



THE CARAKSAY
BROTHERHOOD
BOOK 3

SAVAGE
UNION

INTERNATIONAL BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

ASHE BARKER

SAVAGE UNION

THE CARAKSAY BROTHERHOOD BOOK 3

ASHE BARKER

ASHE BARKER BOOKS

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2022 by Ashe Barker

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Editing by www.studioenp.com

Cover Art by <http://www.fiverr.com/designrans>

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

***One night was never going to be enough. She will be mine,
'til death do we part... one way or another.***

Making gorgeous, feisty Casey Savage my wife was already in my plans. Finding out she is carrying my child, well, that only seals the deal as far as I am concerned.

And although our passion burns as hot and fierce as it did the night I first claimed her, she doesn't accept my proposal as easily as I'd hoped.

No matter. Whatever it takes, I will have Casey where she belongs—in my home and in my bed, where I can touch and taste and tease her whenever I wish.

But in a split second, the future I am fighting so hard for is nearly lost. Now there is nothing on this Earth that will keep me from wiping out the threat against my family.

Even as I hunt down those who tried to take my woman and child from me, I can't help but wonder if they are the true enemy...

Or just a distraction from a greater evil waiting in the shadows.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Savage Prince \(Book Two in the Caraksay Brotherhood Series\)](#)

[Also by Ashe Barker](#)

[From the Author](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER 1

Rothwell Clinic, Inverness, Scotland

May 2020

Jed

“RIGHT, YOU’RE GOOD TO GO.”

The nurse shoots me a bright smile, clearly meant to be taken as an invitation as much as medical advice. Meaning, ‘We’re done, but if you feel like sticking around...’

I roll my sleeve down and check my watch. I’m in no particular hurry, and from what I can see above the surgical mask covering her mouth and nose, she’s pretty enough, in an obvious sort of a way. Maybe I could...

No. I have shit to do. I could just fit in a meeting with my accountant in Glasgow if I get a move on, save me coming back over here next week.

“Best get off,” I reply. “Thanks for...”

For what? The hepatitis B shot? Always a wise precaution in my line of work. You never know where people have been, and when they tend to bleed all over you, well, things can get messy in more ways than I like to think about. Or for the invitation to enjoy the facilities here at the luxurious Rothwell private clinic a little longer?

“... everything,” I finish, reaching for my jacket.

She shrugs and continues to tidy up the desk, dropping the used needle in the bright-yellow sharps box and tossing the discarded packaging in the waste bin. If she's disappointed, she hides it well.

My footsteps echo in the deserted corridor as I head for the exit. The Rothwell is always somewhat on the exclusive side with none of the usual hustle and bustle of an NHS hospital. No crowded waiting areas full of people coughing and sniffing. No harried staff who haven't slept for days and are wondering if there'll be anything left at the food bank worth having by the time their shift ends. No worried parents with squalling kids or elderly couples sitting in companionable silence. No paramedics rushing about with bloodstained accident victims on trolleys.

No, this is the hallowed peace and quiet of private medicine. Better still, private medicine with no questions asked. The Rothwell is a place where no one gets unduly curious about bullet wounds or a stabbing. And it's also a place where they still do the routine stuff such as Hep B injections despite the global pandemic engulfing the rest of the medical world. And where an obliging nurse will still offer a little extra TLC if needed, with scant regard for social distancing.

They aren't even that fussy about mask-wearing, though there are the ubiquitous signs up everywhere. I hate the things so I stuff mine in my pocket, take a left and trot down a flight of stairs, not encountering anyone on the way. All of which makes the din suddenly coming from the self-service café on the ground floor all the more incongruous.

I pause. There it is again. A metallic crash, followed by a string of expletives demonstrating a colourful if not especially wholesome vocabulary. Curious, I scan the foyer area, then peer round the half wall separating the main entrance from the café.

The vending machines are tucked away round the corner. There are three of them, dispensing such goodies as prepacked sandwiches, hot and cold drinks, and snacks. For the more discerning clientele with time to spare there is still a decent

restaurant upstairs serving smoked salmon tartlets and ridiculously overpriced cakes and pastries, but the vending machines cater for those in a rush.

