'm a part of this team and not just some bleeding-heart drowning in compassion. "I understand what's at stake here and I won't interfere. But if he's hurt, I should—"

Jack forestalls any further discussion. "Gabe, take Tony with you. And it would be good to have the doctor on hand." He levels a stern glower on me. "There's a time and a place for mercy, Megan. I trust you to know the difference."

At last, someone on the same wavelength as me.

"I do."

I follow the two men out of the conference room.

IT'S A VERY subdued young man we find in the cells. He sits on the edge of the stone bench set into the wall of the cell, looking thoroughly dejected and shit-scared. He tries to get to his feet when we enter, but his ankle won't hold his weight. He collapses back onto the bench with a sob.

I sit next to him. "Can you tell us your name?"

"Frances," he snuffles. "Frankie."

"Frankie what?" Gabe presses him.

"Sillitoe."

"How old are you, Frankie?" I ask, my tone considerably gentler than Gabe's.

"Sixteen," he replies. "I'm seventeen next week."

"We must remember to get you a cake," Tony sneers. "If you're still alive by then."

The boy pales. "What are you going to do? I just..."

"Nothing," I blurt. "Nothing will happen to you as long as you answer the questions we ask you. Can you do that?"

He nods vigorously. "What do you want to know?"

I don't miss the look exchanged between Gabe and Tony, a look which says, 'Is it really this easy?'

I stand and pull Gabe to one side. "He's just a scared kid," I whisper.

He regards the boy icily. "Maybe. We'll see." He takes my place beside Frankie. "How's the ankle?"

"It hurts, man." The boy is biting back tears.

“We can help with that.” He gives me a nod.

I settle on the other side. “I’m a doctor, Frankie. I’m going to examine your ankle, okay?”

He snuffles and nods.

I move to kneel on the floor in front of him and gently lift the injured foot onto my lap. “I’m going to take your shoe off.”

He bites his lip and nods.

I undo the laces and ease the expensive training shoe off, followed by his sock. The ankle is swollen to twice the size of its twin and sporting a kaleidoscope of colours.

“That looks sore. I need you to tell me where it hurts the most.”

The next few minutes are spent examining the injured limb. I can’t be certain it’s not fractured without an x-ray, and I’d need to move him to my clinic for that. For now, I settle for strapping it up tight. “Is that more comfortable?” I ask once I’ve finished.

“Yes. Thank you.” He appears slightly less pallid, I think.

I suppose I could leave now, my duty done, but I don’t. And neither Tony nor Gabe seems to want me to go, so I remain where I am, seated next to Frankie.

“Who do you work for?” Gabriel starts.

“Myself.”

“Bullshit. Who paid for all that fancy tech you have? The clothes? The shoes?” He kicks the discarded Jimmy Choo trainer. “You’d have no change from a grand for these.”

“I bought them,” Frankie protests. “With my own money.”

“What are you? A rich kid with a trust fund?”

He shakes his head. “I earned it.”

“How? A drugs line?” What other way would a kid of sixteen lay his hands on that sort of money?

“I wouldn’t touch that stuff. Does your head in.”

“Very wise. So, what then?”

“I do... jobs. Projects. People pay me for information.”

“What sort of information?”

“Anything? Anything they want to know.”

“Like?”

“Like... business stuff. Who’s bidding for what, and what they’re offering. Like, at blind auctions.”

Gabe regards him sceptically. "What sort of auctions?"

"Property usually. Companies sometimes. Corporate takeovers."

Gabe expression alters. Is that growing respect I see there?

"You hack into the auction systems?"

Frankie nods. "I can tell my client what the highest bid is to make sure they beat it. But not by too much. No one likes to waste money."

"Your client? Who would that be, Frankie?"

"I... I can't tell you that."

"Wrong answer, you little shit." He grabs Frankie by the collar of his designer polo shirt.

The lad lets out a terrified shriek. "No, please. I can't. Really. I don't know who they are. It's all done online. The dark web... I'd tell you if I knew."

Gabriel releases him, much to my relief. My instincts tell me the boy isn't lying

"So, how does it work, Frankie?" I ask him, more gently. "How do they get in touch with you?"

"There's a... a n-network..." he stammers. "It's hard to explain. I could show you if I had my stuff."

"Tell us," Gabriel insists.

"There's a coded comms system. I log in, and any requests that have been registered pop up. If I'm able to take the job on I reply, name a price, and they agree. It's all anonymous, but the money is deposited in my account, and off I go."

"Your bank account?"

"Yes. In Switzerland. Better for international payments, different currencies, and tax systems, that sort of thing. And private."

"You have it all figured out, don't you, Frankie?"

The boy shrugs. "It's good to be careful. There are some villains about."

"You don't say. Tell me more about this network. How do you join it?"

"Buyers pay a fee to get access."

"Who do they pay it to?"

"I don't know. I was invited to join the suppliers list. I have no contact with the clients apart from through the network."

"What about the other suppliers?"

"I never have any contact with them, except if someone outbids me."

"Outbids you?"

He nods. “Offers to do whatever for a lower price.” He tips up his tearstained chin and somehow manages a haughty expression. “I’m not cheap.”

“So, what do you charge for the inside track on an auction? What’s the going rate for industrial espionage these days?”

“I charge a minimum ten grand. More, depending on the value of the proposed purchase. I think five percent seems fair.” He delivers his price list with a straight face.

“So, on average, how much are you making, selling secrets?” Tony wants to know.

“Most months I clear half a million.”

“Pounds?” Gabe clarifies.

“No. US dollars. They’re a better international currency. Stirling fluctuates too much, and I don’t trust euros, not since Brexit.”

For a few moments, we’re all speechless. I rally first.

“What do you do with the money?” I ask him. “Apart from treating yourself to posh trainers and designer shirts?”

Frankie shrugs. “I keep it. In case.”

“You mean, it’s all in your Swiss bank account? A rainy day fund?”

Frankie nods. “I don’t need much to live on...”

“How much do you have squirrelled away in Switzerland?” Tony asks.

“Last time I looked, it was about fifteen million, but I’ve done some more jobs since then. Maybe seventeen by now. I left my phone behind when I climbed out the window so I can’t check.”

Tony lets out a low whistle. “Seventeen million dollars in the bank, and you live in a grotty eleventh-floor flat in fucking Manchester? What’s wrong with a nice tropical island somewhere?”

Frankie appears genuinely puzzled. “I like Manchester.”

Gabe shakes his head in disbelief. “So, tell me, Frankie, who paid you to hack into Ethan Savage’s phone?”

“I told you. I never know who the client is.”

“But someone did? Right?”

Frankie nods, slowly. “I’m on a retainer for that job.”

“A retainer? How does that work, exactly?”

“The client pays me ten thousand a month to keep a constant tap on the phone and report any interesting information.”

“How long has that been going on?”

“A few months...”

“Shit,” Tony explodes. “A fucking spy.”

Frankie shrinks back on the bench. “I never... I mean, it was just...”

“Just business. I know.”

Gabe is managing to keep his tone moderate, but I know the implications will be ricocheting around in his head just as they are mine. All that sensitive intelligence being passed to Christ only knows who. It’s fodder for blackmailers, would-be assassins. The police.

“We need to know who you sold it to,” Gabe repeats. “We need to know exactly what, exactly when.”

“I...I can’t remember all the details.”

“I suggest you try. Very hard. Will it help to jog your memory if I break your other ankle?”

He’s cowering now, huddling in a ball. “I’m telling the truth. I can’t remember. But it’s all there, in my files. I could retrieve the data if I was at home. If you let me go, I’ll—”

“Nice try.” Tony pulls out his phone and hits a key on his speed dial. “Casey? You still on the island?” He pauses, then. “Great. Could do with your help. And access to your kit.” He briefly explains what we’ve discovered. “So, we need to get into those files...” He hangs up. “Right, let’s get this little shit upstairs.”

“What’s upstairs?” Gabe wonders aloud as the pair of them hoist Frankie onto his feet. Correction, foot.

“Casey’s workshop,” I reply, wondering why I never thought of this. “She’s probably part of this network as well. Or if she isn’t, she’ll know how to access it.”

“No one can access it without the right permissions,” Frankie protests as he is half carried along the dark corridor.

Luckily for him, no one is listening right now.

“HE’S TALKING ABOUT MIDAS,” Casey announces, once she’s heard Frankie’s tale. “Or possibly The Vault. They’re both much the same thing, highly encrypted dark web platforms linking people or agencies who want to purchase intelligence or goods with potential suppliers. The Vault is more for goods. Arms, counterfeit currency, some drugs, though mostly those are traded through more traditional methods, as you know. MIDAS specialises in

data.”

“How do you know about those?” Frankie gasps, clearly wonderstruck at her knowledge.

We decided to meet with Casey in the kitchen, where our reluctant guest has been plied with Mrs McRae’s butter cookies.

He swipes the crumbs from his mouth and eyes a plate of cooling apple tarts. “Are those going spare?”

“You can bring one with you,” Casey decides, “but don’t go getting pastry in my equipment.”

She leads the way up another flight of stairs to the landing where the offices are. “I moved a lot of my gear over to Dublin after I got married,” she tosses over her shoulder as we troop along behind her, “but I expect there’s enough still here to be able to get in.”

“You’ll need to download special software,” Frankie insists. Clearly, his faith in Casey is not as keen as ours. His protests cease as soon as she opens the door to her domain, and we step inside.

“Fuck,” Frankie breathes. “You’ve got more stuff than me here.” He gazes about him in undisguised awe at the banks of computer equipment. “Is that your mainframe?” He reaches out to stroke a pale-beige box to his right. “What sort of power supply does it run on? How much RAM does it have? What about cache memory?”

Casey settles herself into a huge leather chair on wheels and fires up the machinery around her. She absently gestures for Frankie to sit on a stool beside her. “We can talk dirty later. First, we have work to do. Which system are you on?”

“MIDAS,” he replies.

Casey keys in a few commands. A plain access screen pops up. “What’s your login code?”

Frankie rattles off a string of digits, which she types in. Moments later, the word ‘Welcome’ is emblazoned across the screen.

Casey is silent as she navigates through Frankie’s various records, just occasionally stopping to query something. “This relates to the sale of that shopping complex in Dubai last year,” or “I remember this, that film grossed over sixty million at the box office.”

“Yes. The client was interested in the rights for the sequel,” Frankie mutters. “Can’t stand superheroes myself. I prefer something a bit more realistic...”

“Ah, here we are.” Casey pauses to peer at the screen. “A bunch of encrypted WAV files. You recorded the conversations.”

“There are transcripts if that’s easier,” Frankie offers.

“No, these are fine.” Casey settles on one at random, selects the right programme to decipher it, and clicks. Ethan’s voice fills the small room, issuing instructions to Aaron to settle a dispute between two of our suppliers. She selects another; this time Ethan is letting Cristina know he’ll be back in time to put Sebastien to bed. In another he’s ordering Tony to complete negotiations to acquire a snooker hall that has become vacant.

“I remember that,” Tony exclaims. “It was about a year ago.”

“That file is one of the earliest,” Casey confirms. “So, is that how long this has been going on?”

“More or less,” Frankie agrees.

“Has everything been passed on?” Gabe growls. “Every conversation?”

“No.” Casey leans in for a better look. “He’s been selective. Why would that be, I wonder?”

Frankie is quick to explain. “They just wanted travel plans. Location. I was to tell them his movements, especially when he left his home. He lives somewhere out in the fucking Atlantic, this guy.”

“Does he indeed?” Gabriel hitches his hip against a trolley, arms folded across his chest. “Do you even know who Ethan Savage is?”

“No. Why would I? He’s just a job.”

Gabe’s tone softens dangerously. “Do you have any idea where you are? Right now?”

Frankie shakes his head.

“Look out the window.”

Frankie hobbles over to the window and leans on the sill. “Hey, is that the sea?”

“It’s the fucking Atlantic, moron.”

“Oh. Oh...” The youth pales as the penny drops. “I’m... This is...”

“Yeah. Right. Sit down before you fall over. Casey, can you—”

“I’m on it.” She has started the rapid typing again, and characters dance across the screen. “I’m just trying to isolate... Ah, right, here we are. The original transaction.”

We all cluster around.

“Who was the customer?” Tony demands.

“Music Man,” Casey whispers. “I guess that’s his online persona.”

“Like I said, it’s always anonymous...” Frankie chimes in.

“Nothing is ever anonymous online. You should know that.”

“Yes, but you need specialised... Oh.” He falls silent when the location of the computer from which the request originated is displayed on the screen.

“Do you know anyone in Orpington?”

“So, we’re sure the instruction to tap Ethan’s phone was made from Archer’s scrapyard in Orpington? Is there any doubt of that?” Jack’s steely gaze rakes all of us, but it’s Casey he expects the answer from.

“None at all.” She confirms her findings. “Young Frankie has been feeding him a steady stream of intelligence. The only question I have is why has he not acted on it before now? He’s had loads of opportunities to attack Ethan.”

Tony has a theory. “Maybe he was waiting for something. Or perhaps he just wanted to take out as many as he could. That chopper was a prime target, with me, Aaron, and Rome on board as well.”

“Or maybe he prefers to strike on his own turf,” Aaron suggests. “It’s like Beth said, it’s unusual for us to be so far south. That flight path over Northamptonshire offered an opportunity, saved him the bother of transporting his missile launcher several hundred miles to the Highlands.”

Jack inclines his head. “Whatever the reasoning, we know who our target is, and we’ve isolated and blocked the leak. And we have our strategy in place. You all know what you have to do.”

CHAPTER 13

Megan

“DO YOU FANCY GETTING UP? Maybe a bit of fresh air?”

I’ve been trying to prise Magda out of bed for three days now. The sooner she’s up and about again, the better for her recuperation.

She sets aside the glossy magazine she was reading. “Perhaps tomorrow...”

“You said that yesterday. You need to practice getting about on crutches, build some muscle tone ready for when you get started with the prosthetics clinic.”

“I’m not sure...”

“Well, I am and I’m a doctor. Just for a few minutes to start with.” I peel back the blanket and hand her the first crutch. “Swing your good leg out first and put your weight on that, then ease yourself upright using the crutch.”

“What if I fall?”

“I’ll have to catch you. Or you’ll have to get up again on your own.”

She sends me an irritated glower but does as I’ve told her. I don’t think anyone is more surprised than Magda is when she’s suddenly upright and perfectly stable.

“Yay. I did it!”

“You certainly did. Try a few steps, just in here.”

She manages to complete a couple of laps of her bed without mishap before collapsing back onto the mattress, exhausted. I decide that’s enough for a now.

“Okay, you can chill again for a while, and get your breath back. I’ll check your dressing later.”

She waves to me from the bed. “Go do your ministering unto the sick. Well, sicker. I’ll be fine.”

By ‘sicker’ she means Ethan. He’s in the next room, and as usual, Cristina is by his side. She looks up when I enter.

“I was just reading to him. You said I had to talk to him, but I ran out of words, so...”

“What’s the book?”

“*Far from the Madding Crowd*. Hardy.”

“Is that his thing?” Ethan strikes me as more of a Russian tragedy sort.

“It’s mine,” she replies. “I thought I’d go on to a spot of Dickens next.”

As good as anything, I suppose. I run through my observations.

“Is there any change?” Cristina asks me as I complete the notes.

I shake my head.

“It’s been nearly two weeks. Surely there should be...”

“He’s comfortable and he’s stable. Don’t give upon him.”

“I won’t. Of course I won’t, but...”

I lay my hand on her shoulder. “I know.”

I RETURN to Ethan’s room later, to check in with the agency nurse before I leave for the night. He has someone in attendance twenty-four-seven, so she will do the night shift until her colleague takes over at six in the morning. I’ll be on call throughout.

“Everything okay?” I ask from the doorway.

“Fine, Doctor.”

“If you need anything, you have my number.”

“I do. Right here.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.”

I make my way to my quarters next door, to find my bed still ruffled from my romp with Gabriel yesterday. Have I really not been back here since then? I really do need to get more sleep.

I straighten the duvet, fling off my work clothes, and crawl onto the mattress. My body is exhausted, but my brain hasn’t got the memo. Thoughts and images swirl around my head, mostly concerned with a certain US army colonel I used to love.

Or thought I did, until he turned out to be a liar and a cheat.

And then, he morphed into something else, and I had to think again. Reassess. Nothing is quite as it seems. Seemed.

I get out of bed. I'm too confused to sleep. I need to be active, busy. That way I've no time to brood on how things might have been or might still be if I choose to believe in that magical new future that Gabe seems to be convinced is there for the taking.

Was he always a dreamer? I thought that was my specialty, until I was brought down to earth with a bump. Until the brutal truth slapped me in the face and made a mockery of all I'd begun to build. Am I really going down that road again?

I cast a baleful eye back at the bed. Yes, apparently, I am. And this time I'm doing it with my eyes wide open.

I've convinced myself to get back into bed when my phone rings. I check the clock on the bedside table. It's twenty past three in the morning. *Shit.*

"Doctor Alexander," I recite, in my best professional, ready-for-anything tone.

"His readings have changed."

"Changed? How?" I instantly recognise the voice of the agency nurse.

"Heart rate has increased, and blood pressure is up at one thirty-three over seventy. It was—"

"I know. One fifteen over twenty. I'm on my way."

I throw on a T-shirt and leggings and make a dash for the connecting door. I don't even bother with shoes. I'm back in Ethan's room less than two minutes later. "Any more change?"

"No, Doctor. But the BP is holding..."

It's not that I don't accept her findings, but I do my own observations anyway which bear out the reports I just had. I consider phoning Mr Renny, but he'll only say what I'm thinking, these are good signs. Promising signs. That conversation will keep until a more godly hour. So instead, I settle by Ethan's bedside and take his hand in mine.

"Everyone's here, waiting for you. You need to wake up because we want you back. We need you. Cristina needs you, and so do your sons. We know who shot you down now, but we don't know why. Maybe you can help with that, but you need to come back to us first. Can you do that, do you think?"

I might have dismissed what comes next as my imagination. Wishful thinking. But the nurse sees it, too.

“Doctor? Did he...?”

“Did he what, Sarah?” I hardly dare to breathe until she confirms what I’m barely daring to think.

“His hand moved. I’m sure I saw it...”

I felt it. The faintest tremor against my fingertips. Almost imperceptible, but we both saw it.

“Ethan? Can you hear me?” I squeeze his fingers between mine. “If you can hear me...”

“There. Again. Definitely.” The nurse grins. “He moved.”

I nod. His fingers are gripping mine, not hard, but...the pressure is not in my imagination, not wishful thinking. Just briefly, as though the effort is too much, and maybe it is. His hand goes limp again.

But it was enough. It was a start.

“Should I call Mrs Savage?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. But soon. When we’re sure.”

I MAKE the call at eight the next morning. Cristina is here within minutes, a still sleeping toddler, Sebastien, in her arms. “Is he awake? What’s happening?”

“No, not awake. But... stirring. We think.” I shift to let her have the chair closest to the bed where I’ve been stationed for most of the night. “We both detected signs of improvement a few hours ago. He’s been sleeping since then, but he may respond to your voice. Or the baby’s...”

She nods and reaches for her husband’s hand. “Ethan? I’m back. Seb’s here, too. He needs his daddy. And I need you, too. Please, if you can hear me...”