Or perhaps they don't if the fury of the woman currently laying into the machine purporting to serve canned drinks is anything to go by.

Five feet four inches of enraged female lands another hard kick to the side of the machine. The metal casing is actually dented by the blow but still refuses to give up its treasures.

"Bastard machine," she hisses, at the same time delivering a vicious slap to the glass front. "Where's my fucking Coke?"

The entire cabinet shudders under the onslaught, but other than that, there is no response. No can of cola tumbles from its bowels, nor does the gadget apparently see fit to return the money it allegedly stole if her continued tirade is any indication.

The woman delivers an uppercut to the side of the machine, then turns her attention to a spot somewhere near the top. Unfortunately for her, the machine is at least two feet taller than she is, so she's forced to leap into the air in her attempts to dislodge whatever is stuck.

"Great robbing lump of shite," she snarls. "Useless pile of trash." She punctuates her remarks with more blows, none of which make the slightest difference to her predicament. It's when she drags a chair over towards the machine that I decided to intervene before she launches it through the glass doors.

I clear my throat, and she spins around to face me.

"What are you doing there?" she demands to know.

"I was wondering if you might like me to hold your coat," I reply.

"Do one," is her considered response, and she returns to her assault on the defenceless machine.

I take a couple of paces forward, enough to be able to see the problem. The can of cola seems to be wedged at the top of

the dispensing tube, which is about a foot higher than she can reach in her attempts to dislodge it.

“Maybe I could—”

She whirls around again. “Are you still here?” She shoves past me to grab the chair she dragged over.

“I wouldn’t do that,” I advise. “The hospital will probably sue you for criminal damage, or GBH to an innocent vending machine.”

“Get out of my way.” Undeterred by my advice, she pulls the chair in front of the drinks dispenser and kneels on it.

“Ah, I see the plan now. Maybe I can help.” The trapped can is way out of reach for her but at eye level for me. I jab the machine in just the right place with the heel of my hand, causing the errant can to shudder and bounce, but it’s still wedged tight.

“Hit it harder,” the woman says. “Or better still, let me...” She clambers up onto the chair.

“This calls for a little more finesse, I think.” I grab her round the waist and lift her down. “Sit there.”

“Who the fuck do you—?”

“Sit. There.” I inject a healthy degree of menace into my tone, usually sufficient to quell any hint of insubordination. This girl is not one of my soldiers, but she gets my drift anyway. Her expression is sullen but she obeys and sinks onto the chair she had preciously pressed into service as a ladder.

I dig into the pocket of my jeans and produce a small penknife. It’s a handy bit of kit, I’ve had it for years. The handle conceals a variety of implements, including a tiny screwdriver which I’ve found especially useful for picking locks. It’s a skill I’ve cultivated since I was young, and I’m quite adept at it, even if I do say so myself. It takes me less than a minute to unlock the front of the glass cabinet, enabling us to help ourselves from the wares within.

“A Coke, was it?” I lift one out for her and hand it over.

She takes it, scowling. “And you think *I* might get arrested. Where did you learn that?”

I shrug and help myself to a can of lemonade. “Here and there. Do you want anything else, or shall I lock it up again?”

“No. I’m good.” She pops the top of the can and takes a long drink. “I suppose I should be grateful.”

“Up to you.” I take a seat opposite her and open my own can.

“Are you going to pay for that?” she demands.

I take a sip and grin at her. “I confess, I wasn’t going to.”

“Right. Fair enough.” She cocks her head. “You’re not from round here.”

‘Round here’ is the Scottish Highlands. I’m from Dublin, and my Irish accent is a dead giveaway. “Nope. You?”

“Sort of. I live in the Hebrides. The Outer bit.”

“No wonder you were going for it with the machine. Poor bastard never had a chance. They breed hardy souls out there, I daresay.”

She tips up her chin and affects a haughty pose. “We have central heating. And triple glazing.”