The hand in hers remains limp. Cristina squeezes his fingers. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

Still nothing, and the baby is becoming restless. Maybe he’s hungry. I offer to take him, but Cristina shakes her head.

“Perhaps if you could find him something to eat. Some cereals, maybe? No milk.”

“I’ve got just the thing.”

I slip back into my cottage to rustle up a bowl of something chocolatey and bring it back to the clinic. By now, Sebastien is wide awake and crying loudly.

Cristina apologises for the din. “We’ve probably woken everyone up...”

“There’s only Magda, and I doubt if she’ll mind.”

Sebastien brightens up immediately when he catches sight of the bowl. He is content to sit on my lap, crunching happily while Cristina continues to chat to Ethan.

“He did it again.”

I’m alert at once. “Did what?”

“He moved. His middle finger jerked. I saw it. There. Again.”

This time we’re both watching, and the movement is unmistakable. The finger lifts, then lowers again.

“It could be an involuntary muscle contraction,” I feel compelled to point out.

“No. I’m sure it isn’t. Ethan, can you do that again?”

Long moments tick by. We wait. Even Sebastien ceases guzzling. Then, slowly, deliberately, the finger moves again. Then once more.

Tears stream down Cristina’s face. “He’s back. He’s really back.”

I’m inclined to agree. Or, at least, very nearly. “I need to talk to the consultant.”

“Yes. Yes, call him. Get him to come here, whatever it costs.” She’s clinging to her husband’s hand as though her strength of will alone is all that’s needed to anchor him in the here and now, with us. Perhaps it is.

Magda arrives in the doorway, attracted by all the commotion. “Hey, what’s going on?”

“Do you mind helping Seb with his breakfast? I need to make a call.”

I leave Magda beside the bed while I rush to my office. Mr Renny is as delighted as I am at the apparent progress and agrees to make the house call. We’re both of the mind that it would be counterproductive to try to move Ethan back to the hospital since he’s clearly doing so much better here at home. I make arrangements for the helicopter to pick the consultant up, then return to the patient.

“How long before he’s fully awake?” Cristina wants to know.

I can’t give her an answer, though my instincts say not long. “Give me a shout if anything happens. The nurse is in the next room.”

“Where will you be?”

“Jack will want to know.”

“Oh. Of course.”

And I wouldn’t mind an update on what else is happening. Gabe, Tony,

Rome, Aaron, they are all out there somewhere, presumably wreaking havoc on the man who caused all this. I need to know they are safe. All of them, but especially one.

I FIND Jack Morgan at Ethan's desk in the main office. I tap on the door and enter.

He looks up with a smile. "What's all this I'm hearing about a miraculous recovery?"

News travels fast. I perch on the chair in front of him. Although there's no doubting who's actually in charge here, current situation notwithstanding, I've always found Jack Morgan far more intimidating than Ethan Savage. His reputation is formidable. A ruthless enforcer, brilliant strategist, and fiercely loyal to the Savages, Jack gets stuff done. No messing, no compromising. No excuses.

"It's early days," I advise, "but the signs are promising. I arranged for the specialist to fly up here."

He nods. "Good thinking. And nice work on your part."

"All I did was sit and wait, like the rest of us."

He cocks his head to one side. "Not like the rest of us. You got him home, that made the difference."

"We can't know that..."

"I think we can, Megan. Take the credit where it's due."

I thank him, and I suppose that's my cue to leave, to get on with my own job. But I don't.

"Was there something else I can do for you?" Jack leans back in the huge leather chair. "A coffee, perhaps?"

"I was wondering..."

He lifts a pale-blond eyebrow, waiting.

"... how the men were getting on."

"Men? Or man?"

"Men," I'm quick to clarify. "The scrapyards, the warehouses. The betting shops."

"All going according to plan. We have our targets. The surveillance is in hand. They all know what they're doing."

"Have there been any casualties?"

"Ours or theirs?"

“Either.”

“Gabe reports twenty-seven Archer soldiers neutralised. Picked off on guard duty or in response to leads we’re following.”

I wince at the callous terminology. “And on our side?”

“Nothing major.”

“Oh. That’s...good.”

“It’s early days. The main attack hasn’t happened yet.”

“When...?”

“Soon. The attacks need to be synchronised, but our men in the field will determine the most opportune time. Then there’s sure to be mopping up to do. And the betting shops, obviously.”

I nod. “Of course. In that case, I’ll just...”

“What do you make of that boy?”

This is out of left field. I furrow my brow. “Boy?”

“Freddie Sillitoe. The geek.”

I take a moment. “He’s a bit of a puzzle. Very bright but dim as well. I didn’t get the impression he has any real purpose in his life. He has formidable skills, but no real direction or focus for them apart from selling his expertise in exchange for exorbitant amounts of cash he has no use for.”

He nods slowly. “I was coming to more or less the same conclusion. The question is, do I kill him?”

“Are you asking me that?”

“I’d welcome your opinion.”

“He’s very young.”

“I know that. Your point is?”

“Just sixteen,” I remind him. “A child, really. He didn’t think about what he was doing, the harm he could cause. I honestly don’t think he knew any better.”

That expressive eyebrow lifts again. “It seems a little harsh, even for me, to execute him for being a stupid teenager. What would Ethan do with him, do you think?”

I pause to consider. Ethan Savage was never a man to evade the dirty jobs, but neither is he unnecessarily cruel, especially with young people. “I think he might want to help him, if I’m honest.”

“Help him how?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know anything about Frankie. His family, his background. But, I don’t get the sense that he belongs anywhere, with

anyone. Where is he now?"

I expect to be told he's in the cells awaiting his fate. I'm surprised when Jack shrugs.

"He's about somewhere. The kitchen would be my guess."

"You didn't have him locked up again?"

"I figured he's going nowhere. And he's always hungry, so..."

"I'll go and look for him. I really ought to x-ray that ankle in any case, though I'm fairly sure it isn't broken. He's getting about on it okay."

"Do that. And have a chat. See if you can figure out what he's about."

I get to my feet. "Will you let me know if there's any news? About the others?"

"Sure." He's already turned his attention back to the laptop in front of him, and I'm dismissed.

CHAPTER 14

G abriel

“FUCK. WHAT A DUMP.”

I can't argue with Rome's assessment of the down-at-heel bookie's shop on the other side of the road. Prime real estate this ain't. The tramp trying to grab some sleep in the doorway does nothing to elevate the neighbourhood.

“Kick him out of there and send him on his way. We don't need unnecessary casualties.”

The pathetic old lush needs to be shifted to a safe distance before we can go in and lay the explosives. And as we have half a dozen targets to hit tonight, we have no time to mess about.

Rome mutters to the man closest to him, who ambles over to nudge the rough sleeper with his boot. There's some sort of conversation, one-sided, but the old guy drags himself up off the pavement and gathers his belongings together before shuffling off down the street, three battered carrier bags on each arm.

“Wait.” I catch the tramp up and shove a fifty-pound note in the tattered pocket of the loose overcoat he's wearing. “For your trouble,” I tell him. Maybe it'll be enough to get him a proper bed for the night.

He mumbles something which might be thanks and continues on his way.

It takes just a few moments to force the rear door open. I enter with three of the men. We've had eyes on these premises, and the other couple of dozen similar betting shops owned by the Archer so-called corporation, for several nights now. We know they are not in the habit of leaving a night watchman

on guard, presumably because they think these shitholes aren't worth protecting. Who'd want to break in here? These are simply places to relieve miserable fucks of their hard-earned cash, none of which is ever left on the premises overnight.

Losing one shop would be a nuisance, but Archer would just rent somewhere else. Losing all of them at one go is a blow. And, like Jack said, it will make a statement. Archer won't know what hit him.

I have four more teams just like this one who will be attending every single shop owned by Archer within the space of the next two hours. The explosives will be laid, the detonators primed to go off at the exact same time.

At three-thirty precisely, it all goes BANG.

We leave this place and pile back in the cars to move on to the next. I check in with Nico who's heading up one of the other teams.

"Got two set up, boss. Four to go."

"Good. Keep me posted." I hang up and repeat the process with the other three teams.

Rome does the honours at the next shop, and I take the lead again with the third. It's depressing how similar they all are. They are all blessed with the same dingy shade of brown exterior paintwork and a crudely designed sign outside proclaiming 'Archer's Gambling'. Inside, they offer a row of wall-mounted television screens to enable the punters to watch their week's wages falling at the first, and a few scrappy tables to stand and lean on. The only seating is behind the counter, shielded by toughened glass. Stubby pencils are scattered on the tabletops, among the circular beer stains and discarded vending cups.

"Does no one ever clean these places?" one of the men with me wonders.

It's a rhetorical question. None of us feels obliged to answer.

It's going up to three by the time we exit the sixth property on our list. Rome drives, and we make our way back to the rendezvous point, a twenty-four-hour multi-storey car park. Nico's team is there ahead of us, already waiting on the rooftop level. The others all show up within the next five minutes and report that all has gone as planned. Twenty-four betting shops scattered across east and south London are primed and ready.

I phone Tony. "We're all set. You?"

"Aaron's inside the warehouse. There was some firepower in there, but it's been dealt with. He's just finishing off now."

“And the scrapyard?”

“That’s a bit more interesting. There were just a few guards here, half asleep, so we got inside with no trouble. There was time for a good look round.”

“Okay. What does he keep there?”

“Well, he did have a missile launcher, as we knew. Not to mention a dozen crates of Russian guns and the ammo to go with them.”

“You don’t say. And none of it guarded?”

“The man’s a half-wit. Seemed rude not to, so we loaded up a pair of Transit vans he had parked up in the yard. They’re on their way north even as we speak.”

“Nice work. How much longer do you need in there?”

“We’re done. On our way back to the van now.”

I check my watch. Three twenty-one. “Okay. We’re all at the car park. We’ll watch the fireworks from here, then move out. We’ll see you back at our warehouse.”

Jack set up a temporary headquarters in a disused warehouse close to the helicopter crash site. We still have men and equipment there, so it’s as good a place as any to base our operations.

“Sure.” Tony hangs up.

I wander over to join Rome who is leaning on the wall marking the perimeter of the upper deck of the car park, his steady gaze fixed on the surrounding skyline.

We observe the night in companionable silence for the next few minutes, until... *Whoosh!*

“There goes Ilford,” Rome mutters.

The plume of dark-grey smoke ascends vertically in the still night air.

“Barking. Dagenham,” Rome murmurs as more towers of smoke appear.

I have to bow to his superior knowledge of London geography. One burning betting shop looks much like another to me. Already the sound of sirens is carrying on the light night-time breeze. We wait and watch.

One by one, the plumes of smoke grow and multiply. I count them, only giving up when I reach seventeen and they have become so thick and fast that I can no longer reliably differentiate one from another. The acrid smell of smoke hangs in the air, and the wail of sirens is near deafening by the time I decide I’ve seen enough.

“We leave at four-minute intervals,” I order. “Take it steady. The city will

be swarming with police, and we don't want any unwelcome attention. Oh, and nice work."

Rome and I are the last to be on our way. Our progress towards the M25 is slowed by the throngs of emergency vehicles filling the streets, but they all seem much too intent upon reaching the scene of the latest apparently indiscriminate arson attacks to be interested in a humble baker's van delivering early morning crusty loaves.

"WE'VE LOCATED ARCHER." Tony makes the announcement as we munch on bacon sandwiches acquired from the butty van a couple of streets away. "That was Casey," he adds, with a nod towards his phone.

"Where?" I growl.

"Stevenage nick. He was hauled in for questioning over the fires. Suspected insurance fraud."

That makes sense. Jerome Archer wouldn't be the first to torch his own premises with a view to claiming a hefty pay-out.

"They won't be able to prove anything, though," Tony goes on. "So, we just need to be ready and waiting when they let him out."

I'm not so sure. "Didn't we agree that Casey would mess with his finances? If the cops inspect his books and think his companies are in trouble, that would be a motive for arson."

"Well, that's a possibility," Tony agrees.

"What Archer needs is a shit-hot lawyer," I suggest. "Who do you know?"

"Do I look like someone who hangs around with shit-hot lawyers?" Tony reaches for his phone again. "I'll call Jed."

Less than two hours later, we're reliably informed that Mr Maurice Walkyngton-James QC has successfully sprung our man from jail, bailed to reside at his home in the Hertfordshire village of Nether Halton, having surrendered his passport.

"He won't need documentation where he's going," Tony observes. "Let's go pay him a visit."

ARCHER'S HERTFORDSHIRE estate is ample proof, if that were needed, that

crime pays. And pays handsomely. The lofty wrought-iron gates are barred and bolted when we arrive, but nothing that a set of bolt cutters can't handle. We let ourselves onto the grounds and cruise in a convoy up the gravelled drive.

The place is three storeys high, fronted by a glorious Georgian facade. An ornamental fountain splashes gaily at the foot of the front steps, carved Grecian-style cherubs spewing water from their mouths. I suppose this must be the sort of thing the British aristocracy appreciate. To my uncultured colonial eye, it just seems tacky.

The lawns are nice, though. But I could take or leave the rose garden and the topiary.

We are greeted at the door by a middle-aged gentleman in butler's livery. He regards us down his long nose and politely enquires as to what he can do for us. He might carry the superior attitude off, too, but for the beads of sweat erupting on his brow.

"You can fuck off nice and quietly," I suggest, since it's clear his heart's not in it.

"Sir? If you would just—"

"We've no quarrel with you," I snarl. "Take the day off. Same goes for anyone else who works here."

The pompous little man sees sense. He turns and scuttles away, back into the house, leaving the door swinging open behind him. We take that as an invitation. Guns drawn, we start our search. Rome and I check the rooms on the right side of the spacious entry vestibule while Tony and Aaron cover those on the left. It's Tony who runs the fox to earth.

"In here," he calls.

We leave the bulk of our soldiers to guard our backs. So far, we've encountered nothing in the way of armed resistance, but you never know. Rome and I join Tony and Aaron in the study where Archer is seated at his massive desk, a laptop open before him and a tumbler half full of amber-coloured whisky in his hand. He glares at us.

"Who the fuck are you?" He reaches for the servant's bell set into the wall behind him.

"Don't you remember me, Uncle Jerome?" Aaron drops into the burgundy leather-covered winged chair opposite Archer and casually drapes one leg over the arm. "It's been a while, but even so..."

"Get out of my house." There's more frantic pressing of the bell. "I'll call

the police.”

Aaron grins. “Feel free. You’re probably on first-name terms with the local plod by now. Oh, and don’t bother with the bell, Jeeves is taking a break.”

“What are you doing here? I’m busy. I have things I need to do...”

“I’m sure. Like trying to work out how all your betting shops came to go up in smoke all at once. Not to mention the scrapyard and that pigsty of a warehouse.”

“Maybe he’s checking his banking apps,” Tony suggests, “and wondering where it all went.”

Archer scowls at the computer screen then back at Tony. “How do you know...? Oh, I see. I should have guessed. That bitch of a so-called stepdaughter...” He takes a good slurp of his whisky. “You bastards.”

“Got it in one,” Aaron sneers. “Not that relieving you of your ready cash in any way makes us even. You still owe us for a perfectly good helicopter.”

“Get fucked,” is the succinct reply. “Tell me, how’s that brother of yours? Still unconscious, last I heard. Must be, or he’d be here himself, not sending the runt of the litter to do his dirty work.”

Aaron’s gaze hardens. His smile doesn’t so much as offer to reach his eyes. “Ethan sends his regards. I’d say he was looking forward to seeing you again, but that would be a stretch. Truth is, no one really wants to see you ever again. That’s why we’re here.” He levels the barrel of his gun as a spot between Archer’s eyes. “Time to say goodbye, Uncle.”

It’s as though the reality of his situation is suddenly apparent. Archer blanches, squinting at the gun. “You don’t want to be doing this, lad. We’re family...”

“I think I’ll cope.” He cocks the weapon.

“No! Wait. Please, if we could just—”

Aaron directs a questioning glance at each of us. “Anyone have any better ideas?”

We all shake our heads.

“Well, then...”

The gunshot reverberates around the room. Archer jerks in his chair then collapses backwards, sightless eyes fixed on the ceiling, his brains splattered over the back of his chair.

Aaron re-holsters his firearm. “Sorted.”

CHAPTER 15

Megan

“IT’S NOT BROKEN.” I peer at the image on my tablet, then glance back at my patient. “A nasty sprain, but it’ll heal well enough with rest. Keep the support bandage on for a couple more weeks.”

Freddie beams. He seems pleased enough with the verdict. “Right, Doc. Thanks.” He gets up to leave, presumably headed back to the kitchen where he is confident of receiving a hearty welcome. In exchange for peeling potatoes and other such drudgery, he has access to limitless supplies of home-made baked goods. My aunt was always a woman who liked to feed people up, and she sees something of the waif in Freddie Sillitoe.

So do I, and I guess Jack, too.

“Wait.” I gesture to him to stay where he is. “I need a word.”

He sits back down.

“I was wondering where you might go. When you leave here, I mean.”

“Go?”

“Yes. Where’s home?”

“Manchester,” he replies warily. “You know that.”

“I know that’s where your flat is. But what about your family? Parents? Brothers and sisters?”

He simply shakes his head. “It’s just me, Doc.”

“You’re only sixteen—”

“Almost seventeen,” he reminds me.

“Almost seventeen,” I correct myself. “It can’t be that long since you left

home.”

“Been on my own since I was fourteen. I was in care before that. Foster homes mainly.”

“I don’t understand...”

He shrugs. “It wasn’t working out. No one’s fault, not really. I don’t get on that well with other people, so I decided to try it on my own. The other kids thought I was odd. They used to pick on me, and I’d hit back, so there was trouble. I’d get moved on. So, I decided to get my own place and I was okay after that.”

“How did you get a flat at fourteen?”

“I lied. And I had the rent, so why would there be a problem?”

“How did you have the money for rent? Food, electricity?”

“I told you. Projects. I’ve never gone short.”

I have no ready answer to that. Unlike most troubled teens, Freddie has a saleable skill, and he’s found a lucrative market for it. Without his ‘projects’ he’d probably have been on the streets, begging or worse. As it is, he’s a loner. A misfit. Sooner or later he’ll end up in jail. Or fall foul of someone even more lethal than Jack Morgan.

“How did you learn so much about computers?”

“Here and there. School, to start with. There was an IT teacher, he was sound. I used to stay back at lunch time and mess with the equipment. I just picked it up, I suppose. Read a lot, too. Computers are easy, it’s people who are complicated.”

He’s right there. “Back to my original question. Where will you go from here?”

“Are they going to let me go anywhere? I mean, I sort of assumed...”

I take a chance. “I think, if you wanted to leave, Jack would let you go. Why don’t you ask him?”

“Oh.” Freddie studies his fingernails. “Maybe I will, then.”

“Or...”

He peers up at me through his myopic glasses, and I detect a flare of hope in his eyes.

“Or you could ask if you can stay.”

His eyes widen. “Stay here? With you?”

“With us. And not here necessarily. There’d be training, you’d move about in the organisation.”

“Oh. That sounds... cool.”

“Think about it. And talk to Jack.”

Freddie shrinks back into his chair. “Fuck. Do I have to? He scares me.”

“He scares everyone. It’s his job. But this is his call. If he sees potential in you, he might give you a chance.”

I WATCH from the window of my consulting room as Freddie makes his way back towards the castle. Despite his injured ankle, I detect a spring in his step that wasn’t there before. Here’s hoping...

My next stop is with Magda, who in my opinion is ready to leave the clinic and move back into her apartment in the castle. I suggest as much to her.

“What about all the steps?” she wonders.

“One. You can manage steps. We practiced. And two, use the lifts.”

“What about looking after myself. Getting dressed, the bathroom, all of that.”

“If you need help, ask for it. There’s me, Cristina, Beth, my aunt, Janey, Faith.”

“They’re not nurses...”

“You don’t need a nurse. If you did, we’d hire one.”

“No. No, I don’t think—”

“You don’t need a nurse because you have friends. Let us help you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Trust me, I’m a doctor.”

FAITH and I help Magda to settle herself back in her own apartment, leaving me with just one patient in my care. I pop in to relieve the duty nurse for a few minutes, while Cristina deals with the school run.

I pull up a chair and seat myself beside Ethan. In the ‘real world’ as I like to think of it, I would never initiate physical contact with him. He’s my boss, a respectful distance is called for. That’s how things are run here. But this isn’t the real world. This is Planet Coma. I’m a doctor. I do what needs doing to help bring him back.

So, I take his hand, squeeze it gently. “Hi there, boss. How are you feeling today?”

I don't expect an answer. I hope for, perhaps, a responding squeeze of my fingers, but there's nothing.

"Feeling a bit tired, eh? I'm not surprised. Cristina will be back soon. She just went across to the mainland with the boys, then I think she's going to do a bit of shopping. Meanwhile, you've got me to entertain you. Would you like some more of *Call of the Wild*?" I pick up the tattered hardback Cristina brought across from the castle library. She's finished with Hardy and started on something a bit more modern. She marked the page where she got to. I open the book at Chapter Four and begin. "*He wanted to have the leadership. It was his by right. He had earned it, and he would not be content with less...*"

I pause. "A bit like you, boss. I can see why you like this book." I return to the story, but before I can continue, he clutches my hand. Hard. And opens his eyes.

For several seconds we simply stare at each other. I search for a sign of recognition, of awareness, some sign that he's really there, seeing me. My breath hitches. I open my mouth to speak, but no words form.

Then, his lips move in a smile. Or what might pass for one. He forms a word. I don't catch it, so lean in. "What did you say, Ethan?"

He mouths it again, and this time, I do get it.

"Hello, Doc."

MR RENNY ARRIVES by helicopter the next day. He conducts a range of neurological tests designed to establish what level of higher function is returning and declares the signs 'promising'. Ethan waits until the specialist has departed before opening his eyes again, but this time Cristina is there to see him do it. The celebrations go on into the night.

Progress is slow but steady. Ethan's periods of wakefulness are longer, more frequent. He's forming words, questions. Sitting up in bed, drinking through a straw. Jack starts to bring him daily reports. Ethan tires easily, but he's interested and seems to grasp what's going on.

Unlike his family, who are just so delighted to have him back, in whatever way they can, I'm on the alert for signs of longer-term damage. Loss of memory, poor concentration, defective linguistic skills. I'm not seeing any of that. A few days pass, and I begin to think that, just maybe, this is all going to be all right.

I say as much to Gabriel when he presents himself unexpectedly at my door.

“I didn’t realise you were back,” I blurt. “Are you...? I mean, did everything go okay?”

“Archer’s dead,” is his succinct report.

“Oh. I see.”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.” I step aside to let him pass. “What happens now?”

One eyebrow arches. “Well, my vote would be for an hour or so between your sheets. Unless you have any better ideas?”

“I didn’t mean that.”

His mouth slants across mine. “I know. We’ll talk later.”

It’s the elephant in the room. The thing neither of us wants to see or speak of. With the matter of Jerome Archer effectively settled, he has no further reason to stay. He needs to resume his hunt for Sokolov and he won’t find him on Caraksay.

We both knew this would be a temporary reunion, and Gabe would move on again. It was never acknowledged, but it was there.

But he’s right. We can discuss the details later. Right now, we have more pressing business. I break the kiss and take his hand. I lead him through to my bedroom, somehow managing to lose my shoes and my blouse on the way there. We tumble onto the mattress in a flurry of arms and legs, wrestling with each other and our clothes. Within seconds, we’re naked, and when he sinks his thick cock into me, I let out a shuddering groan.

“It’s been too long...” I gasp.

“Only four days,” he mutters. “But, fuck, you’re right.”

I wrap my legs around him and roll my hips, squeezing my inner muscles around his thick girth. The friction is delightful, intense, but still not enough. It will never be enough.

He finds a rhythm, short and fast at first, then lengthening his strokes. Deep, smooth, he fills me so perfectly. He always did.

Pleasure coils and spirals, surging up from my core. I quiver, and sensation pulses through me, building to a stormy crescendo before bursting with an avalanche of heady joy. I cry out, the sound muffled in his neck, and rake my fingernails down his back.

He stiffens in my arms, goes still for a moment, then thrusts again, hard and deep. “Christ, baby,” he mutters. “It gets better and better.”

I know.

I cling to him long after we've both gone still, long after the waves of pulsating lust have receded, at least for now. I let out an anguished moan when he eventually slides out of me and rolls to my side.

"Welcome back," I whisper. *Please stay...*

"I NEED to go back to the clinic." I stretch out beside him and contemplate getting dressed.

"Yeah, I guess. I heard the boss is back with us." He kisses my forehead. "You did well, Doc."

I'm not about to take all the credit. Cristina's devotion and Ethan's sheer pig-headedness are probably bigger factors in his recovery. Still, I did what I could. "I need to check in on him."

"D'you want me to come? I never actually met the guy properly."

I shake my head. "Not yet. He's still very weak."

"Really? He didn't give me that impression. Still, you know best. I'll be here when you get back."

I brush my lips over his. "You'd better be."

I pull my clothes on again as quickly as I can. "There's food in the fridge, if you want anything."

"What's wrong with Mrs McRae's cooking?"

"Nothing. I just... We need to talk. When I get back. Promise?"

He grins at me from the tangle of sheets. "Promise."

JACK ARRIVES at the clinic a few moments after I do. He pops his head around my office door. "Okay if I go in?"

"Of course. I think he's awake."

He nods. "Gabe Sawyer's back."

"I know. I... I saw him."

He says nothing more. If this was anyone but the hard-as-nails Jack Morgan, I might even interpret his expression as sympathetic. He leaves me to my work and disappears into Ethan's room. The low hum of voices tells me he's delivering his report of Archer's death.

The door crashes open. I splash my coffee all over the immunisation

reports I was filling in, the legacy of Covid-19.

“For fuck’s sake.” I grab a handful of tissues and start mopping up. “What the hell are you doing, Freddie?”

The boy is panting in my doorway, a laptop tucked under his arm. “I need to speak to Mr Morgan.”

“Now’s not a good time. He’s busy.”

“This won’t wait. They said he was here.”

“He is. He’s talking to Mr Savage, and he won’t want to be disturbed right now. Best if you wait a while. He won’t be that much longer.”

“Can’t wait.” He sets off along the corridor. “Which room is it? This one?”

I charge after him. “You can’t just burst in there. Freddie, wait!”

I’m too late. By the time I arrive, Freddie is at the foot of Ethan’s bed, being glared at by two ferocious Mafia bosses. Talk about blowing your chances...

Everyone speaks at once.

“I’m sorry. I tried to stop him...”

“What the...?” Jack looks ready to shoot Freddie between the eyes right here and now.

“Who the fuck is this?” Ethan demands to know.

“There’s a contract,” is Freddie’s garbled contribution.

“I’m sorry,” I begin again. “This is Freddie. He’s... new.”

“He’s fucking suicidal,” Ethan growls.

“I’ll take care of this, boss.” Jack gets to his feet and bellows at Freddie. “You, get the fuck out of here. Wait for me in my office.”

For a moment, I have the distinct impression Freddie is going to do as he’s told. He quakes, half turns. Then he changes his mind. “No, sir. I need to tell you now. About the contract.”

Jack closes his eyes and takes a deep breath in through his nose. “Do not make me repeat myself, you little shite.”

“I’m sorry, but you have to listen.”

Jack takes a menacing step forward, and I make a grab for Freddie’s elbow, intending to drag him out of there by force if I have to.

It’s Ethan who cuts through the tension and chaos. “Wait. If it’s so urgent, let the lad speak. What’s this about a contract?”

Freddie swallows hard. “I was in that lady’s room...”

“Lady?” Ethan appears baffled. He’s not the only one.

“The lady with the computers.”

“He means Casey,” I offer.

Freddie nods. “Yes. Her. I was in there, messing about, and I logged on to my MIDAS account.”

“Your what?” Ethan asks.

“It’s a network, on the dark web,” Jack puts in by way explanation. “Who gave you permission to use Mrs O’Neill’s equipment?”

“No one. I just thought... Anyway, never mind that. I was on there, checking for projects I could do, to pass the time, like, and I saw this.”

He dumps the laptop from under his arm onto the bed, turns it so Ethan can view the screen.

“What am I looking at?”

Jack and I move round so we can also see.

“There. It’s a Code 8 request.” Freddie points to the top-left corner of the screen. “That means an armed assault. Lethal force.”

“An assault on who? Or what?”

“You, sir.” Freddie hits a couple more keys, and another dialogue box appears.

Target : Ethan Savage

Location : tbd by contractor

“What the fuck does this mean?” Jack snarls.

“It means that someone is willing to pay a lot of money to have Mr Savage killed. Lethal force. The place of the attack to be determined by whoever takes this contract on.”

Ethan’s lip quirks. “How much money are they offering, exactly?”

Freddie consults the information on the screen. The latest bid is for half a million dollars. It’ll go for less than that, though, because someone is sure to undercut me.”

“Undercut *you*?” I gape at him.

He nods. “I needed to put in a bid to keep the negotiations open, give me access to the discussion and time to come here and find you.”

“How many bidders are there?” Ethan asks.

“Three, sir, including me.”

“Do you know who the other two are?”

“Not their names, but I can see where they are, so I can make a guess. This first one is located in Nairobi. There’s only one outfit in Africa capable of a hit like this, and that’s Ngunde Esperate. He’s a sniper. And he’s very

good. If he got the job, well, I think you would have had it. Sir. But he's too dear."

"It pays to hire the best," Ethan points out drily.

"But this client is a cheapskate. Look, he's going for the lowest offer. That was me, even though I've no experience of this sort of work."

We all squint at the screen and can see what he means.

"Who's the other bidder?" Jack wants to know.

"Not sure. He's located in the UK. And that's who's probably going to get the job. See, he's already said he'll knock fifty grand off my price."

"Holy fuck," Ethan breathes. "Why doesn't the buyer just seal the deal, then?"

"The money hasn't changed hands yet," Freddie explains. "No idea why. The final offer was made nearly twenty-four hours ago, but something's holding up proceedings."

"Maybe the buyer's short of cash," Jack suggests. "Four hundred and fifty thousand isn't the sort of money you find down the back of the sofa."

Freddie squints at the screen. "No, but it's not a lot for a job like this. A million is nearer the mark, and then you'd be dealing with Esperate. Whoever's bidding here, he's not in it for the money."

Ethan has heard enough. "Whatever the delay is, it won't last long. This bastard means business. Jack. I need a war conference. Main hall, ten minutes. Get everyone there, and those on the mainland by video link." He's already sliding his legs out of bed. "Megan, I need you to help me get some clothes on. And I'll need a wheelchair..."

"You can't, you're not well enough."

"Fuck that. If what Einstein here says is right, we're about to be under attack. We've got shit to do, and I won't be doing it from a hospital bed."

CHAPTER 16

G abriel

I'M WOKEN with a start by the shrieking of a siren. I roll out of Megan's bed and grab my clothes. Less than half a minute later I'm outside, sprinting around the side of the cottage in the direction of the clinic.

I meet Megan coming out. She and Freddie are pushing a wheelchair, and if I'm not mistaken, the occupant is Ethan Savage. I skid to a halt in front of them.

He recognises me at once. Not bad, given it's been a few weeks since Minsk, and he's been in a coma since our previous one and only meeting. He doesn't give the impression of being especially pleased to see me.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

I offer my hand. "Gabriel Sawyer. Nice to meet you, Mr Savage."

Megan does her best. "Ethan, this is Gabe. He... I mean, he and I... That is..."

Ethan scowls at her. "Just get me to the castle. We can deal with the introductions later."

"Let me." I take Megan's place behind the wheelchair and shove.

She and Freddie jog along beside us.

Men are arriving from all directions, heading towards the castle. Clearly the siren, which is still wailing, is some sort of call to arms.

"What's this about?" I yell, wrestling the wheelchair up the castle steps.

"There's going to be an attack," is the best an out-of-breath Megan can manage. "Ethan called a war conference."

There's no time for further discussion. We arrive in the entrance to the great hall, where maybe a couple of dozen men are already assembled. From among the crowd, a boy of about twelve years old disengages himself and rushes at us with cries of "Papa." He flings himself into Ethan Savage's arms. "Papa, you're better."

Ethan hugs the boy back. "I'm certainly getting there, son." He puts the boy at arm's length. "I need your help, Tomasz."

"What, Papa?"

"I need you to find Jacob, then go with Aunt Faith. You'll have the little ones with you as well and you'll need to help look after everyone."

"But, Papa, I want to stay with you."

"I know, but this is an important job, and I need someone I can really trust. Will you do it for me? Please?"

The boy regards his father, then nods. His reluctance is obvious, but he does as he is told. Asked.

"You can trust me, Papa."

"I know that, son. I love you."

"I won't let you down." He hugs his father again, then rushes off in search of this Jacob.

Ethan watches him go, then seems to give himself a mental shake. "Right. To business. Is everybody here?"

A few stragglers are still filing in. I spot several women as well and the men. Cristina Savage is already seated at the huge table. Beside her is Beth, Aaron's partner. And, of course, Casey Savage-O'Neill. Magda hobbles in, and one of the men stands to offer her a seat. Even the cook is present, hovering by the door to the kitchen.

I manoeuvre Ethan's chair to the head of the table, then take a step back. Tony, Rome, and Aaron form up beside me, while Jack takes the seat next to Ethan, opposite Cristina.

"It's good to see you back, boss," one of the men calls out.

There's a generalised cheer, which Ethan acknowledges. Then, silence.

"We have a problem," Ethan announces. He beckons Freddie forward. "Tell them."

The lad has the appearance of a rabbit caught in headlights. "I... Well..."

Ethan is exasperated. "For fuck's sake. Jack, help him out."

Jack Morgan gets to his feet and moves to stand beside Freddie. "It seems our whiz-kid here has discovered an assassination plot. Someone, we've yet

to determine who exactly, is in the process of taking out a contract on Ethan.”

There’s a chorus of outrage, soon quelled by a disapproving glower from their leader.

“We’ve work to do. First things first, we can’t be sure of the target for the attack. Here, or at Caernbro Ghyll. Possibly both. Consequently, I want all non-combatants on both sites evacuated.”

“We want to stay. All of us.” This from Beth, who reached for Aaron’s hand.

Ethan is having none of it. “This is likely to be vicious. We need our children well away from any fighting. We can’t defend our home and worry about all of you. The evacuation is non-negotiable.”

“I understand, but—”

Aaron’s hand on her shoulder quells any further response. “Please, sweetheart. Do this.”

Cristina adds her voice to the discussion. “My husband is right. The children and staff must be protected. I will organise the evacuation. We can use *The Lydia*, and I will call my brother. We can go to Moldova.”

Ethan nods. “Excellent plan. It would be good to move the yacht out of these waters in any case. It would be a target and repairs would cost a fortune.”

“Are there any women from the trafficking rescue still at Caernbro Ghyll?” Cristina enquires.

“Three,” Jack replies. “Ruth’s working on it.”

“They need to be included,” Cristina asserts. “I’ll talk to them.”

“Trafficking rescue?” Ethan glares at his second-in-command. “So, I’m running a women’s refuge now?”

Jack shrugs. “It’s temporary. How soon can *The Lydia* be ready to sail?”

A grizzled-looking individual at the other end of the table stands. “Within the day, sir. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll get on with the preparations and plot a route.”

“Who’s that?” I murmur to Megan. I haven’t seen this old guy before.

“His name’s Isaac. He’s the skipper for *The Lydia*.”

“Ah. Right.”

Ethan is still digesting the news of his latest philanthropic gesture. He nods at the old man, and Isaac shuffles off to go about whatever needs doing. Cristina gives Beth a nudge and excuses herself, too.

“Roisin needs to go, but I’ll be staying,” Casey announces. “Jed?” She

turns to her husband. “This isn’t your fight. I’ll understand if—”

“Fuck that. I’m staying, too.” He addresses his next remark to Ethan and Jack. “How many of my soldiers do you need? I can have men here within the day.”

Jack responds. “It’s appreciated. The island is easy to defend with just a few of us, but we could do with reinforcements at Caernbro Ghyll. As many as you can spare.”

“It’s done.” He’s already on his phone, tapping out instructions.

“What can I do?” Casey wants to know.

Ethan’s eyes narrow. “Is it possible to identify the purchaser and the contractor from the information on the dark web?”

Freddie shakes his head. “It’s all totally secure. That’s the point of it.”

Casey has other ideas. “Nothing online is foolproof. Given time, and skill, there’s always a way to burrow in.”

That’s good enough for Ethan. “Right. Do it then. Freddie, you can help her. Or failing that, just watch and learn.”

Casey is on her feet. She jerks her chin at the lad. “Are you coming?”

Freddie trots off after her, leaving just the men in the war room.

“What do we have by way of weaponry and ammunition?” Ethan demands.

Jack is all over that. “We’re well supplied on both sites. I have men checking now, but I’m confident we’ve no need to worry on that score.”

“And there’s the additional consignment we liberated from Archer’s scrapyard the other day,” Tony reminds us. “The missile launcher and two dozen crates of Russian guns.”

Ethan’s ears prick up. “Where are they now?”

“Glasgow.”

“I want the missile launcher here. How soon can you organise that?”

“Is there a chopper free?”

“There can be.”

“A couple of hours, then.”

Ethan nods. “If they attack us here, it’ll have to be by sea or air. A missile launcher will come in useful. The first priority is for everyone to assist in the evacuation, then, once the families are safely away, assume battle positions and stay on alert. I’ll keep you briefed as we learn more. You all know your jobs. Go and do them.”

MOST OF THE men disperse to assume their duties, leaving only the most senior lieutenants gathered around the table. My status here is, shall we say, undetermined. I opt to remain. Ethan's steady gaze takes us all in.

"You've done well. All of you. You have my thanks."

"Just keeping your seat warm, boss." Jack's features split in a rare and genuine smile. "I guess I can move over now."

"I won't forget what you've done for me, Jack. And for my organisation. My family owe you. Cristina told me how you stepped up and pulled everyone together straight after the crash. You, too, Aaron, despite being injured yourself. His gaze rests briefly on Rome, still on crutches. And the rest of you. I truly appreciate it."

There are mutterings of "You're welcome", and "Anytime". Suddenly, that dark gimlet gaze is levelled on me.

"I said introductions could wait, but my original question stands. What the fuck are you doing here?"