“Very wise.”

Now that she’s ceased her murderous assault on the cola machine, I can study her more closely. Like me, she isn’t wearing the requisite mask so I can tell she’s pretty, in a quirky sort of a way. And probably not one for following rules, either. Large blue eyes, made to look even larger behind her oversized glasses. Her blonde hair is scraped back into a wild bun, and during her recent exertions, curly tendrils have escaped to frame her face. Her mouth is mobile, and expressive, her nose straight. The more I scrutinise her, the more I think that ‘pretty’ wouldn’t describe this woman. ‘Exquisite’ would be closer to the mark. ‘Alluring’, maybe.

She’s of less than average height, maybe five feet two or so, and very slender. Delicate hands grip the cola can, and she

lifts it to her mouth to take another drink. Her throat works to swallow the liquid and I watch, mesmerised.

Her breasts are petite like the rest of her, that much is obvious beneath the loose-fitting T-shirt. *Small, but perfectly formed.* The phrase pops into my head and seems to be made for her. I wouldn't mind betting that I could encircle her waist with my hands. I wonder what she'd do if I tried that...?

“What are you staring at?” She glares at me and swipes the back of her hand across her mouth. “Did I spill some?”

I shake my head. “I was just thinking...”

“What?”

“Fuck, you're lovely.”

Her eyes widen. She gapes at me. “What did you say?”

“I said, you're fucking gorgeous.”

“I am not!”

“From where I'm sitting...”

“Are you Irish always so... so...?”

“Honest?”

“I was going to say, quick off the mark. Pushy.”

“It was an observation,” I reply. “And an honest one. It doesn't mean I want to jump your bones.”

“I see.” She pauses to take another drink. “Well, that's a pity because I wouldn't mind jumping yours.”

Now it's my turn to be surprised, though I like to think I hide it reasonably well. “And you say the Irish are pushy.”

She flushes a deep crimson, and I get the distinct impression those words were not intended to come out loud. “I'm sorry. I should never...” She leaps to her feet. “I should go. They'll be wondering where I am.”

“They?” I stand, too.

“My brothers. My sister in-law just had a baby. Upstairs.”

“I see.” I had wondered why she was here at the hospital. “You’re visiting, then?”

She nods. “It all got a bit... intense. I mean, I’m happy for them and everything, and he’s a lovely baby, but...”

“You needed some air? A break? Coke?”

“All of the above. Not to mention the prospect of being propositioned by a handsome stranger.”

Handsome? I’ll take that.

“As I recall, you propositioned me.”

She reddens again. “I don’t know what came over me. I can only apologise...”

“Don’t apologise. Try this instead.” I close the distance between us in one stride and frame her jaw with my hands. It does occur to me that this is a risk, the sort of thing seriously frowned on these days with everyone so paranoid about catching covid, and I get all that. I really do. But I’m willing to take a chance if she is. With that in mind I take my time lowering my face to hers, allowing her every opportunity to draw back, or even slug me on the chin. She does neither, so when my lips brush across hers, I’m fairly sure the caress is welcome.

Her lips part. Her tongue darts out to taste me. The tang of cola dances on my tongue. I slant my head to gain better access and deepen the kiss.

Her hands are around my neck. She combs her fingers through my hair and reaches up on tiptoe. I drop my hands to cup her bottom, then I lift her. She clammers up me willingly, wraps her legs around my waist, and grinds her core against my abdomen.

“Jesus,” I moan, breaking the kiss just long enough to glance around in search of a more accommodating spot.

And I see the perfect place. She’s still clinging to me when I carry her around the side of the row of vending machines into the secluded corner, out of sight from the foyer or even

the rest of the café. Even better, there's a ledge where they keep vending supplies.

I send the collection of plastic cups, lids, and little wooden stirring sticks to the floor with a sweep of my hand and deposit her on the shelf. It's the perfect height.

I tip up her chin with my fingers. "You want this?"

"Yes." And to emphasise the point, she grasps the hem of her T-shirt and drags the garment over her head. She's not wearing a bra.