I come straight to the point. "I work for the US Government. Loosely. Uncle Sam has a keen interest in preventing Olaf Sokolov from getting any sort of toe hold on US soil, which is why I was operating undercover in Minsk picking off his key generals. I came to the UK on a mopping-up exercise to eliminate what remained of the trafficking enterprise he had established here. I realised the Savages and I had a mutual interest in that particular matter and your guys had the inside track. So, I offered to join forces. It helped get my job done, and I figured you could do with the extra manpower, seeing as half your top brass were out of action."

"We don't take on new people who we don't know. Or we didn't." He eyes Jack suspiciously.

His underboss nods. "I wasn't keen, to be fair. But Megan knew him, and like he says, the extra manpower came in handy He's done okay, boss. Led one of the teams when we went after the traffickers, and he helped stop an assassination attempt on Aaron. He was part of the team that took out Archer and his operation, so I reckon we can trust him."

Ethan takes all this in and nods thoughtfully. "You say Megan knows him? Ah, right. The US military..." Suddenly, the penny drops. "Holy shit! Is this the guy...?"

Megan blushes a bright shade of crimson, which is answer enough.

"Fuck," Ethan breathes. "I bet that was some reunion."

"We're... working things through," she mutters.

I opt to remain silent, coward that I am.

Mercifully, Ethan moves on to quiz his team regarding the other newcomer. “What’s the story on young Freddie?”

Jack explains the youth’s part in the unfolding situation, ending with, “I’m thinking he might have promise. As a new recruit. With some training...”

“Some training?”

“Well, a lot of training. He’s bright. We can use brains as well as brawn.”

“I know that, but from what you say, he used his brains to sell our secrets to our enemies. Our chopper was shot down as a direct result. We could have all been killed. Why is he still breathing?”

Megan is instantly leaping to the boy’s defence. “He’s only a kid. A confused, lonely kid. He wants to stay, make a go of it here, with us. And he did come straight to us when he stumbled on that contract. You can’t kill him now.”

Ethan’s features are like granite, and his gaze is nothing less than arctic. “Just to be clear, I can do what the fuck I want. But I’ll hear what the rest of you think before deciding.”

Jack is first to declare. “I was ready to give him a chance. We could start his education with a good battering, to point out the trouble he’s put us to and discourage him from fucking up again.”

Rome agrees, but he’s less keen on kicking the shit out of the lad. “I think he’s learned his lesson.”

Tony just shrugs. “I quite like him. He’s a bit weird, but who isn’t?”

“He could make us a lot of money,” Aaron points out, always with an eye to business.

“What do you think, Mr Sawyer?” Ethan regards me with interest.

I haven’t given the matter much thought before now, but the answer seems fairly obvious to me.

“I don’t think he’ll ever make a soldier, however much you train him. Teach him to handle a gun, obviously, and to look out for himself. But his place is at a desk, with a laptop. He reminds me of your sister. If she’d agree to work with him, they could make a formidable duo. And Aaron’s right. Young Freddie will rake in a fortune for you, if you let him.” I could go on to wax lyrical about boundaries and role models, but I think I can safely leave that to Megan.

“Jed?” Ethan turns to his brother-in-law.

The Irish mob boss pours himself a glass of water before offering his opinion. “I have a vested interest. If you have your own tech wizard here, you won’t be constantly calling on mine.”

“Don’t rely on it,” Ethan mumbles.

“For what it’s worth, Casey rates him. He wouldn’t be with her now if she didn’t. She’s no bleeding heart, and she won’t suffer fools.”

Ethan strokes his chin. “True enough. Okay. It’s decided. He can stay. And we can leave his pretty face intact, for now. Jack, can you work something out around his training? I’ll talk to Casey about taking on an apprentice.”

IT’S ONLY a little over seven hours since the war conference concluded, and the helicopter is making its second drop-off on the island, crammed with the remaining women and children from Caernbro Ghyll. I watch proceedings from the window of Megan’s cottage.

“Who are they all?” I ask.

She comes to stand beside me and peers around my shoulder. “That’s Jenna, Tony’s girlfriend. And the boy is young Robbie. They foster him.”

I recognise the blonde as Ruth, Jack Morgan’s wife. I briefly met her baby daughter on the memorable occasion of my one and only visit to the nursery. I also recognise the three trafficked women, though they look rather better now than they did a couple of weeks ago. Decently dressed, well fed, bruises all but entirely faded. I gather they’re the ones with nowhere and no one, really, to go back to. I daresay they face an uncertain future, but at least they’ll have some say in it.

“That’s Janey, another of Ethan’s waifs and strays. Obviously, you know my aunt Jacqueline. The rest are the women and children who normally stay here on Caraksay.”

In all I count five children of various ages, a toddler, and two babies. There are six women, too. There is much hugging and kissing on the wooden jetty as they clamber on board the shuttle boat. The only females remaining are Casey and Megan, the rest are packed off on the luxury yacht bound for Eastern Europe.

The operation is smooth and efficient. I can’t help wishing we’d been half as competent when Kabul fell to the Taliban. The evacuees are ferried across to the yacht, which sets sail within the hour. I can still hear the distant shriek

of the horn, even after the mast has finally disappeared over the horizon.

BY COMMON CONSENT, those of us remaining congregate in the kitchen at the castle. We help ourselves to whatever's in the fridge and keep a pot of coffee constantly bubbling. Most of the men are pretty much glued to their phones, presumably texting their wives and children. It's the lull before the storm and is shattered when Casey clatters in, her new protégée at her heels.

"We did it," she announces to the room in general.

Ethan uses his elbow to clear a space on the huge oak table for her to deposit her ever-present laptop. "Tell us."

She doesn't sugar-coat it. "The purchaser is—was—Jerome Archer."

Aaron lets out an expletive. "Not possible. He's dead. I shot him myself."

"Yes. My guess would be you walked in on him just as he was trying to finalise the deal."

"But we—"

Tony interrupts. "He was on his computer. Do you remember? We found him in his study. It was open in front of him."

"I don't suppose any of you thought to check what the fuck he was doing?" Ethan growls.

Aaron is unrepentant. "We were busy, bro. Things to do, traitors to kill."

Ethan waves the explanations away. "Go on," he says, directed at Casey.

"So, the deal was unfinished. We saw that and wondered why. Seems we were right. Archer was strapped for the cash. His accounts are either frozen or emptied, so he couldn't lay his hands on the price, four hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Without the money, up front, the contractor wasn't budging. I imagine he was trying to sort all of that out when you burst in. The rest is history, rather like Jerome Archer."

Maybe I'm being dim today, but I'm struggling to make sense of all this. "So, there isn't actually a deal in place? No contract?"

Casey grins at me. "That's right. And once it gets out that Archer is dead..."

"You think it'll all just disappear?" I ask.

Casey nods. "Pretty much, I imagine."

"And if that happens—"

"When that happens..." she corrects me.

"When. We'll never know who was willing to take on the job. Until they

decide to have another go.”

“I suppose that’s true, but we should just be glad we foiled it in time. We can stand down and get our people back.”

I’m not so sure. I may not be a classic mercenary. I kill for a living, but I work for my country, not a pay packet. Even so, once a target is marked, it’s about more than just money. It’s about honour, prestige, reputation. It’s about getting the job done. The offer of a contract is out there. Ethan Savage is a marked man now.

I’m about to point that fact out when Ethan clears his throat.

“Tempting as that might sound, it doesn’t really solve the problem.”

All eyes are on the boss.

He continues. “Gabriel is right. We know, now, that there’s some bastard out there ready to have a go, as soon as someone offers the right price and has the cash to back it up. And next time, we won’t be so lucky. We may not see it coming. I moved us all here to avoid this sort of fucking problem. I’m not spending the next few years looking over my shoulder, knowing my family is in danger, while some chancer is biding their time, waiting, watching. I want this ended. Now.”

Ah, so he is on the same wavelength as me...

“How can we...?” Tony’s brow furrows in puzzlement.

“We should finish what Archer started.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it’s not general knowledge that Archer’s dead. We can assume this firm he’s been dealing with don’t know yet, anyway, or they’d have fucked off by now. They wouldn’t still be expecting their money. All they know is, they’ve done a deal and want the payment, but he’s not coming through. So, what if we pay them and activate the contract?”

“Are you serious, boss?” Jack gapes at him.

“Deadly serious. This way, we can dictate the terms. When. Where. We’ll be waiting for them. We’ll wipe them out for their trouble. It’ll send a nice, resounding message to anyone else who gets a similar idea.”

There’s a rumble of generalised muttering, and it’s clear not everyone sees the logic in this plan.

“It’s asking for trouble.”

“Suicide.”

“What if...?”

Personally, I’m on board. It sounds like a stroke of genius to me.

In what I'm beginning to realise is his usual style, Ethan allows them their say. I've no reason to suppose he isn't listening, weighing their views with his own. He slaps his palm on the table, and the rest fall silent.

"It's my call. I say we're doing this. Anyone object?"

No one, apparently, wants to argue with the leader.

"Right, then. Casey, you need to make the payment happen. Get them locked in, find out who the fuck they are, and start telling them how it's going to be."

"I WAS HOPING to find for Jack." I pause in the open doorway of the main office on the first floor of the castle. Ethan is seated at the desk, *his* desk, I assume. His recovery continues apace. I can't help but marvel at the stamina of the man. Or maybe it's sheer bloody-minded determination.

His empire is under threat. He steps up.

"Sorry to disturb you." I nod to him, ready to move on since Jack Morgan is clearly not here.

"Why?" he asks.

"Why what?"

"Why are you looking for Jack? Can I help?"

"Needed to check what sort of explosives we're using to blow the jetty if it comes to that. I'm setting the detonators."

"Ah, yes. You're the expert on blowing things up."

"Well, more specifically, *not* blowing things up. I specialised in bomb disposal in Afghanistan. Roadside devices, mainly."

"Dangerous work. Was it good training for becoming a covert assassin?"

I shrug. "Some transferable skills, I suppose."

"Like what?" He settles back in his leather chair, clearly ready to listen.

"Focus," I begin. "Attention to detail. Timing. Good instincts."

"I can see why Jack was inclined to make use of your skills."

"There was mutual benefit."

His lip quirks. "Glad to be of service to the US Government. What's the plan for after?"

"After?"

"Once this threat is neutralised. Does the US military have other targets lined up for you?" He props his elbows on the desk. "Can I risk turning my back on you, Gabriel? That was the mistake Fedor Morozov made, was it

not?”

“I have no quarrel with you, Mr Savage, and as far as I know, neither does the US Government.”

“Bollocks. I trade over there. Jed, too, even more than me. How do I know your ‘cleansing’ operation won’t extend to us?”

“You’re not in the flesh trade. Quite the opposite, from what I’ve seen.”

“Is that it?”

“It is, for me. I’m not on a crusade to rid the world of organised crime, but there’s a line...”

“Human trafficking?”

I nod slowly. “That’s right.”

He steepled his fingers, his elbows on the desk. “So, what’s the story with you and my doctor?”

I roll with the sudden change of subject.

“What about me and your doctor?”

“The way she described it when she arrived here, you were a worthless piece of shit who couldn’t keep his dick under control.”

“She wasn’t far wrong.”

“And now? Where’s it going with you two?”

“We’re working things out.”

“That’s what she said, I seem to recall. Do I need to be on the lookout for another medic?”

“I guess that’s up to her.”

He’s silent for a few seconds, as though he’s uncertain whether or not to continue. Eventually, he opts to press on. “You’re no fool. You’ll have seen there’s tension between Jack and Aaron over who is second-in-command.”

This is news to me. I’ve seen no sign of dissent in the ranks. “If there is, they manage it well. But, yes, I can see the potential. Age and seniority versus blood.”

“Exactly. There isn’t room for a third dog in that particular race. The dynamic is delicate already.”

Now he has me on the back foot. “I don’t want the job.”

“Maybe not, but you would still be seen as a contender. I can’t let you disrupt things, and if you stay...”

“I can play nicely when I have to, but running with a pack isn’t what comes naturally to me. I work alone. I won’t be elbowing my way in.”

He raises one dark eyebrow. “A lone wolf presents a different set of

issues. I can do without the hassle.”

I sigh. I could carry on but see no point. His mind is made up. “I get it. There won’t be a problem.”

He gets to his feet, unsteady but resolute. He offers me his hand. “I’m glad we see eye to eye. It was good talking to you, Mr Sawyer. I wish you well.”

“Likewise, Mr Savage.”

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CHAPTER 17

Megan

“I WASN’T EXPECTING THAT.” Gabe steepled his fingers, frowning. “It’s not Olaf’s usual style. To work for someone else...”

“Maybe he needs the money,” Rome suggests. “He’s had some costly losses recently.”

“Possibly, though according to the boy genius here, he’s offering to do the job pretty cheaply. You’re quite sure he’s the guy?”

Casey and Freddie nod in unison, but it’s Casey who does the talking.

“We’ve been exchanging covert messages for the last couple of hours. It’s him all right. Olaf Sokolov. And he can’t get to work soon enough. I guess this job is personal as well as a half-decent earner. You’ve seriously pissed him off, Ethan.”

He grins. “Good. Did you relay my instructions?”

“Of course. He has over two hundred men ready to launch their attack the day after tomorrow. Six helicopters, the rest on motor launches. His plan, just as you instructed, is to take us by surprise, overrun the island, and eliminate everyone here. He apparently fancies the place as a holiday home.”

Ethan gives a grim chuckle. “I’ll think about scattering his ashes here. Okay. We have forty-eight hours. Ample time. Get moving. You all know what needs to be done.”

The men disperse, leaving just me, Casey, and Freddie in the hall. Casey’s role, with Freddie, is to monitor communications between Olaf and his men and gather any intelligence she can from it. For myself, I’m at a

loose end until the fighting starts, and then I deal with the casualties.

Freddie excuses himself and heads for the kitchen to check out the fridge.

“You and your hunky marine look to be getting pretty cosy,” Casey remarks as soon as we’re alone. “So, you two are a thing again?”

“A thing?”

“Fucking like the proverbial bunnies,” she clarifies. “He’s moved into your cottage.”

“Not moved in, exactly...”

“He slept there the last two nights.”

“Who told you?”

“No one ever tells me anything. They don’t have to.”

I give it up. There’s never any point trying to keep secrets from Casey Savage, and why bother anyway? “We’re... trying to work something out. It’s been complicated, but—”

“But you love him?”

“Love? I didn’t say that. We just—”

“I admit, he’s not hard on the eye. I wouldn’t mind rolling across the mattress with him myself a time or two if he was going begging, but Jed can be quite possessive.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re silly in love with your husband.”

“And the sexy American is silly in love with you, so I guess we’re stuck with them both. Problem with yours is, he’ll be going back to the US when his mission here is done. Will you be going with him? It’s just that, with you being kicked out of the army and deported and all that...”

Casey Savage could never be accused of mincing her words.

“I wasn’t deported. I left.”

“Ah. So, you could go back?”

“Not exactly. I could get past Homeland Security, perhaps, but I’d never be allowed to work as a doctor in the US.”

“That’d be a shame. A fucking waste, if you ask me.”

I don’t answer. What is there to say?

“Maybe you and Gabe could keep in touch,” Casey suggests. “You could get together at holidays. Thanksgiving dinner, that sort of thing.”

“Jed travels a lot. You make it work.” I’m clutching at straws, I know.

“I always know where he is, what he’s doing. I go with him most of the time. Roisin, too. Your babies will hardly ever see their daddy.”

“Babies? You’re getting ahead of yourself, Casey.”

“Thinking it through, that’s all.” She lays her hand on my arm. “Just thinking of you, really. You were good to me when I had no one, and I haven’t forgotten. I’m your friend, or I’d like to be. Sort of.”

“My friend?” *Sort of?*

“Don’t get carried away. We won’t be swapping lipsticks or sharing fashion tips...”

“Thank God for that.”

“...but if you need someone to talk to, I’m here. Or on the end of a phone. Oh, and for what it’s worth, I think he’s a good guy. A keeper.”

“I can’t keep him, though. That’s the problem, you just said it.”

“I guess that’s up to you. Find a way to make it happen, girl.”

“But I—”

“Right. Enough chit-chat.” She’s on her feet. “I have armed raids to coordinate. Where did that fucking boy get to?”

“Kitchen,” I offer.

“Yeah, right. Later.” She waves to me over her shoulder as she makes for the door.

GABE FINDS me in my clinic. I’m doing a stocktake, making sure I have enough supplies to cope with pretty much anything that may come at me over the next few days. Despite the general air of confidence among the men, I like to be prepared for the worst. If we suffer heavy casualties, my problems will be more around manpower than bandages and equipment. The two agency nurses were dispatched back to the mainland days ago, so it will be only me.

Still, I’ll cope. Ethan has never been one to cut corners where the welfare of his men is concerned. I have state-of-the-art equipment and facilities. I could ask for no more.

Gabe taps on my office door. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Aren’t you busy lining up missile launchers and organising surveillance?”

He enters the room. “It’s all in hand. I have a few minutes to spare.”

“Well, I’m not sure I do. Since the nursing staff left, I have to do my own cleaning and prep.”

“The place looks spotless to me.”

“Looking spotless and being clinically clean are two different things.”

“Come to bed with me.”

“What?”

“You heard. We can go next door. No need to mess up one of your squeaky-clean hospital rooms.”

“But, what if—?”

“What if it all goes wrong? What if it doesn’t work out the way your boss has planned it? What if Sokolov turns out to be not quite so dim as we thought? We could all be dead this time tomorrow.”

“You don’t think—?”

“No, I don’t, actually. But I do think we should seize the opportunity to fuck each other’s brains out. Just in case.”

I pretend to consider his point. “Well, when you put it like that...”

He holds out his hand.

I take it. “Let’s get this over with.”

“STRIP. Then lie on the bed. Facedown.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask questions, but there is something in his expression that dissuades me. Gabe wants to be obeyed. He expects to take charge, and I realise I want to let him. I’ll be in safe hands.

I undo the buttons on my shirt and slide that off, followed by my bra. I take my time releasing my breasts, then I stand, naked from the waist up, allowing him plenty of time to peruse my body. I suppose most would describe me as being a bit on the curvy side. It’s not something I’m especially conscious of. Army fatigues have never done anything for my body image, and even though I’m a civilian now, my dress sense hasn’t improved much.

But, today, I want him to see me, to admire me. To want me.

Make it happen, girl.

Casey’s words are ringing in my ears, and so far, my strategy seems to be working.

Gabe lounges against the bedroom door, watching me undress. His slate-grey eyes darken, his jaw flexes. I lower my gaze to take in the bulge at the front of his jeans, then slowly turn my back on him. I unfasten the snap on my canvas work trousers and drop the zip, then I shove them down past my hips. I have to pause to toe off my shoes and socks, but I manage that without too much loss of grace and dignity, and kick everything away. Wearing just my knickers, I’m glad that for once I’m wearing a pretty, fancy pair.

Lavender-coloured lace on mint-green satin, they cost me over twenty quid at Ann Summers. I've Cristina to thank for talking me into such extravagance. I make a mental note, then lift my gaze to face him once more.

He rakes me with his eyes, appreciation glowing in those stormy irises.

"Christ, I missed you," he breathes. "I'd forgotten how sexy you are."