Enough said.

I unfasten the button on her jeans and pull down the zip, then take her weight so she can wriggle the denim past her hips. She kicks off her shoes, a pair of well-worn trainers, then the jeans. Underwear, too. It's all in a heap at my feet.

She looks up at me, her expression one of defiance, as though she's challenging me to say something. Anything.

"Fuck, you take my breath away." It's the best I can manage and seems to be enough.

Her lips curl in a smile. "Show me how much."

My mouth finds hers again, and I cup her breasts in my hands. Her nipples are hard little pebbles, pressing against my palms. I roll them between my fingers and thumbs.

She gasps, then moans into my mouth, writhing her body against mine. Her hands are at my jeans, fighting with the button, sliding the zip down, then delving inside to free my cock. She wraps her elegant little fingers around the shaft and pumps a couple of times, then swipes her thumb over the crown.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." I grasp her knees and spread her wide, then drag my fingers through her soaking-wet folds.

"Now," she murmurs. "I need you to..."

"I know." I line myself up at her entrance.

Her legs are clamped tight around my waist, and she uses them to lever herself forward, taking the first inch of me inside

her. I groan, and with a swift thrust do the rest. I'm buried to the hilt in her hot, tight pussy, and I swear nothing in the history of Creation has ever felt more glorious.

I pull back halfway, then drive my cock deep again. Hard, fast, maybe a little bit rough, but she seems to appreciate it. Crave it, even. Her fingernails are clawing at my shoulders, and her face is mashed against my chest. She's panting and squeezing her pussy around me as though she can't get enough friction.

I step up the pace, and she groans in appreciation.

"Yes," she gasps. "Like that. Just like... oh! Aaagh..."

I slip my hand between us to find her clit and rub. It's enough to send her soaring. She shakes in my arms, shuddering under the onslaught of sensation as her climax washes through her. Her wails of delight have barely subsided when my balls lurch and my semen erupts to fill her channel.

For long moments, neither of us moves. I'm the first to recover my wits and enough breath to get by. I straighten and withdraw, but she still clings to me, her face buried in my chest.

"Are you okay?" I ask, leaning back in order to actually see her.

She manages a nod. "I should... I should get dressed..."

Sounds like a plan. I step back and help her down from the ledge, then I bend to pick up her discarded clothes.

"Do you have a tissue or anything?" she asks.

"Don't move." I dump the pile of clothing on the shelf where we just fucked like bunnies and leave her hidden in the alcove while I dart into the public loos a few paces away. I return a few seconds later with a toilet roll.

She takes it, offers me a swift smile, and sets to cleaning herself up.

"We shouldn't have done that," she mutters, studiously refusing to meet my eyes now. "I mean, I never usually.... I don't know what got into me."

I'm about to reply along the lines of 'not what, who' but think better of it. Now that the brief interlude of unbridled lust is over, she seems embarrassed to the point of mortification, and I suppose I can see why. We never even got as far as exchanging names before we were ripping clothes off. Still, better late than never.

"It was good to meet you. I'm—"

"Casey? Casey, where are you?"

She leaps like a startled rabbit at the sound of the male voice echoing along the corridor.

"That's my brother. I can't... You need to hide."

Do I? "You'd be Casey, then?"

"Yes." She's dragged her T-shirt over her head and is stepping back into her jeans. "Don't let them see you. Please..."

We're both consenting adults. Apart from the possibility of a public indecency charge, I see no reason to be unduly coy about what just happened. My companion clearly has other ideas. Casey appears positively desperate. She jams her feet back into her trainers and shoves her socks in her pocket. With one final pleading look in my direction, she steps out from behind the vending machines, just as two men round the corner and enter the café area.

"I'm here," she calls out, rushing towards them.

"Hey, we thought you got lost." I watch from my hiding place while one of the men slings an arm around her shoulders. "You okay, Case? You seem... odd. Did something happen?"

She shakes her head and is perhaps overvigorous in her denial. "No. Nothing. I'm fine. How's Cristina?"