Am I? Was I?

"You were always the one who turned heads," I blurt. "Half the women on the base were panting after you."

"I'm not interested in half the women anywhere. I only want you. It was only ever you." He pushes himself forward, takes the two paces needed to reach me. He lays his hands on my shoulders and grazes my lips with his. "Beautiful panties, but I need you naked. Now. And facedown on the bed."

I do as I'm told, then twist my neck to peer up at him.

"Reach forward and grasp the headboard. Don't let go of it."

"What? Why?"

"And close your eyes. Or I could blindfold you."

"But we never..."

"Do you trust me, Megan?"

"Of course. Yes. Yes, I do."

That eyebrow lifts again. "Well, then?"

I stretch out my arms and grab hold of the lowest bar on the headboard. Closing my eyes is more of an effort, but I do it. "What are you going to do?" I whisper.

"I like watching you come, so you're going to perform for me."

I can't think of a ready objection to the plan, but that doesn't translate into confidence that it's going to work out. "I'm not sure I can... I mean, on demand?"

"Yes, on demand. I've never spanked you before, but I will be minded to if you carry on arguing with me."

"Sp-spank me?" I squeak. Despite the shock at hearing those words, my pussy convulses, and something twists in my core.

He leans over to murmur in my ear, "Yes. Spank you. Would you like to try that?"

"I...I don't know. I've never..."

"Another time then. Soon. Right now, I need you to be a good girl and spread your legs."

Oh. My. God. Whatever happened to the sultry temptress I was

channelling just a few minutes ago? She seems to have left the building, and now it's just me, uncertain, nervous, and aroused as all hell. Was Gabe always this... this bossy? And why does it turn me on so?

I feel a compulsion to obey so I edge my knees apart a few inches.

"You can do better than that. Knees as wide as you can, ass in the air. Show me that pretty pussy of yours."

I gulp but do as I'm told. I shiver when the cool Hebridean air wafts over my exposed slit.

"Such a sloppy girl. You're wet. Soaking. Enjoying yourself already, Megan?"

Am I supposed to answer? My brain is short-circuiting. I can't think of anything to say. So I settle for a long, low moan when he slides the flat of his palm from my clit to my ass.

He takes his hand away, and I imagine him examining it for evidence of my shameless arousal. I don't doubt it will be there.

Exhibit A, M'lud. Dripping wet. Guilty.

"I think you're nice and ready, so we can start the evening's entertainment. I need you to keep still."

"I... Oh!"

He parts the lips of my pussy, spreading my entrance wide. I expect to feel the head of his cock, but that's not it. The object he inserts is smaller, hard, cool to the touch. He slides it right inside me, then pats me on my buttock.

"Don't drop it, honey."

"What is that? I... Oh, Jesus!"

It vibrates. Deep inside me, sending pulses of pleasure the length of my channel. I let out a groan and roll my hips. I can't help myself.

"Is that good? Enough? I can turn it up a little if you like."

"It's... it's... Oh, dear God." The vibrating intensifies, becoming a rhythmic pulse rather than a constant hum. I start to shake as my body hurtles towards climax. "I'm going to come..."

"There now, I knew you wouldn't let me down."

My senses shatter. The orgasm sweeps over me, through me. Filling me. My muscles spasm, and my pussy convulses helplessly around the buzzing toy. It seems to go on forever, wave after delirious wave of sensual deliciousness, rushing through me until I can't think straight.

At last, it stops. Or slows, at least. I gasp for breath, savouring the final

tremors, clenching my inner muscles around the object still pulsing inside me. I collapse onto the bed.

“Hey, the show’s not over yet. Back up on your knees.” His tone is not unkind, but it’s firm, and accompanied by a sharp tap on my bum.

I prise my eyes open and squint at him. “I just came. I’m done.”

“I don’t think so. Up.”

I haul my body back up onto all fours. Maybe we could just fuck this way. That would be nice...

The vibrating gathers strength all over again. I peep at him through my eyelashes and can see he’s tinkering with a small remote control. *Holy fuck!*

“Where did you get that thing from?” I croak.

“I did a spot of shopping while we were in London. I bought a few things I thought you might like, in fact.”

I hardly dare ask. “What things?”

You’ll see. All in good time. This gizmo has seven settings. That was just number two. This is number three. How do you like it?”

The throbbing builds. My pussy is already reacting, convulsing as if I didn’t just romp through the mother of all orgasms not a couple of minute ago. The next climax is swift and sharp, not quite so bone-deep as the first, more of a heady tingle that leaves me shaking.

“Hmm, that was nice to watch. You make those gorgeous breathy sounds when you come.”

“You don’t say. I live to serve.”

“My sort of girl, sweetheart. Roll onto your back.”

“What? More?”

“Hell, yes. I have another toy to show you.”

“What is it?” I wriggle onto my side.

He gestures with his hand for me to complete the turn, then positions my legs wide apart. “We need your clit to be swollen for this. It’s already getting there, but I think we can do better.” He closes his lips around my plump bud and sucks.

I yelp in a mixture of surprise and ecstasy and thrust my hips upwards, press myself closer to him.

“Liking that? You’ll love this, then.”

He takes a moment to remove the toy from inside me and drops it into the floor, then he has something else in his hand. I try to see what it is, but I’m not quick enough.

He strokes the hood back, exposing my clit, and places the new gadget right over it. It feels soft, rubbery, a bit like a cushion. I jerk when it seems to tighten, sucking my sensitive bud inside.

“This can be intense. Tell me if it’s too much.” His eyes are on mine, holding my gaze as he increases the pressure.

Intense? That barely describes it. I’ve never felt anything quite like this. It’s as though every nerve-ending in my body is alive suddenly, tuned in, focussed on that tiny scrap of sensuality between my thighs. I’m quivering, thrusting upwards, lost in a chaotic welter of pure sensation.

“Gabe,” I let out a cry, not pain, but not entirely pleasure either, reaching for him.

He laces my fingers through his, both hands, and leans over me, watching me unravel.

When I go still, utterly spent, he lowers his forehead to rest on mine. “You’re a beautiful woman, Megan Alexander. Did I tell you that already?”

“I... I think so. You may have.” To be honest, if he asked me my own name right now, the only reason I’d be able to answer is because he just said it.

“I should have told you, and I mean to carry on telling you.”

I love you. I open my eyes, lose myself in the storm-grey of his. It’s there, on the tip of my tongue, aching to be said.

Different words emerge. “I want you. Now.”

Not quite the same, but good enough.

He smiles. “You have me. I’m here.”

“Inside me,” I clarify. “I want you to fuck me. I need you...”

He’s still fully dressed, hardly a stitch out of place. *How does he manage that at the same time reducing me to a quivering wreck?* He kneels up to unfasten his jeans, and his solid cock springs free. I reach for it, but he gives a quick shake of his head.

“Don’t move.”

Let my hand fall onto the mattress and watch as he unrolls a condom over his length. Then, he twirls his finger in the air, a signal for me to get back on all fours.

I like it this way, so I’m quick to comply.

He parts my buttocks and nestles his cock in the valley between. The tip of his finger toys with my asshole. The sensation is new but not entirely unwelcome. I settle in for the ride, only to gasp when he inserts something

solid, gently but firmly filling that most private place.

“What...? Oh!”

It’s the buzzing toy again, and it’s humming merrily inside my arse. The sensation is barely describable—wicked, forbidden, exquisitely sensual. I grasp at the bedding, my fingers raking the sheets like talons.

Slowly, with aching deliberation, he drives the head of his cock into my pussy. Just an inch at first, then another, and another, withdrawing each time then pushing harder, deeper. Little by little he fills and stretches me. The throbbing in my arse becomes more intense, reaching right to my very core. By the time he’s fully inside me, I’m hovering on the edge of a precipice, poised, ready to drop into the abyss with cries of ‘Geronimo!’

With infinite skill and patience, not to mention forbearance on his part, he keeps me there. Long moments trickle by. I’m almost sobbing with desperation by the time he reaches around and under me to flick the tip of my clit.

I’m gone. I let out a scream they can probably hear at the castle. I’m shaking, convulsing violently. Wave after wave of pleasure swamps every other sense as the dam breaks and sensation washes over me. My pussy clamps down around him, hugging him inside me and milking every last drop of ecstasy from this orgasm to end all orgasms.

After, I collapse like a rag doll. It’s to be hoped Sokolov doesn’t choose this moment to attack because I’d never regain control of my limbs in time to make a run for it. The toy is gone, dumped in the bathroom, and Gabe is lounging in a chair beside the window, still with barely a hair out of place.

Sokolov isn’t marching over the horizon. Everything is calm, for now. I take a few more minutes to collect my senses, then shove myself up into a sitting position. I open my mouth to speak, but find I have no words sufficient. ‘Splendid’ might go some way towards it. ‘Exceptional’, perhaps.

I settle on, “Fuck. What was that about?”

“That was about me asking you to come back to the US with me.”

I do a double-take. “What? You know I can’t.”

“I love you. I need you in my life.”

“My life is here.”

“It could be wherever you choose to make it.”

“My career, then. Medicine.”

“You were never struck off. You could get work.”

I let out a mirthless chuckle. “I doubt it. If I did somehow manage to get a

job, I'd be lucky if they let me do the occasional blood test. I'm a trauma specialist, a skilled physician. I'm needed here."

He stands, stares out of the window at the stormy horizon beyond. "I guess I knew that. Had to ask, though." He turns to regard me. "You know I can't stay."

Maybe I do, but I'm not ready to accept that version of reality yet. "Why not? I could speak to Ethan..."

"I already did."

"Let me try. Maybe I could—"

"It wouldn't work, sweetheart."

"Why? Because you won't leave the army? I know what your work means to you, just as mine is everything to me."

He shakes his head. "I'm good at what I do, but I'm not a career soldier. I'd dump the military like a shot if it meant I could have you. But I'd be an outsider here. They needed me before, when Ethan was unconscious and his brother in hospital. There was shit to be done, I was useful. I still am, for now. But he's back. They all are. Ethan Savage doesn't need another lieutenant, and I'm not sure I could do that anyway. I work best on my own."

"But I need you," I whisper. "I love you."

He takes my jaw between both his hands and grazes my lips with his. "I love you, too. And, I'll be back. Often. We'll find a way to make this work."

I close my eyes, but that doesn't prevent the tears streaming down my cheeks.

"Yes," I murmur, more to myself than to him. "Yes, we'll somehow make this work. We have to because I can't lose you a second time."

CHAPTER 18

G abriel

REINFORCEMENTS ARE ROLLING IN, as promised. Jed O'Neill has sent over a hundred men. Some are stationed at Caernbro Ghyll, the rest will be deployed in boats to guard our waters. A further three dozen have arrived from Moldova, courtesy of Marius Bival. Our arsenal of heavy weaponry has increased, too. Ethan Savage has forged strong alliances, and all are turning out in force to assist him when he needs it. I wonder if Sokolov has the first idea what he's actually up against.

Ethan has Sokolov under surveillance, naturally. We know he has a couple of hundred men to call on, but most are still in Belarus or Russia and showing no sign of being mobilised. His soldiers in the UK number perhaps half of that, which makes me wonder if he truly appreciates what's involved in launching an attack from the sea. Belarus and Russia are more or less landlocked; he has no experience of this.

Sokolov has commissioned a fleet of helicopters, so it's safe to assume he means to come in from the air. Accordingly, we have Archer's missile launcher, backed up by hand-held grenade launchers that can take out a target at a few hundred metres. The plan is to eradicate the incoming enemy while they're still in the air and prevent them ever setting foot on Caraksay soil. They may try to land from boats, too, in which case they'll be blasted to smithereens by my explosives which have been set at every conceivable disembarkation spot. My role in the defence of Caraksay is to monitor activity at sea and respond accordingly. No one is to actually get boots on the

island, and anyone who does get this far is to be shot on sight. No prisoners, no negotiating.

That's my sort of war.

I'm stationed in a turret on the roof of the castle. It's the highest spot on the entire island. I have a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the terrain below and the entire coastline. Casey has electronic surveillance in place, so we'll know of their approach well before anyone comes into view, but I'll have the first eyes on our enemy.

The radio strapped to my waist crackles. I hit the 'receive' button.

"Eight helicopters, repeat, eight helicopters approaching from the east. Distance twenty-seven kilometres, speed one hundred and seventy knots."

I do a quick calculation. That's around a hundred and ninety miles per hour, so the choppers will be in sight within under two minutes. Even though I'm alone up here, the air of anticipation around me is palpable.

"Any sign of landing craft?" I spit into the radio.

"Negative," comes the reply from Casey.

I'm not complacent. It's possible to drop divers from choppers, though the waters around Caraksay are among the most perilous anywhere in the world. A more likely approach will be to attack from the air, which means they have to actually reach Caraksay to be effective. Courtesy of Jed, we have firepower aboard dozens of vessels in the North Sea, ready to intercept before they get anywhere close.

"Two down. Repeat, two down."

I acknowledge the message, grinning at the prospect of a couple of enemy helicopters already sinking beneath the choppy waters. Idiots. Six to go.

By the time they come into view, there are just four left. I hear them before I see them, the distant hum rising above the constant buffeting of wind and waves. As I scan the horizon, I see another explode in the air, then spiral into the sea.

The damage is being done mainly by Irish marksmen provided by Jed, backed up by an impressive bit of Russian kit, courtesy of Marius. The portable air defence system he shipped over to us is a guided surface-to-air missile capable of destroying aircraft. We have it set up on a launch about twenty miles to the east of the island.

Sokolov has made it easy for us, to be fair. Instead of staggering his approach and attack routes, sending his forces in unpredictable waves, the enemy are flying in formation, making them an easy target. Any choppers

that slip past our surface-to-air missiles can be picked off by a decent shot from a rifle or handgun, provided they hit the rear rotor or the pilot. Jed's men aren't missing many.

According to our surveillance, Sokolov himself is not aboard any of the helicopters. He prefers to direct operations from his base on the mainland, a disused holiday camp which he has commandeered on the west coast of Scotland. We have eyes on that, too, ready to mount an attack as soon as we are sure Caraksay is safe.

Just one helicopter makes it as far as Caraksay. It circles low, spraying bullets at us but with no obvious strategic intent. It's more a scattergun approach, delivered by two men leaning out of each side of the aircraft.

I watch Tony, installed on a turret just below mine, line up the missile launcher. He waits for the chopper to glide in on its second destructive sweep, then takes it out. The missile finds its target. The aircraft spins in the air, whirling crazily before coming down in flames at the top of the cliffs.

There are no survivors, just as we planned. The airborne assault is over.

"Reports?" The voice is clipped, Ethan demanding to know the state of play now. "What are our losses?"

Rome answers. "One boat hit, with seven men. Effecting rescue now. Will update as soon as casualties are known."

It sounds like minimal damage to us, and our enemy decimated. I don't trust this. It's too easy.

I scan the horizon for any sign of approaching boats, though how they would have evaded our blockade is difficult to imagine. Even so, if Sokolov is prepared to throw enough money at it, there's always a way.

I decide to do a quick reconnaissance of my explosives installations. In the unlikely event the attack is over, they will need to remain in place as a security measure until we've eradicated any remaining threat from Sokolov himself. I need to now make sure the safety devices are activated to prevent any of them being triggered accidentally. I report my intentions over the radio, then make my way to the ground.

I jog down to the harbour first, passing several groups of our own armed men on the way. I check and satisfy myself that our own vessels can safely dock, then move on to the defence systems in place on the beaches and coves, and the foot of the cliffs. Wreckage from the downed chopper litters the rocks, and I have to pick my way over it to reach my detonators. I daresay Ethan will have the mess shifted by tomorrow. He hates pollution on his

island.

I wade through knee-high waves to reach the spot where I installed the equipment. Behind me, the seabed drops away sharply, so I'm careful where I put my feet. I can swim well enough, but now's not the time for a dip. I trace the cables back to the source and crouch to adjust the connections.

There's a sound behind me. I whirl around, reaching for my gun.

What the fuck?

A periscope is rising from the water. I take a shot at it, at the same time grabbing for the radio. I'm not fast enough. Ethan's voice crackles over the airwaves, but not before my world goes dark.

CHAPTER 19

Megan

MY CLINIC TOOK a direct hit from the single helicopter that reached us. The roof was sprayed with bullets. Several windows are broken, and I'll be needing a new ventilator to replace the one now peppered with bullet holes.

Still, could have been worse. I have no casualties to deal with, as far as I know.

It's now almost an hour since the attack was repelled. Caraksay is still on high alert, but no further reports of damage or injuries have come in. I emerge from my bolthole in my cottage and venture to peer outside.

All is quiet. There's no one around, which is not surprising, I suppose. Everyone has their role to play, a job to do. I'm no exception. I weigh up whether to make a run for the castle or my surgery.

I drag out my phone and try Gabriel's number. It rings out, then eventually the call drops.

Puzzled, I try again. It goes straight to voicemail. He must be somewhere with no signal, the dungeons most likely.

That settles it as far as I'm concerned. I take one final look around to be sure there's no enemy in sight, no Russian gangster who somehow slipped past our defences, then I sprint around the building and make for the cobbled courtyard in front of the castle.

Tony and Jack are there when I arrive, panting. Both are heavily armed, conferring in the castle entrance.

"Everything okay with you, Doc?" Tony calls out as I approach.

“Yes. Fine. Some structural damage to the clinic, but that can be fixed. Is Gabriel down in the cells?”

Tony shakes his head. “Don’t think so. Why would he be? There are no prisoners.”

“Oh. I just thought... I’ve been trying to reach him on his phone.”

“He went to check the coastal explosives. There’s good signal down there. Shouldn’t be in a dead spot.” Jack pulls out his own phone and taps in Gabe’s number. It rings out, just as it did for me.

He tries again, this time using the radio. “Gabriel, come in, please.”

No response.

“Gabriel? What the fuck are you up to? Come in. Now.”

Still nothing. The next request is to the entire island. “Does anyone have eyes on Gabe Sawyer? Report location, please.”

The feedback establishes that Gabe was last seen leaving the harbour on foot, presumably to inspect the coastal defences. A team is mobilised to retrace his route.

I have a bad feeling. I perch on the front steps, imagining all the dreadful mishaps that could befall a man on his own on that treacherous shoreline, even without the added complication of an enemy attack.

“I don’t even know if he can swim,” I whimper to no one in particular.

Ethan emerges from the castle to confer with his lieutenants and the rest of the men who are starting to congregate. It’s soon established that it’s been over forty minutes since anyone saw Gabriel. He’s disappeared without trace.

“We don’t really know him,” Ethan asserts. “Could it be he just decided this isn’t his fight?”

I’m on my feet. “No! He’d never do that.”

Ethan shrugs. “He’s no team player. He said so himself. Maybe...”

“Why would you think that?” I demand.

Jack interrupts whatever Ethan might have said in response. “I don’t think he’d do a runner, boss. He wants Sokolov, and I reckon he’d stick around to see that bastard ended.” At last, someone is talking sense.

“He wouldn’t just leave,” I insist. “At least not without saying goodbye. Something must have happened.”

“No one managed to get onto the island, we’re sure of that,” Tony adds. “If he’s had an accident of some sort... I’ll organise a search.”

Ethan nods. He still doesn’t seem convinced but for now he’s going along with the general view. “Fine. Get that done. Casey, can you track his phone?”