"Hungry," the other man replies. He tugs his phone from his pocket and hits one key. The call is answered immediately. "We found her. We'll head on up to the restaurant now. See you there."

The trio disappears into the corridor. I remain where I am until their voices have died away, then I get to work clearing up the debris. Discarded tissues, empty drinks cans, and an ominous-looking dent in the side of the vending machine are the only evidence we were here. I dump the tissues and cans in the trash, and even pick up the cups and lids I flung on the floor.

It gives me time to think, to assess the implications of what just happened.

I recognised one of the men. I've met Aaron Savage a couple of times over the years, done business with him. Fuck, I quite like the guy. I have to assume that the formidable-looking individual with him was his brother, Ethan Savage, head of one of the most powerful criminal networks in the world, certainly in Europe.

And I just fucked their baby sister up against a wall in a hospital waiting room.

Holy shit.

CHAPTER 2

Manhattan, New York

October 2020

Jed

“I’M IN NO HURRY. Maybe we could... make ourselves little more comfortable.”

I drag my attention from the spreadsheet on the screen. Maria Sorza is not a woman to be ignored, no matter how much I might wish she’d get the message and leave me to get on with my work. Apart from the fact that she’s breaking all the covid regulations by simply being here, these funds won’t launder themselves. I make a mental note to fire the next secretary who lets Maria into my inner sanctum uninvited.

“I’m comfortable enough,” I reply. “And I’m busy. What are you even doing here?”

Maria’s response is an elegant wave of her artfully manicured hand. Her nails are painted a brilliant shade of crimson, offering a sharp contrast to the expensively tailored cream dress that looks to have been painted on. She unfastens the first three delicate pearl buttons running down the front.

“Never too busy for me, of course, my darling. Or at least, not yet. And the rules don’t apply when we’ll be married soon. Then you’ll have all the time in the world to ignore me.”

I sigh. “Maria, we’re not getting married...”

“Oh yes, we are. You know it, I know it. More to the point, my father knows it.”

Luigi Sorza, the father in question, is don of the Sorza Mafia who control New York and most of Connecticut and New Jersey, too. Maria is his only child, and in her opinion that makes her his heir. Unfortunately for her, the old man has other ideas. A traditionalist at heart, Luigi has no intention of leaving his empire to be ruled by a woman. He has four perfectly hale and hearty nephews to choose from and has made it abundantly clear that one of them will take over when he dies. Eduardo is favourite, the eldest and without doubt the most ambitious.

Maria's not taking that lying down. She's hatched a scheme whereby she makes an advantageous marriage to another crime boss, allies herself, and, by extension, the Sorzas to an equally powerful family, and her father will welcome a new son-in-law to inherit his crown.

Simple.

And it might even work, if she can find a willing crime boss to go along with her scheme. Sadly for her, that won't be me.

To be fair, I don't really blame Maria. She's amply capable of running a Mafia, more so than any of the cousins whose only qualification as far as I can see is the possession of a penis. Maria is astute, ruthless, dedicated, and driven. Her father might be a dinosaur, but Maria makes a credible case, and the Sorza soldiers would probably have accepted a female leader if he'd endorsed her from the start. It's a pity she's been forced to resort to using her feminine wiles to gain the status and authority that should be hers by right, but there it is. We work with what we have, and Maria has beauty and charm in abundance. Add that she's hard as nails, utterly determined and relentless, and you have a winning formula.

But it's not winning with me. I admire Maria in an objective sense, and no male with a pulse could find her unattractive. If she didn't come with all the Sorza baggage I might even have been interested, at least for a while.

But the truth is, I don't have the slightest desire to extend my own empire. I run the Irish Mob, so I have wealth and power in abundance, not to mention enough responsibility and hassle to keep me busy twenty-four-seven. I certainly don't want the added grief of succeeding old Luigi Sorza. All those disappointed cousins to subdue. Men to win over, men with divided and confused loyalties, and a business network that doesn't exactly suit my own preferences or business model. The Sorzas deal in drugs and guns like the rest of us, but they also traffic people, and I have no stomach for that.