“Sure.” She heads off back inside.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, the phone, at least, has been located. In a rock pool at the foot of the cliffs. The men searching the bay retrieve it and bring it back up to the castle, along with Gabe’s gun.

“There were traces of what could be blood on the rocks close by, and footprints in the shingle. Two men, by the looks of it.” The report is delivered by Nico. “We did a scout round but couldn’t see anything else. Definitely no trace of a boat having landed.”

“We’ve had constant surveillance on the waters around Caraksay, and visibility is good. We’d have seen any boat approaching.”

“What about divers?” Tony wonders. “Or some sort of submersible?”

Ethan’s eyes harden. “Fuck! *Casey!*”

THERE’S no camera surveillance down on the beach, so we’re relying on probability. A submersible seems somewhat far-fetched to me, but once all other options are eliminated, what you’re left with has to be the answer. I think Sherlock Holmes deduced that, so who am I to argue? Casey is tasked with identifying what, if any, submersibles are available on the market and if any of them could conceivably pull this off.

More to the point, has Olaf Sokolov commissioned one from anywhere?

She’s been doing her homework and recites her findings to us when we assemble around the table in the great hall.

“Most of the commercially available underwater vehicles are tiny, capable of carrying two or three men at best. They’re not designed for warfare, more exploration and scientific discovery. And they cost a fortune.”

“Fair enough. But is it feasible?” Ethan demands to know.

“If money was no object, then yes. Submersibles aren’t like submarines. They need to operate from another vessel, and they have a limited range. They can be hired from commercial companies, mostly those involved with marine archaeology, repair and maintenance of things like oil rigs, or maybe adventurous exploration. High-end tourism. Some people will pay half a million pounds for a dive.”

“More money than sense,” Ethan mutters. “But what would have been the

point, assuming they did use a submersible of some sort?”

“Maybe to land one or two people, or, and this is what it’s looking like, to snatch a hostage.”

“What about the blood Nico saw?” I ask. “What if they...?”

“If he’d been injured or killed, we’d have found the body,” Ethan insists.

“Not if they threw him the sea.” I bite back tears. “He was on his own. No one saw...”

Casey reaches for me and pats my hand, comfort indeed coming from her. And an indication of how concerned she is.

Jack makes a call to the surveillance team watching Sokolov’s makeshift headquarters on the mainland. “Anything happening? We suspect they’ve taken a prisoner and we need to know where he’s being held.”

“No one has entered or left in the last two hours, boss. There’s plenty of activity inside, though, charging round like blue-arsed flies, they are. Probably got the news of the losses they had trying to reach Caraksay.”

Ethan and Jack exchange a glance.

Ethan nods. “Issue the order to move. I want that shithole wiped out and everyone there eliminated. If Sawyer’s been taken prisoner, I want them to have nowhere to go. And I need our own choppers in the air searching the area for any vessel that could be hosting a submersible. Chances are, if he’s still alive, he’s on a ship somewhere, and the bastards can’t be that far away by now if they had to retrieve their submersible and land it. I want eyes everywhere. Find it.”

“I think it’s just here.”

There’s silence. All eyes swivel to Frankie who is unrolling a tattered map of Scotland. He points to a spot in the ocean, about ten miles offshore.

“How the fuck would you know that?” Tony demands.

“He’s got my fitness tracker in his jacket pocket.”

“Your what?”

“The strap broke when I fell off that roof,” the youth replies. “Rome picked it up and gave it to Mr Sawyer, who put it in his pocket. I kept thinking I might ask him for it back, but he’s a scary dude, so I just... left it.”

“How do you know he still has it?”

“How else would it have got here?” Frankie replies, jabbing his finger into the spot on the map. “The tracker’s still transmitting. He probably just forgot he had it.”

Ethan looks to Casey, who simply shrugs.

“It’s the only lead we have, boss.” Jack is on his feet. “I’ll organise a sweep of the area.”

“YOU DON’T TRUST GABRIEL, do you?”

Everyone else has dispersed, to helicopters to join the search, or other duties to shore up the defences of the island, just in case. I take the opportunity to confront Ethan, a risky endeavour at the best of times. Normally, I’d stay out of the operational stuff, but this is personal.

“I don’t really know him,” he replies.

I smell evasiveness and press on. “You know enough. I realise you were... out of it, but he’s done his share these last weeks and not let anyone down.”

His eyes narrow, and at first, I think he’s going to refuse to discuss it. After all, Caraksay isn’t a democracy, however much Ethan is inclined to listen to those around him most of the time. Ethan Savage’s word is law. End of. But he relents.

“He’s an outsider. He turns up out of nowhere. We don’t really know what his motives are or what’s in it for him.”

“Sokolov...” I begin.

“That’s what he says. How do we know it’s not another of his cover stories. He might be still working undercover with us as his target.”

“He isn’t. I know it.”

“Megan, I get it. I know you feel... something... for him even if I can’t quite work out what or why. He let you down before.”

“Not now. Not anymore. We worked that out.”

He resists the temptation to roll his eyes. Just. But his scepticism is plain to see.

“Even so, I have bigger responsibilities. I have to do what’s best for all of us, for this organisation, and the last thing we need is some US law enforcement agent sniffing about.”

“That’s not what Gabe is,” I protest. “Yes, he’s army, but—”

“Then what is he? Who is he? And why would I risk my men’s lives for him?”

“Because... you owe it to him.”

“Do I?”

“He saved your brother’s life,” I remind him. “In the hospital. He’s been

there when he was needed. He's loyal, and... and... Please. Please, don't let them kill him..." I break down, sobbing. "Please, you have to help him."

Ethan gets up and comes around the table to sit beside me. "Megan, listen to me."

I raise my face to look at him. The hard-edged cynicism is gone, replaced by genuine compassion, and I remember why I so much want to stay here.

"We're going to do what we can, you have my word. Apart from anything else, Sawyer was snatched from here, my island. My safe haven where I'm bringing up my children. I can't let that go."

"Truly? You mean that?"

"I do mean it. If Sawyer's alive, we'll shift heaven and earth to get him back. And show anyone else who might be thinking along the same lines that Caraksay is off limits."

"Then, will you let him stay? If he wants to, I mean."

His brow creases. "Let's wait and see how this turns out. No promises. Ultimately, I'll do what I think is best."

I'm ready to continue pleading, but we're interrupted by Frankie charging back into the hall.

"Fuck. Can't you learn to knock?" Ethan grumbles.

Frankie skids to a halt, panting. "Sorry. I just... We lost the signal."

THE RADIO on the table crackles. Ethan hits 'receive'.

"Target sighted." The disembodied voice rattles off a set of coordinates. "Current course suggests they're headed to Ireland."

"How many on board?" Ethan wants to know.

"Uncertain, boss. We've sighted four men, but that would be a small crew for a boat of this size. No sign of Gabriel. Or any other prisoners. There's a submersible lashed to the rear deck."

"It must be them. So, we need to keep eyes on that boat. I want to know where they land and where they go when they leave the boat. And I want to know at once if there's any sighting of Sawyer." He ends the radio call, already reaching for his phone. He brings up Jed O'Neill on speed dial. "We think they're headed for Ireland, and we lost contact with the tracking device. Do you have any way of keeping a trace on them once they're on shore?"

There's a brief silence, then, "Leave it with me. I might know someone..."

CHAPTER 20

G abriel

MY HEAD THROBS. I swear, a marching band has taken up residence between my ears. There's a groaning sound coming from nearby, and I realise it's me. I try to open my eyes.

Darkness. I give my head a shake, which I bitterly regret when a spike of pure agony arcs through my skull, but it's enough to convince me I'm awake, alive even, and as lucid as can be expected. Deliberately, slowly, I open and close my eyes. It makes no difference either way, I'm surrounded by cloying blackness. And there's a noise, the low hum of a motor running close by, blanketed by a whooshing sound.

I try to sit up but find I can't move. It doesn't take long to work out my hands are tied behind my back, and wherever I'm being held is small. Not enough room to get to a sitting position or even raise my knees.

I edge from one side to the other to scope out the space. I have a couple of inches on either side on me, about the same above. I'm in some sort of tube.

Christ, good thing I'm not claustrophobic, though that could change.

I tamp down the first stirrings of panic and force myself to think back, to remember. I was on the beach, at the foot of the cliffs, checking detonator cables. There was a sound behind me. I saw... what?

Something in the water, rising above the surface. A submarine, or submersible of some description. Definitely. I saw the periscope. Then, nothing.

I'm pretty sure I wasn't attacked from the submersible. There wasn't time, I'd have seen if anyone got out or took a shot at me. And it came from behind. So that leaves... someone already on the island who must have been there waiting, expecting the submersible. And I got in the way. Wrong place, wrong time.

A traitor, on Caraksay itself.

I contemplate my options. My guess is that I'm currently on board that submersible, though fuck knows why. It would have been easier to just kill me, and they had the chance back there on the beach. It's unlikely they came intending to take a prisoner, more likely they were picking up their man who'd done his job, whatever that was. Why snatch me, especially as these craft aren't designed for carrying extra passengers?

My best guess is that I was recognised. Sokolov probably realises by now who killed his *Vor* in Minsk, and getting his hands on me is an added bonus. If I'm right, this won't be ending well. No one else on the island knows what happened to me, and even if they did, there's no way they can locate an underwater craft. If I'm getting out of this, I'll be doing it on my own.

I was never a man to wait and see. Fuck that. I mean to make a nuisance of myself, and I can start by kicking the shit out of this tin can. I wriggle down until my feet connect with the end of the capsule and I launch a kick. My boot connects with metal, and the din reverberates around me, making my throbbing head pound even worse than before. Relentless, I do it again, and again. Sound carries under water, so if anyone is out there...

I bite back a curse when light floods my prison. Blinking, I'm dragged out, feet-first, to land in a heap on the floor, where a vicious kick is delivered to my ribs. I swear I hear the crack of bone. I roll into a protective ball while the blows continue to rain down.

There are voices, guttural and angry, speaking in what sounds like Russian. I make out a couple of words.

"Predatel. Ubiytsa..."

Traitor. Murderer. Yup, they recognised me for sure.

The onslaught ceases. I expect to be bundled back inside the storage capsule, but they decide to leave me where I am, curled up on the floor. It's probably easier to lay into me again if I'm handy.

I remain still and quiet. No point in attracting more violence unless it can be helped, and the respite gives me a chance to take stock.

I venture to open my eyes and take in my surroundings. I was right, I am

on board the submersible. The sounds I heard are quieter now but must be the engine and the air supply. There are three men on the tiny craft. I recognise all of them.

Yaromir Kislev and Alyosha Ivanov were guards at the warehouse in Minsk, lieutenants of Fedor Morozov. The third man I can't put a name to, but I've seen him on Caraksay, tinkering with the helicopters. A mechanic? At least, that was his cover.

They seem inclined to leave me alone, so I take advantage of the relative calm. I listen to their conversation, but my smattering of Russian isn't much help. They do mention Sokolov several times, though, confirming my suspicions regarding who's behind all of this.

A loud clanging sound is accompanied by a jolt, then a siren sounding. Kislev is yelling into a radio, being answered by someone who seems to be issuing commands. The motion of the vessel alters. We're rising, and the engine has stopped, suggesting we're being lifted externally. The submersible sways dizzily. I almost throw up, then we're dumped on something solid.

Kislev is still on the radio, while Ivanov stretches up to open a hatch above our heads. Daylight floods in. There's another rapid exchange in incomprehensible Russian, then Ivanov and the man from the island grab me by the shoulders and haul me to my feet. A knife is produced, and my wrists are released. I'm shoved towards a ladder which has been lowered into the submersible.

"Up," Ivanov commands, punching me in the back for good measure. "You be quick."

I've no desire to remain where I am, so I grasp the ladder and make my way up the first couple of rungs, enough to be able to peer over the edge.

As I thought, I'm on a boat, at sea. I'm no expert, but it seems quite big though lacking the luxury of a yacht like *The Lydia*. This vessel is functional rather than fancy, commercial rather than military. My guess would be that Sokolov hired the vessel and its submersible for the purposes of getting to and from Caraksay undetected.

Four men are on the deck, stationed around the submersible, and all have guns trained on me. I don't much like the odds, so I clamber out without protest and drop to the deck, my hands raised.

One of the guards gestures with his weapon, directing me towards a flight of stairs leading below deck. Once I'm down there, I'll no doubt be tied up again and slung in some sort of cell or whatever they have on ships. I flirt

briefly with the notion of making a break for it and diving overboard but decide not to bother. First, it's unlikely I'd make it to the rail without being shot, and second, that sea looks rough. And cold. I'd have little chance of surviving more than a few minutes. Third, my ribs hurt like a bitch, and I'm struggling to breathe.

I'll wait for a better opportunity.

I stumble down the stairs and find myself in a salon of some sort. One of the men follows, nudging with the muzzle of his gun to encourage me to move through the salon and into what seems to be a storage room at the end. He slams the door on me.

Mercifully, the storeroom has a tiny porthole, so there's some light. I'm surrounded by boxes of supplies, food mainly. Tinned tomatoes, sardines, peaches. Cartons of long-life milk, orange juice, pasta. At least I won't starve. I work out I've just enough room to drop to my haunches and try to make myself comfortable. The space feels positively generous after my previous accommodations, so I do just that.

There are voices outside, constantly, and the clatter of footsteps above my head. I make out about half a dozen different tones, which seems to me to be something of a skeleton crew, given the size of the boat. I guess it was just a pick-up mission, and they came back with more than they bargained for.

The light fades. Soon, I'm in darkness again. I try to make the best of it by grabbing a couple of hours of sleep, but I'm constantly disturbed by the shouts and crashing about of the crew. No one bothers to bring me anything to eat or drink, a bad sign as it suggests they don't consider me worth looking after. I help myself to a carton of milk. It tastes disgusting, but it will have to do.

Eventually, it gets light again. I have enough room to stand and take one pace in any direction, so that's what I do to keep moving and alert. Despite it being spring outside and unseasonably cold even for the UK, it's hot as Hell in here. I shrug out of my jacket and think about kicking up a commotion again but see no point in provoking them into another battering. The pain from my fractured ribs is bad enough, I'm not inclined to invite further injury. I might still be able to make a run for it.

Night falls again. I'm living off processed milk and orange juice and starting to think I might just create a fuss if only to pass the time. I manage to contain myself, and soon after dawn on the second day, the door flies open.

"You. Out." The armed guard beckons me forward.

I do as I'm told. Ivanov and Kislev are stationed behind him, also armed. They bundle me back through the salon and up onto the deck. The wind hits me, and I remember the jacket I abandoned in the storeroom.

"My coat..." I begin.

Ivanov cackles viciously. He has the jacket and flings it over the side into the sea. "You freeze," he sneers.

In the dim half-light, I make out a harbour. It's a ramshackle affair, a rough wooden jetty and a handful of single-storey brick-built structures dotted close by. A pair of dark-coloured SUVs are parked at the end of the jetty.

One of the crew secures a gangplank, and I'm shoved towards it. I stumble forward to make my way back onto dry land.

Where Sokolov is waiting.

He smiles at me, his prominent gold upper incisor glittering. "Mr Sawyer. How fortuitous to see you again. I could hardly believe it when my comrades informed me of your capture."

"Long time no see," I mutter.

"Indeed. But such a happy reunion, for me at least. I fear you may come to disagree."

"I was never one for raking over old times," I spit. "Least of all with a slimy fuck like you."

He regards me in silence, strokes his chin, then nods to one of the guards. "Take out his knee. The right one."

The bullet penetrates my kneecap, slicing from front to back. I collapse in agony.

"You need to learn some manners," Sokolov announces, bending to examine the damage. "That can be a start. Oh, and don't worry too much about the injury, you won't be walking again."

I leave a trail of blood as I'm dragged from the jetty over to one of the SUVs, then heaved into the boot. The lid is slammed shut, and I'm in darkness once more.

I drift in and out of consciousness, so I've no idea how long I'm in that boot. Neither do I know where I am, could be anywhere in Northern Europe, I suppose. The pain in my knee is blinding, and my jeans are soaked in blood, though the worst of the bleeding seems to have slowed.

The boot lid opens, and I'm yanked unceremoniously out. It's still daylight, and I'm lying on tarmac that smells of petrol. I make out the

silhouette of an industrial building.

Two men who I've not seen before grab me by the ankles and haul me across the ground towards the building. I scream in agony, which amuses them. They're laughing when they haul me through the raised shutter door and into the hangar-like structure.

I must have passed out again, because the next thing I know, I'm seated on a chair in the middle of the space, my arms tied behind me and my feet secured to the chair legs. I raise my head to look round.

The entire place is empty, save for the SUVs parked at one end. A huddle of men cluster around the vehicles, smoking and chatting. All are armed, all are itching to use their weapons at the least provocation.

One glances my way and spots that I'm conscious. He nudges one of his companions, who leans into one of the SUVs to speak to the occupant. Moments later, Sokolov emerges, a sick grin on his pudgy face.

He saunters over to me and grabs my hair to force my head back. "Nice to see you back with us, Mr Sawyer. Now we can have some fun."

I spit in his face. It seems like the only reasonable course of action.

He steps back and wipes the spittle from his cheek. His smile never wavers as he beckons one of his men over. The command is issued in Russian, but I can guess what it is. The guard answers with a nod, then jams the butt of his rifle into the side of my head, sending me and the chair flying. That's followed up by a vicious kicking while I lie helpless on the concrete floor.

"Enough," Sokolov snaps, in English this time. "It is not time to kill him yet."

It takes two of them to right the chair. I sag against my bonds, peering at my tormentor through the one eye which still opens.

"Feel better now?" I rasp, swallowing the blood filling my mouth.

"I believe I may be getting there." Sokolov snaps his fingers, and another chair is produced from somewhere. He extracts a handkerchief from his pocket and makes a show of dusting off any debris before settling his weight on it. "Now, we just have time for a little chat, I think."

"Fuck you," I manage. Seconds later, I'm on the floor again with two of them laying into me. It's clear how this is going to go.

Sokolov evidently thinks so, too. "In our past acquaintance, I had thought you an intelligent man, for an American. I see I was mistaken. You are a fool who does not learn from his mistakes. Still, we must persevere. You will start

by explaining to me when you started working for Ethan Savage.”

I close my eyes—correction, eye—and pretend to lose consciousness again. A bucket of ice-cold water over my head puts a sudden end to that escape route.

“Wakey, wakey, Mr Sawyer. I don’t have all day to wait while you take a nap.” He has me by the hair again, my head forced backwards. He slaps me across the face. “I asked you a question.”

“I don’t work for Ethan Savage,” I mumble through what I’m sure is a broken jaw.

He slaps me again, so my head snaps back, but the chair somehow remains upright. “Shall we be perfectly clear, Sawyer? You are about to die. Maybe in the next few minutes, maybe hours. But be assured, it will be an unpleasant death. Just how painful, and how long the agony is dragged out for, is up to me. And I am not in a good mood. You cost me one of my best men. You destroyed lucrative business interests of mine. There have to be consequences. You of all people must understand this.”

“I work for the US military,” I mutter. “Harm me, and it’s them who’ll come after you.” Except, no one Stateside has the faintest idea where I am or what I’m up to. And now that I’m separated from the Caraksay organisation, I’m on my own.