Neither do I relish the prospect of relocating permanently to the US and I can be pretty sure that would be a condition of any deal. I love New York and enjoy my visits here to nurture my own financial interests in gambling and clubs. The night-time economy in the Big Apple is second to none. It suits me fine and is lucrative as fuck.

It's a pity that transatlantic travel has become so tricky recently. It's not the money — I can run to the hire of a private plane, and even the exorbitant fees for sneaking into a little-used airfield won't break the bank as long as these restrictions don't continue too long. It's all the hassle of keeping under the covid-police radar that gets to me. I think I might need to buy a yacht. Just a small one. I should be able to pick up what I need for a few million and sell it again later.

I need to get back and forth, pandemic or not. I'm Irish at heart, Dublin born and bred. Ireland is my home. My roots are there, it's my heartland and my stronghold. It's the place I always go back to, and that will never change.

Maria has unbuttoned her dress as far as the waist. Her apricot-coloured silk camisole shimmers in the waning sunlight, and she flashes me a smile that would light up the Empire State Building two blocks from where we face each other. I'm not exactly dispassionate as I watch her settle herself in one of the leather armchairs opposite my desk and lift one stiletto-clad foot. I'm a male, after all. And not quite dead yet. She toes off her shoe and loosens the crocodile-skin belt at her waist.

The show is beyond amazing, but it has to stop. It's one thing fucking Maria Sorza just for fun, and I've done that enough times, but now she has an agenda. Since she embarked on this quest of hers, she has expectations. I need to avoid misunderstandings.

"It isn't happening, Maria."

"I think it is, darling." The second shoe drops to the carpet.

I shake my head. "Don't make me have to call men in here to escort you out." I wouldn't do that, we're friends, after all. But shit, this has gone on too long and it's getting old. She won't take 'no' for an answer.

She pouts prettily. "It's not as though I expect you to be faithful or anything so boring as that. Our marriage will be a business arrangement, that's all." She stands, and the belt falls away. She's moving on to the rest of the buttons.

"For fuck's sake..." I hit the intercom button. "Gemma, I'm going out. Have a car waiting for me downstairs."

"Of course, Mr O'Neill."

My secretary might be a poor gatekeeper, but she's generally efficient. A car and driver will be outside in a couple of minutes. "Ms Sorza will be leaving soon, too. Perhaps you could arrange transport for her, as well."

"Certainly, sir. Where will she be going?"

"Anywhere she likes." I end the call and close my laptop. I'll get no more done today, that much is obvious.

I get to my feet and reach for the jacket I slung over the back of my chair. "Bye, Maria. Don't take too long about getting yourself decent. Oh, and in case you were thinking you might be able to contrive a compromising situation... my CCTV is state of the art." I gesture to the camera in the corner of the ceiling. "Say 'cheese'."

Her shriek of frustration follows me down the carpeted corridor.

“REPORTS?” I snap, my gaze sweeping the four men seated around the table with me.

Since I couldn't get on with any work in my office, this is the next best thing. It never hurts to drop in unannounced on my clubs. I can get to know first-hand what's going on in my empire, as well as keep my people on their toes.

I listen to the various accounts of profit margins, staffing issues, permits and licences, and find nothing much to take issue with. My team are hand-picked and good at what they do. The meeting is soon concluded, and the managers file out.

One man remains. Cal Paterson is my second-in-command, both here and back in Ireland. He's a cousin, of sorts, but I don't know the exact relationship. My mother would have been able to describe it in detail, but she died a few years ago, so I muddle through just knowing that he's family and the man I trust most in the world.

“Not got anything to do?” I ask, one eyebrow raised.

He relaxes into his chair and props one foot over the other. “Not especially. You?”

“Fucking plenty,” I mutter.

“Ah. So, why are you prowling about down here among the common folk instead of sorting out the shit you need to deal with?”

I narrow my eyes. “It's called walking the job.”

“It's called micro-managing and it's what you pay me for. What's going on, boss?”