“You’ve been doing Savage’s dirty work. Did he order the killing of Fedor?”

“It was nothing to do with him. I work for—” A rifle butt to the side of my head sends me to the floor all over again. This time it takes two buckets of water to bring me halfway to my senses.

“Shall we try another tack? Where is the woman?”

“What woman?” I manage, genuinely baffled.

“Cristina Bival.” He bends over me. “My woman, by rights. That bastard abducted her.”

I have no idea how or when Ethan and Cristina met, but there’s no doubt in my fuddled head that Sokolov is delusional. Cristina is on Caraksay of her own free will. I say as much, which earns me another kick to the ribs.

“There was an arrangement, with her father.” Sokolov is almost shrieking now. He’s on his feet, pacing around me, relating the tale as he sees it. “The old man died, but the son should have honoured our agreement. The contract was signed, she was mine. She *is* mine. I can give her everything she deserves, lay most of Europe at her feet. What does he have to offer? A life

on that barren lump of rock?”

The attack is starting to make sense. It wasn't just about the money, though the fee would have been welcome, I suppose. But in reality, the motive was personal. Sokolov has his greedy, self-entitled eye on Ethan Savage's wife.

“You're fucking mad,” I growl. “Cristina Savage wouldn't look twice at you. She wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire.”

“She's a woman, she'll do as she's told and come to love it. They're all the same. A few nice dresses, jewels, exotic holidays, and she'll see what's good for her.”

“Dream on,” I mumble.

“Where is she? My man informs me that Savage sent the females away. Where did they go?”

“Fuck you,” I offer.

“You will tell me, or I start slicing pieces off you.”

“Yeah, right,” I taunt. I have nothing to lose, he's going to kill me anyway. For all I know he may have his slimy tentacles reaching into Moldova and may decide to go after Cristina again. I won't be helping him to do that.

“Your ears to start, then your nose. Your eyes. One at a time.” He snaps his fingers again, and one of his men places a blade in his hand. “You won't have such a pretty face when I'm done.”

“He'll find you, eventually. You can't hide forever...”

“He has no fucking clue, but I'm coming for him. I'll sink that island of his, I'll burn it to the ground.”

“Like you did before? You'll be needing a few more helicopters, asshole. And another army to replace the one Ethan wiped out.”

He lets out a bellow of sheer rage and grabs my right ear by the lobe. I brace for the pain, just as the warehouse explodes about us.

CHAPTER 21

Six hours earlier, on Caraksay
Megan

“ARE YOU SURE? There’s no mistake?” My eyes are glued to the big screen in Ethan’s office where the drone footage is playing over again. We’ve already watched it three times.

“You’ve seen what we’ve seen. Jed’s contact on the Irish mainland managed to capture all of this.” Ethan points the remote at the screen to zoom in. “His equipment is military grade, the images are crystal clear, even from forty thousand feet. We see them disembarking and loading your guy into the back of a vehicle.”

The images also show them knee-capping Gabe on the jetty. Bile rises in my throat, and I silently beg not to be forced to view that again. He looks to be still alive when they throw him into the boot, but this was hours ago.

“Where did they take him?” I sob. “Can we get to him time?”

“The drone kept them in sight. We have coordinates. A derelict industrial estate about ten miles from Donegal.”

“You need to send men there. Now. You have to save him.”

“Tony, Aaron, and Rome are on their way. They left as soon as we had eyes on them. ETA is...” he consults his watch, “less than thirty minutes. Jed already has men assembling in the area.”

“But will they be in time? You saw what happened, what they did...”

“We’ll be there as fast as humanly possible, and in enough force to storm the building. If he’s alive, we’ll get him back.”

“I know. I’m sorry, I realise you’re doing all you can. It’s just... I need to be there. He’s hurt, I’ll be needed.”

His lip quirks. “You’ll be no use to anyone if you can’t hold yourself together.”

I stiffen. “I’ve been in war zones before. I can handle this.”

“It’s not the same. This is personal.”

“They’ll need a medic. Let me go. Please.”

He gazes at me, his eyes hard. At last, he nods. “They’ll take him to the Rothwell. You can meet them there.”

“But—”

“That’s my top offer. Take it or leave it.”

Gabriel

THE AIR around me is erupting in flames. The din is deafening, my eardrums are ringing. Gunfire. Blasts. The building is collapsing about us.

Men shouting, boots pounding. I’m helpless on the floor tied to this chair while fuck knows what explodes around me. A dead weight lands on top of me, cutting off what remains of my ability to breathe.

Somehow, I manage to wriggle free, despite the chair still lashed to me. Sokolov’s sightless eyes stare at me, from inches away.

Hands reach for me. The ropes are sliced away, and I’m cradled in someone’s lap. His voice is familiar.

“Can you hear me?”

I... I...

“Mate? Gabe? It’s Tony. We’re going to get you out of here.”

Too late. I’m dead.

“Not fucking yet, you aren’t. I’ll tell you when you’re dead.”

There’s more shouting, but the gunfire has stopped. The silence is eerie. Is this what Heaven sounds like? And if it does, what the fuck am I doing here?

I’m flying, floating. Pain is everywhere. Everything hurts, which is odd, because I’m dead and death is pain-free. That’s the only thing good about it.

Let me go. Stop taking the piss.

“This should help.”

I let out a moan when I’m stabbed in the thigh, but after comes the euphoric rush of oblivion.

Megan

“HOW’S HE DOING?”

I raise my forehead from the crisp white sheet pulled tight around Gabe’s motionless body to acknowledge Ethan’s presence. My boss takes the one spare seat, on the other side of the bed.

“He hasn’t regained consciousness yet,” I reply.

“Probably just as well.” Ethan winces as he takes in Gabe’s battered features. “Fuck, what a mess.”

I deliver the preliminary report. “His eye socket is shattered, and his jaw. Most of his ribs, too. And there’s his knee... He’s heavily sedated.”

“The bastards,” Ethan mutters. “Will they be able to reconstruct the knee joint?”

“The orthopaedic consultant will be examining him tomorrow. Thanks for paying for that, by the way.”

“No problem. According to Jack, they got there only just in time.”

I manage a nod. Just a few more seconds, and Christ knows what state he’d have been in. “I...I haven’t seen them yet. I should thank them.”

“No need. They did their job, now it’s time for you to do yours. If anyone can bring him back, it’s you, Doc. I should know.”

“He’s in good hands here.”

“I know. But you’ll be staying, I expect.”

“Yes. If that’s all right.”

“We’ll cope without you. Which reminds me, is there anyone I ought to be getting in touch with? Does he have family? Or a commanding officer?”

I shake my head. “If he does, I don’t know who they are. He’s never mentioned anyone, apart from a wife who never existed.”

“Sounds like an interesting story. I look forward to hearing it sometime. Truly a lone wolf, then?”

“I suppose so. Until now.”

He gets to his feet. “Keep me informed. And give him my best when he does come round.”

IT’S two days before I’m able to pass on the message. The sedation has been gradually reduced, and the first stirrings of consciousness are returning. The moment when he opens his one good eye, I break down and weep.

“Hey, that’s some shitty bedside manner you have there.” His voice is thin, barely more than a croak. But his hand reaches for mine across the cotton coverlet.

I need to pull myself together. I swipe my fingers across my face to dash the tears away. “I’m sorry. It’s just...”

“Honey...?” He takes my hand. “It’s good to see you.”

I chew on my lower lip to hold back the sobbing. I should be happy, right? And I am. Deliriously happy, but I can’t seem to stop crying. “You, too. I thought—”

“I know. So did I.” He pauses, then, “He’s dead. Sokolov.”

“Yes. All of them are.”

He nods. “Good. He would never have given up.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I need to speak to Ethan. Explain what happened, and why it happened.”

“There’ll be time for that. You need to concentrate on recovering. Ethan won’t expect—”

“Would you tell him? Please?”

“Yes. Of course. But first...” I climb onto the bed alongside him and stretch out, “can we just be together?”

THE STAFF at the Rothwell are known for their discretion, but I think we’re stretching even their tact and diplomacy. I’ve barely left Gabe’s side for the last week, and each morning the camp bed which they set up in his room for me remains undisturbed. I prefer to share the hospital mattress.

The top consultant Ethan had flown in from Edinburgh is guardedly optimistic. “It’ll be a delicate operation, but we can replace the knee, and with intensive physiotherapy, he should recover most of the use of it. It won’t come cheap, and the treatment will take time. Much depends on the patient

himself and how determined he is to get better.”

He has my absolute assurance. “I don’t think that will be an issue, Mr Monroe.”

Gabriel’s other injuries are slowly improving. The surgeons here at the Rothwell managed to save his eye and reconstruct the socket. We don’t yet know how much damage there has been to his eyesight, but the early signs are good. His ribs are healing, and his jaw has been wired together again. His complaints about the liquid diet are beginning to grate on me, but it should only be a few more days.

The procession of visitors filing past the bedside is endless. Casey was first, accompanied by Jed. If it hadn’t been for him and his drone pilot friend ready to drop everything and help us out, things would have worked out very differently. He waves away my attempts to thank him.

Young Freddie, too, doesn’t seem to appreciate the role he played, him and his fitness tracker. Gabe laughs when I tell him, then regrets it because his ribs aren’t quite up to that sort of punishment yet.

The men have all trooped in to wish him well, usually several at a time. And they’re not particularly quiet. The ward sister has taken to issuing warnings not to disturb the other patients, giving rise to suggestions that Gabe might be better being cared for at Caraksay, now the worst is over. She points this out to us as Jack and Aaron are leaving one day, having disrupted the normal mealtime which caused an elderly lady with a dodgy bladder to have a little accident, because the staff were too busy eyeing the male talent assembled around Gabe’s bedside.

“Great idea,” Jack concurs. “I’ll sort out the chopper.”

Gabe shakes his head. “I’ll be staying here, until I’m ready to be discharged properly. Then I’ll head home.”

“Home?”

“The States,” Gabe clarifies. “There’s stuff I need to—”

Jack scowls. “Well, yes, eventually. Maybe. But that’s a way off yet. What about your leg? That’ll take months to fix.”

“We have doctors in the US, too.”

“But your quack is here,” Jack insists. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on. I just don’t want to rock the boat, that’s all. I owe you, all of you...”

“Do you fuck. What boat?”

“You came after me, risked your lives. You didn’t have to.”

Aaron dismisses the sentiment with a wave. “Don’t get sappy, thinking we’re fond of you or some shit like that. We’d have done the same for any one of us.”

Gabe falls silent, so I answer for him, despite his warning glower. “But that’s just it, he seems to think he’s not one of you. Us.”

Aaron lets out an obscenity. “Fuck that. I mean, he’s right. He’s a fucking Yank, to start with. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“You’re a team. A unit. You have a chain of command,” Gabe starts to explain.

“And?” Jack wants to know. “All of that’s true whether you’re here or not.”

“Ethan doesn’t think so.”

Aaron swears again. “For fuck’s sake. What has my brother said?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m going back to the States, and that’s it.”

“Fuck that. Tell us what this is about.”

Gabe sighs. “You should ask him...”

“We’re asking you, dickhead.”

He sighs. “Okay. Here it is. Your boss thinks I disturb the equilibrium. I create tension, especially between you two. There isn’t room for a third commander here.”

Jack and Aaron exchange a bemused look.

“Is there tension?” Jack wants to know.

“Fuck, yes. You’re an asshole,” Aaron replies.

“Right. I could say the same for you. But what does that have to do with him?” He jerks his thumb in Gabe’s direction.

“Fucked if I know. We can butt heads without any help from anyone else. And look at him. He’s not a commander. Barely even a soldier with that limp, and now the knee. He’s just a bloke who turns up out of the blue and makes himself useful here and there.”

“And fucks the doc. Don’t forget that.”

Aaron winks at me. “Well, someone has to.”

My face is hot enough to fry eggs by the time they’ve finished their banter. For once, I’m speechless. “I... We just...”

“Don’t you go booking a plane ticket,” Aaron says, ignoring my stammering. “Ethan’ll see sense. He always does, in the end.”

Jack is more circumspect. “It’s the boss’s call, but we’ll talk to him.”

Gabriel

“MEGAN TELLS me you’re wanting a word.”

Ethan’s waiting for me when I return from yet another visit to the x-ray department. He’s lounging in the plastic-covered armchair beside my bed, thumbing through a copy of *Time* magazine.

“That’s right. But you didn’t need to make a trip over especially. You could have just phoned.”

The nurse accompanying me shoves my wheelchair to the edge of my bed, and I begin the laborious task of shuffling from the chair onto the mattress.

Ethan watches me but doesn’t offer to help, which I’m glad of. I get enough of that from the nurses, who mean well, and I suppose it’s their job, but I need to get used to shifting for myself. It’s been ten days since my rescue, and this is the first time I’ve actually been out of bed. It was a heady experience, but now I’m exhausted. I flop back against the pile of pillows and wince when pain arcs through my ribs.

“So, how’s it all going?” Ethan helps himself to a chocolate biscuit from the stash I normally keep hidden. The men from Caraksay are like a plague of locusts when they descend, and I’ve learned the wisdom of hiding my cookies when they’re around.

“Not bad. There’s talk of physiotherapy, probably starting next week. I need to build muscle tone ready for the surgery.”

He shoves half a biscuit into his mouth. “I wouldn’t have thought that would be an issue. You’re built like a tank.”

“I’ve been lying around for a week. Megan thinks I’m getting flabby.”

“Ah, well, she’d know, being a doctor and all.”

I settle myself in the bed. “Thanks for coming. I wanted to talk to you about Sokolov.”

“There’s a fucker who won’t be missed.”

“True. While he was... questioning me, he said quite a lot about why he was so keen to attack you.”

His eyebrow lifts. “Oh?”

“Apparently, he had a thing for your wife.”

His mouth quirks in a grin. “I can understand that. I have a thing for her myself. What did he say, exactly?”

“There was some sort of an arrangement, years back. Or so he seemed to think. A betrothal, him and Cristina.”

“First I’ve heard of it.”

“Me, too.” Cristina appears in the doorway. “He really believed that?”

“Sorry, ma’am, I didn’t mean to—”

“Oh, never mind that.” She perches on Ethan’s knee as there is no spare chair in the room. “Tell us what he said.”

“Not much more than that, really. He seemed to think that you were promised to him, but Ethan abducted you. He intended to storm Caraksay, take back what he thought was his, and give you the life of luxury you deserved.”

“The man was clearly deluded, but it is possible that my father gave him the impression...” She shrugs. “He was always making deals and dangled me in front of more of his associates than I care to remember. The Moldovan Bratva still goes in for dynastic marriages, but I managed to make my own arrangements.”

Ethan wraps his arms around her and nuzzles her neck. “With a bit of help from me. So, it makes some sort of sense, then.”

“Yeah. He also had a suspicion that you paid me to end his *Vor*, but I didn’t get the impression he was that bothered about Fedor. It was mainly about Mrs Savage. I thought you should know. Both of you.”

Ethan nods, his brow furrowing. “Thank you. There was something I wanted to discuss, too. I’ve had a delegation...”

“Jack and Aaron?”

“The very same.”

“I didn’t ask them to talk to you, but they—”

“I know. If I thought you were trying to pull strings you’d be out of that bed and on a plane headed for the US before you could say ‘hospital corner’.”

“Hospital what?”

“Never mind.” He smiles at his wife. “Sweetheart, would you give us a few minutes, please?”

“Of course. I’ll go grab us all some coffees.” She gets to her feet, kisses him on the mouth, and waves to me on her way out.

Ethan waits until the door swings shut behind her then launches in. “So, you’ve made quite an impression on my lieutenants. And my brother. My wife, too, by the looks of it.”

“They’re a shit-hot team. I enjoyed working with them. We got stuff

done.”

“Megan’s been pleading your case, too.”

“I know, but—”

“You know what my concern is.”

“I do, and I understand.” *I think.*

“I find myself in a minority of one, not that I’d give a fuck normally.”

“Ethan. Mr Savage, I—”

“But, like you say, I have a shit-hot team. And I’ve learned to listen to them. So, it seems I must compromise. You’ll appreciate this does not come easily.”

“Ethan...”

“Would you be prepared to take the oath?”

“The oath? As in...?”

“Obedience and loyalty. To me, and to the organisation. It is binding, and it’s for life.”

Cornered, I try to pick my words with care. “I *am* loyal, and—”

“I thought not. For a start, you’re US army, so I assume you have obligations there. You can’t just go swearing allegiance to a foreign entity. I’d think less of you if you did, in fact.”

I let out a relieved breath. “I see. Thank you for understanding. So...?”

“So, I’m going to propose a looser arrangement. Just for you. You can come and go as you please, go about your business as before, but if you want to be based on Caraksay with Megan, I’ll allow that. I appreciate that you’ll have other... obligations. Your role in the military, whatever that is, will take you away, and that’s fine, as long as I have your assurance that nothing you do will work against my interests, legitimate or otherwise.”

“My work is usually top secret. You wouldn’t know what I was involved in, or where.”

“I get that. So, I’ll have to trust you. That’s why I’m asking for your assurance.”

“You’d accept that?”

“Unless you give me reason not to. And I also want your assurance that, within reason, if I need you, you’ll be there. A man with your skills and contacts is a valuable asset. My underbosses like you, they respect you, the men will take orders from you, so in return for my hospitality, I intend to capitalise on that. Do you think you could agree to my terms?”

“And, if I don’t?”

“Then nothing has changed. We part company, as friends, I hope. I wish you well. Megan, too, if she decides to go with you.”

“She won’t. Her life is here.”

He leans forward, his wrists dangling from his knees. “Okay. You know where I stand. I’ll leave it with you, then. Let me know your decision.”

“I accept.”

He grins and offers me his hand. “Welcome to Caraksay, Mr Sawyer.”

EPILOGUE

One year later, spring 2023

MY STOMACH GROWLS. I check the clock on the wall. Not yet eleven-thirty, and I'm ravenous.

"Ye're eatin' for two," my aunt is fond of telling me these days.

It's rubbish, an old wives' tale, but she insists on feeding me up, and who am I to argue? I'm only a doctor, after all.

Maybe an early lunch...

My immediate future decided, I abandon my stockist for now. Supplies of controlled drugs will have to wait. I head out of the clinic and, puffing, drag myself up the slight incline towards the castle. My plan is to raid the kitchen before the usual lunchtime crowd arrives, and maybe snatch a bit of downtime with my aunt and Janey.

I was never one for shirking or taking time off, but recently I've made an exception. There's always someone telling me to take it easy, to put my feet up. And I do get tired, as well as hungry.

Eight and a half months of pregnancy will do that for you.

I'm about halfway to the castle when it hits me. There's nothing subtle or gradual about the agony that shoots from my back around to my belly button, followed by a cramping pain that brings me quite literally to my knees.

Christ, it's started.

I let out a yell and try to get back on my feet, only to be felled once again by the second wave.

It's too soon. Not due yet...

My baby apparently thinks otherwise. I double up in agony and scramble in my pocket for my phone.

Before I can focus on dialling, I'm grabbed by strong, male hands, a pair on either side of me.

"It's okay, Doc. We've got you" Ethan's voice is laced with concern. "We'll help you back to your cottage."

I shake my head. "No, I need to be at the hospital. They're expecting me..."

He doesn't take any persuading. "Good idea. Chopper, then."

Ethan and Aaron half carry me to the courtyard where a helicopter waits, its rotors whirling. Magda waves to me from the cockpit, her career as a pilot pretty much undisturbed now that she has her artificial limb sorted. Only when I'm safely strapped into a seat does Ethan ask about Gabe.

"Do you know where he is? I'll let him know."

I shake my head. "He's due back next week..." But right now, as far as I know he could be anywhere in the northern hemisphere, though I suspect China, in advance of a US government trade delegation in a couple of months' time. It's Gabe's job to identify and eliminate known threats so that when the politicians arrive there's a sporting chance they'll get out again alive.

The hop over to the Rothwell passes in a haze of pain. We land on the roof, where Ethan lifts me onto a trolley. Cristina trots alongside, having dashed across the courtyard to jump in with us moments before we took off.

The maternity wing here is one of the finest in the UK and probably the most expensive. I'm whisked into a private room, which has more in common with a five-star hotel than a clinical setting. All the requisite gadgetry is there, but discreetly unconcealed behind the state-of-the-art entertainment system.

Two midwives are on hand to cater to my every need. They examine me, declare me five centimetres dilated, and try to order Ethan out of the room.

"Fuck that, unless you want me to go?" He leans over my bed to take my hand.

I shake my head. "Gas and air..." I moan.

"Got that."

Ethan thrusts the mouthpiece into my hand, and I take a long, satisfying suck. The heady, intoxicating rush almost knocks me out. It's like being drunk but without all the messing about beforehand. The sensation deadens

the pain, allowing me a few moments of lucidity before I need to take another swig.

“T-tell him... aargh!” I seize the Entonox again. “Please, tell Gabe...”

“It’s okay, we’re on it.” Cristina smooths back my hair. “Meanwhile, you’ve got us. Would you like me to send for Mrs McRae?”

I shake my head. My aunt is lovely, she truly is, but she does tend to be full of ‘traditional’ advice. I’m not in the market for slugs and snails and puppy dogs’ tails, even less a natural birth. I can see no point in being a child of the twenty-first century and not taking advantage of all that modern medicine can offer.

Bring on the epidural. And I hope they ordered in an extra crate of Entonox.

I THINK PERHAPS THEY DID. Certainly, there seems to be no shortage of the stuff, and I make frequent use of it through the next eighteen hours. This labour might have got off the mark fast, but any hint that my baby might be in a hurry stopped. She, and my cervix, are taking their own sweet time, but at last the midwives seem to be getting excited. They peer eagerly under the raised covers, studying my nether regions, which feel to me to be splitting in half. I grasp Cristina’s fingers in mine and squeeze hard enough to bring tears to both our eyes.

“I can see the head,” one of the midwives squeals. “Won’t be long now, dearie.”

“On the next contraction, give one long, hard push,” the other advises. “I’ll tell you when.”

I’m panting, barely coherent. All I know is, this will be over soon. It has to be. My friends murmur encouragement, but I’m past hearing, past making sense of anything but the need to expel this child into the world. Gabriel and I made this little miracle by accident, but no child was more longed for, more welcome.

“I wish your daddy was here, little one. He wanted to be...” I whisper.

“Whoa. Someone trying to have baby without me?”

I’m hallucinating. It sounds like him, but I know for a fact Gabriel is on the other side of the world. Still, it’s a nice dream...

“Sweetheart, I love you.” He kisses my forehead.

It seems so real, I can almost taste him, smell him.

The bed dips just as the pain grips me again. This is it, the next contraction.

“Push, honey. Push now. Hard. Harder.” Gabriel’s tone is low, even, compelling.

It reaches me through the drugged, agonised haze, gives me focus. From somewhere, I dig deep and find what I need.

“She’s here, I have her...”

I swear I split apart. There’s a warm, wet rush, impossible stretching, a hoarse, raucous cry which I think must be me, then, relief.

I’m sobbing, barely conscious, when the squirming, slippery bundle lands on my chest. “Here she is. Our daughter. As beautiful as her mama.”

People are laughing, crying, clapping. I’m sobbing and grinning at the same time, deliriously happy and racked with emotional turmoil. The rational, medically trained part of me knows it’s only chemistry, hormones running rampant, but I’m still carried along on the blissful wave, in this precious moment to be captured in time and carried forever.

The high-pitched wail of a baby’s first cry bounces off the walls. I hug her to me, revel in her hot, sticky little body.

My baby girl, my very own baby girl...

“HOW DID YOU KNOW? And how did you get here so quickly?” I’m propped up in the bed, swathed in fresh bedding, bathed and pampered and freshly stitched, watching Gabriel pace about the room with baby Charlotte cradled in his arms. All of two hours old, she already has her daddy wrapped around her tiny pink finger.

We haven’t chosen a name with any special significance. We didn’t want to call her after anyone, rather she has her own name because she’s her own special little person. But we talked and agreed Charlotte sounded nice.

“Freddie,” he says, in answer to my questions.

It’s enough, no more explanation needed. Seriously, that lad can creep right up the arse of the dark web, even discovering the innermost secrets of the US military. He’d be lethal if let loose in the world but shows no inclination to head back out into the wilderness.

“I got a coded message from your boss and extracted myself straight away. Hitched a ride on a military jet to Azerbaijan, then across the Black Sea to Moldova. From there, Marius helped out with a private jet to

Inverness.”

“I dread to think of the carbon footprint,” I mutter. “But I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me, too.” He sets the baby down in her clear plastic hospital-issue crib, and we both gaze at her in wonder, her adoring slaves. “How are you feeling now? I gather it was rough.”

“I’m fine,” I say, and I mean it. Eighteen hours of being torn limb from limb have somehow slipped from my memory to be replaced by overwhelming love for the little scrap of humanity sleeping peacefully in the cot. “I’m glad she took her time. It gave you the chance to get here.”

“We’re a team, she and I.” He lifts one eyebrow. “And you’re amazing, too.”

“I like to think so. So is she. Just look at her.”

“I am.” His features cloud. “Do you think we’ll be good parents? Good enough, I mean?”

“Where’s this coming from? It’s not like you to doubt yourself.”

“I’ve never done this before. This shit matters.”

“More than protecting presidents and rescuing women from sex traffickers?”

“Oh yes. This is proper important. Life-or-death stuff.”

I try to sit up further and reach for his hand, but my stitches get the better of me, and I collapse back onto the pillow with a groan. Gabe is at once all concern.

“Don’t try to move. Just lie still. What can I get you? Do you need the nurse?”

I shake my head. “I’m fine. Just a bit sore. Do you think it’s time for her feed?”

He gapes at me, horror-struck. “I don’t know. Is it? Shall I ask someone? What if she—?”

I burst out laughing. “Relax. It’s okay. She’ll cry when she’s hungry.”

“Are you sure? What if she doesn’t? She might starve to death.”

“She won’t. I promise.” I pause for a few moments to let my stitches settle again. All this giggling isn’t good for my delicate condition. “Do you have to go back?”

He nods. “Not for a while, though.”

“How long?”

“A few weeks. Months, maybe.”

“Oh. Wow. That’s... great.” I’d somehow assumed this was a flying visit.

“So, since we’re going to be around for a while, both of us, and this tiny one too, I thought, maybe now would be a good time to...” He digs in his pocket, produces a small square box, and holds it out to me. “This was my mother’s. I stopped by in Dallas couple of weeks ago to get it from the safety deposit box where it usually lives. I thought you might... I mean, if you want...”

“For fuck’s sake, ask her.” Ethan’s amused tone echoes from the doorway. “I have champagne getting warm here.”

Gabe growls something less than complimentary at him, then returns to his theme. “I want to get married. Please.”

My mouth opens, then shuts again. Then opens. At last, I find something to say. “To me?”

“Of course, to you. Who the fuck else would I marry?”

“Oh, well, in that case, I think... I think I’d like that.”

Anything else either of us might want to say is drowned by shouts and hoots from outside the room. Charlotte stirs and joins in the chorus. A champagne cork narrowly misses the blood pressure gauge. The party has started.

LOOKING AHEAD...

I hope you enjoyed getting to know Gabe and Megan as much as I enjoyed writing their stories. Look out for the next book in The Caraksay Brotherhood series.

Savage Enforcer is Nico and Molly's story, releasing early next year

In the meantime, why not turn the page for a glimpse of where it all began. ***Savage King*** is the first book in The Caraksay Brotherhood series.

SAVAGE KING : CHAPTER ONE

Stirling, Scotland.

March 2019

Cristina

I step outside and sniff the air. This is just the sort of morning I like. Cool, but with the promise of warmth later. A light breeze ripples the new leaves on the sycamores lining the street where I rent a ground-floor flat. I close and lock the door behind me then pocket the key.

Today is the start of a fresh, spring day in Stirling, perfect for a quick five miles or so before I make my way into the city centre to set up my stall.

I pull my hood up, stuff my earplugs into my ears, and click on the music app on my phone. *Madonna's Greatest Hits*. A bit dated, but still, one of my favourites. I set off at a brisk pace, my feet slapping the pavement in time with *Like A Virgin*.

Five miles should take me about forty minutes. I'll be back in time for a quick shower, then I can catch the bus into town and be at the market by nine. I'm looking forward to setting up my display. I have several new pieces that I created over the weekend, titanium pendants set with tiger eye and bloodstone, with matching bracelets. Classy and elegant, but not too pricey. I'm keen to see how they'll sell, though I'm quietly confident.

My stuff is good, even if I am biased. Unique, even, as far as I can see. I like to blend traditional Celtic designs with the more exotic styles of the Near East to create what I consider to be stunning items of jewellery. The tourists of Stirling seem to agree. My pieces have been well-received among the visitors from abroad who flock to places like Stirling for the romantic and historical connections. I occasionally venture to Edinburgh, usually during

the Festival when it's busy and trade might be better, but generally I prefer my regular site. I'm to be found there three days a week, in the marketplace in the city centre a mile and a half from where I live. My pitch nestles between a stall selling antique clocks and another offering silk scarves in every colour imaginable.

It's a good living. Quiet. Peaceful. Predictable. And safe.

Exactly as I like it.

I reach the end of my quiet street and jog left into a busier road. A mile further, to the haunting strains of *American Pie* Madonna-style, I leave the main road, continuing along a cobbled path leading to the riverside. The local council, in their wisdom, has invested in a decent paved waterfront trail to attract more visitors to the city, and it's one of my preferred routes for a morning run. It's away from traffic, out of the din, and smells of the busy city streets, with occasional glimpses of an otter or a kingfisher to brighten the day.

I'm panting now, but I have another mile or so in me yet. I'll run as far as the next bridge, then make my way back up onto the road and head for home.

I round a long, curving stretch of path. The bridge is up ahead, about half a mile away. The river tumbles merrily on my right, the water level slightly raised due to the heavy rain we had a few days ago, but nothing too alarming.

I can just make out a group of people walking over the bridge, four or five of them, perhaps. One separates from the rest and jogs back to the start of the bridge, then down the stone steps onto the waterside path in front of me. He reaches the path, then ducks beneath the bridge, heading away from me.

I'm relieved. Never the most sociable of people, I'll be leaving the path before I get to him, so I won't need to conjure up a smile and a 'hello'.

He pauses in the shadow of the bridge and turns to face the wall.

Bloody hell.

I slow my pace. He's still a fair way ahead, but I'll make sure I leave enough time for him to finish taking a leak, put everything away again, and get lost.

He finishes his urgent business and begins to retrace his steps. He doesn't get more than a couple of paces before more men appear from beyond the bridge. Four. No, five of them. They rush at the lone man, who is clearly not best pleased to see them and not hanging about to pass the time of day. He breaks into a sprint.

They all arrive at the foot of the steps together, and one of the men chasing grabs at the one running away. He whirls and aims a vicious kick at the assailant's knee. I'm still at least a couple of hundred metres away, but I swear I hear the crunch of bone from here. The man goes down like a felled tree.

It all took just a few moments, but it was long enough for one of the other men to get behind him, blocking the escape route up the steps. Another attacker makes a lunge, but the victim dodges out of the way, landing a swinging punch to another jaw.

Then, it's all something of blur. There's a scuffle, the sound of punches landing, grunts and snarls as breath is forced from lungs and male testosterone erupts into violence. Rooted to the spot, I can only stand and stare when the four men still on their feet set about the one on his own.

Suddenly, he breaks free from the skirmish and makes another run for it. He's heading in my direction. Instinctively, I side step off the path and into the shrubbery lining the route. No way do I want to get involved in whatever this is.

I can see the first man clearly now. He's covering the ground fast, only about a hundred metres from me. He's young, about my age, I think. Early to mid-twenties, with dark-brown hair. And well-dressed in a casual sort of way, expensive designer jeans and a button-down shirt to match, though his clothes are looking the worse for wear right now. No coat or jacket, which seems odd, given that this is March, in Scotland. Hardly a subtropical climate.

The other four are in hot pursuit and gaining. Their quarry is limping and holding his side, and they are almost upon him. He whirls back to face them.

"Fuck off, Olensky. You really don't want to do this." He is walking slowly backwards, his gaze swinging left and right, keeping each of them in sight.

'Oh, I think we do.'" The reply comes from the largest of the assailants, a bear of a man aged around forty, I'd say, and whose craggy appearance suggests he's seen every day of that life, and it is delivered in a heavy Eastern European accent, not unlike my own.

The man has almost drawn level with the spot where I'm hiding when they catch him up and surround him again. He throws a punch that catches the one who spoke right in the middle of his face.

"Wrong answer, asshole. Do yourself a favour and piss off."

Blood dribbles from the ‘arsehole’s’ nose, and his hand is tucked inside his jacket as though holding bruised ribs. But still he advances, his mates at his back.

This time, the younger man is ready for him. He stands his ground, fists up. “Do you never get the message, dickhead?”

Another of the men answers this time. “We have message for you, Savage, or rather, for your brother.”

Again, I detect a slight hint of an Eastern European accent, but my attention is concentrated on the glint of steel as the man at his side — Olensky? — pulls a vicious-looking knife from beneath his jacket. So much for injured ribs.

The younger man clearly sees the value of caution. He’s outnumbered, and they are armed, with murderous knives and equally deadly intent.

He backs away. “Don’t be a fucking idiot,” he begins. “You know how this will end.”

“It ends here.” Olensky lunges with the knife. “You always were the runt of the litter. It is time to put you out of your misery, my way of showing you, and your brother, what happens to those who cross me. You were warned. Now, it’s payback time.”

The one called Savage puts up an arm to defend himself. The knife slices through his sleeve. Blood pours from the wound to pool on the stone flags.

“Fuck,” he mutters, grasping at his arm, at the same time swinging his foot up to catch Olensky in the elbow.

There’s a sickening crunch and a wail of agony, but Olensky is not done yet. The rest of his thugs grab Savage and pin his arms at his sides, while Olensky switches the knife to his other hand and circles the prisoner.

“Let’s make this nice and slow, shall we?” He grins, revealing three or four yellowing teeth and huge gaps where the rest should have been. “We really should savour the moment, perhaps take a few snapshots to send to your brother. We wouldn’t want him to miss out on all the fun, would we?” He moves in close, narrows his eyes, then slowly, deliberately, slices the blade across Savage’s stomach.

It’s enough. Too much. The men holding him let go, and Savage buckles to his knees.

Olensky stands over him, his left arm dangling useless at his side.

“We cannot leave trash like this on the path. Someone might complain.” Then, as calm as anything, he pockets the knife again, bends and wraps his

meaty fist around Savage's ankle. While his friends watch, grinning stupidly, Olensky drags the dying man across the path to the edge of the river, then simply shoves him into the water.

I let out a strangled scream. I can't help it. Shock and horror overwhelm what's left of good sense.

They all hear me. As one, they turn and see me for the first time. Olensky's lip curls in a parody of a smile in his weather-beaten features. He bares his nicotine-stained teeth at me, his eyes almost as dead as those of his victim.

"You should not have been here," he snarls, reaching for me.

Instinct kicks in. I have to get away. I dart out of the shrubbery and try to dodge past the group of thugs, but they block the entire path. The knife is in Olensky's hand again, and he is once more playing to his audience. He circles around me, edging me backwards, towards the water's edge. There's only one way to escape, and I take it.

I take another step back, twisting my body, and I dive into the river.

I surface to see Olensky and the rest glowering at me from the path. One of the men starts to take off his jacket as if he might be contemplating coming in after me, but a shout from the bridge disturbs them. More men are running down the steps, and clearly Olensky and his cronies have no desire to discuss their recent antics with anyone else in a fair fight. He mutters something in Russian and sprints off in the direction I came from, his thuggish mates at his heels, away from the men now pounding along the bank.

I spin around, treading water and scanning the surface for any sign of the injured man. It's the blood floating to the surface that gives him away. I pick my spot, swim a few strokes, and dive.

When next I surface, the lifeless body of Savage weighing me down, there are two more men in the water. One of them grabs Savage, the other reaches for me.

"I'm okay. I can get out on my own. Help him," I splutter.

The man nods and turns his attention to assisting the one who was injured. By the time I reach the edge and grasp at the hands reaching down to help me out, the body of Savage is already on the bank.

"Is he...?" I hardly dare breathe the words. *Is he dead?*

The faint wail of sirens is getting stronger. Someone must have called an ambulance. And the police. I can only lie on the path, spluttering and gasping for air. I'm a strong swimmer, and I had no doubt I could save myself. I

wouldn't have dived in otherwise. I don't have a death wish. I wasn't so sure I could save the man, but I saw no reason not to try. Now, though, that dip in the icy waters of the River Forth has taken everything out of me.

Apart from myself and Savage, there are six men clustered around us, two of them dripping wet like I am but not yet shivering. For myself, it may be shock, or the cold, but I think I'm about to pass out. I close my eyes and wait for the nausea to pass.

When my senses have rallied and I'm a bit more focussed, I raise my head and take in the scene. Two of the men are on phones. One of them glances at me, mutters something into the mouthpiece, and nods.

I am helped to my feet by two of them and bundled along the path in the direction of the bridge. A pair of paramedics jog down the steps from the road and pause to ask if we are injured.

One of the men accompanying me gestures to where the casualty is still lying motionless on the stone flags. "Over there," he says, then takes me by the elbow to propel me up the steps.

I expect to be guided to the ambulance parked on the bridge, blue light flashing, but find myself instead directed to a sleek, black four-by-four across the road.

"Get in."

I shake my head, not happy about this. Something isn't right...

"No, I don't know you. I'll ride in the ambulance. The police will want ___"

"Do as you're fucking told," comes the snarled response. The man opens the rear door of the four-by-four and bundles me onto the back. He follows me into the car, and the other man hops into the driver's seat.

Stunned and bewildered, I try to scramble across the seat and make a grab for the other door, but he's faster. He hauls me back, throws me down across the seat, then covers my body with his own so I can't move.

The car engine bursts into life. We are moving.

"Put your foot down," he tells the man in the driving seat. "Get us the fuck out of here."

ALSO BY ASHE BARKER

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FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *Savage Reckoning*.

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.

Better still, why not sign up for my newsletter to get your hands on lots of fun stuff - giveaways, competitions and much more. And make sure you're always one of the first to know when the next book comes out.

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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