His gaze never wavers. It's one of the qualities I most value in Cal. He never sugar-coats it with me. He tells me straight what he's thinking. And he knows me better than anyone else, even myself sometimes. I consider tossing out some throwaway remark but decide not to bother. He'd see right through me anyway.

“I got turfed out of my office. Maria's there. Or, she was.”

He shrugs. “Could be worse. She's certainly easy on the eye and good company.”

“She wants to get married.”

“So, what else is new?” Maria’s plans for claiming her inheritance are well-known.

I groan and let my forehead drop to rest on the table. “She won’t let up. I’ve told her it’s not happening, but it’s like talking to the wall. Fuck, she even tried to seduce me over my own desk.”

“She can seduce me anytime she likes...”

“I’ll mention that to her next time I see her.”

“Seriously, Jed, why not? You could do worse. Old Luigi would welcome the match. You could extend your power base, take over the north-eastern territories here as well as back in Ireland. It’s not as though you’d actually have to run things anyway. Maria plans on doing that herself.”

He’s right, and I already thought through all of that. I can’t say I’m exactly excited about just being a pawn in her strategy.

Cal isn’t done yet, extolling the merits of Maria’s little scheme. “And, you’d have a beautiful trophy wife to sweeten the pill even more. If you don’t have her, you can be sure the Russians will be sniffing about. Or the Poles.”

“Maria won’t look twice at Leonid Koslov. He’s sixty if he’s a day and just as fossilised in his thinking as her father. He’d never let his wife flounce about New York running her own Mafia. As for Aleksander Nowak, he recently got engaged to some girl from Warsaw. I gather it was arranged years ago.”

“Fair enough.” Cal can see the writing on the wall as clearly as I can. “And Maria won’t be settling for a younger son from any of the families, so I guess that just leaves you, my friend.”

I’ve been racking my brain for a solution, but I’ve only come up with one idea. “I need to get back to Ireland. If I’m not around, she’ll soon find someone else.”

“We just agreed that there is no one else qualified. And Ireland’s out of the question, at least until the airports reopen.”

He's right. The Covid pandemic has grounded pretty much all scheduled international flights. I suppose I could hire a private plane again, or charter a yacht, but I'd need a crew as well. Still, it's probably worth the effort and expense to put some distance between myself and Maria Sorza, at least until she seizes upon another more willing victim.

But what if she doesn't? We already established that suitable candidates are thin on the ground, and pandemic aside, it suits me to be able to travel freely between Europe and the US without needing to avoid power-hungry women. I need to find a way to put myself off limits.

Cal hasn't finished delving into my personal life. "Is it just Maria you object to, or marriage generally?"

I furrow my brow. "I've nothing against marriage per se, I just..."

"What?" Cal presses me.

"I don't know..." I give the matter some thought. "Maria's approach is so clinical. Business-like. I mean, I guess there's chemistry at some level, we're good in bed together. But I'm really just a means to an end."

Cal grins. "You old romantic. You want hearts and flowers and undying love."

Do I? And if I do, what's so wrong with that?

My parents loathed the sight of each other, and it blighted their lives for a quarter of a century. They were both from important families. Their marriage was an alliance forged for strategic gain and consolidation of power, and it worked on that level. If you could ignore the fact that they couldn't bear to live within fifty miles of each other, it was a brilliant match, a total success.

I can't help but think that Maria would be happy with such an arrangement, if it handed her her Mafia. Fuck, she even said as much with her remark about not expecting fidelity. My whole being recoils at the prospect of living like that.

I want something more meaningful. I want a wife I actually like. Someone I can trust and look forward to coming

home to. Love would be nice, but loyalty and companionship are essential. I want a woman who is intelligent, compassionate, good company. Someone I can respect.

“Like I said, hearts and flowers. So, where will we find this goddess, then?”

I scowl at Cal, realising too late that I spoke out loud. “Forget it.” I need to change the subject fast before I weep all over him. Even my most loyal lieutenant won’t stand for that. ‘Fancy a poker game tonight?’

He grins. “Sure. Your place?”

“I’ll invite George and Marco over.” They are two more of my underbosses, based here in New York. Strictly speaking, it’s against the rules to socialise in my home, but who gives a fuck? Extortion, murder and armed robbery are against the rules as well, but I never let that stop me before. And, this is poker. “Bring some bourbon.”

“Will do. About ten?”

I’M NEARLY five grand down but sitting on two pairs. Cal has already folded, and Marco is wavering.

I eye George across the green felt table. “I’ll raise you a hundred.”

“Two,” he replies, tossing four fifty-dollar bills on the table beside his cards.

He appears confident, but my hunch is that he’s bluffing. He’s a wily old fox, is George. I weigh up my options. There are plenty of hands to beat two pairs. Maybe I should fold...

I’m spared the need to make a decision when my phone rings. I check the screen. It’s an unknown number but from the United Kingdom. It’s close to midnight here, so about five in the morning there.

I could ignore the call, but I don’t want to. If someone is keen enough to speak to me in the middle of the night their time, I want to know why.

“Excuse me,” I mutter to the other men at the table and hit ‘reply’. Then, “Who the fuck is this?”

The voice on the other end is assured and authoritative, British, with a hint of a Scottish burr. “Ethan Savage. I need a word, and it won’t wait.”

I take a breath, recalling the last and only time I saw Ethan Savage. I’d just fucked his younger sister. Casey, her name was. Delightful girl. I shake that memory from my head. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Am I keeping you up?” he drawls

“Not exactly.” I cast an apologetic look towards my companions. “But it’s not especially convenient either. Is there something I can help you with? Preferably something quick.”

“Yes, but you need to be on your own for this conversation.”

Holy fuck. He rings me up in the middle of the night, then starts ordering me around. Ethan Savage may call the shots on his own turf, but not on mine. I’m on the point of telling him to go fuck himself, but better sense prevails. I don’t know Ethan, but I’ve done business with his younger brother, Aaron, from time to time. The Savages are all right. They pay their debts and keep their promises. I don’t want to alienate them if I can help it.

“Okay. Give me a moment.” I gesture to my companions to leave, with the exception of Cal. He remains seated and silent as I resume my conversation with Ethan Savage. “This had better be worth it. You interrupted a serious game of poker, and I had a decent hand.”

“You bought some merchandise tonight. It belongs to us.”

“Merchandise?” This I didn’t expect. “Can you be more specific?”

“Guns. Half a dozen semi-automatic rifles.”

How the fuck does he know that? I only concluded the deal a few hours ago.

“Jed?” Ethan is growing impatient. He wants an answer.

“I think you’ve been misinformed.”

“I haven’t—”

“And more to the point, my business has fuck all to do with you.”

“Our guns,” Ethan repeats. “I need—”

I decide that this conversation is over. “Goodnight.”

I end the call, then look to Cal for his reaction. He raises his brows in an expression that says, ‘Well, fuck...’

“Were those weapons stolen?” I demand.

“Probably, but we had no idea they were once Savage’s.”

“Tough. Whoever owned them before, they belong to me now.”

Cal’s brow furrows, and he scratches his chin. “There was a robbery at a warehouse of his a few months back. He was pissed off about it. Lost two men in the raid. I seem to recall there were some guns stolen...”

I nod. I remember the incident. There was a lot of talk at the time as both the Savage brothers raked through all their contacts searching for any clues as to who had their property. “Yes, but that was four crates, wasn’t it? We only bought half a dozen rifles.”

“So, the consignment has been broken up,” Cal reasons. “Easier to shift.”

“Probably.” I pour myself another bourbon. “And I guess I just pissed him off all over again.” So much for not alienating the Savages.

“You could always call him back...”

I consider that briefly but dismiss it. Savage was out of order chasing me over this, and I’m not having him throwing his weight around with me. “Fuck, no. Let’s get George and Marco back in here. I’ve a decent hand for once...”

The four of us have only just settled back at the table when my phone rings again and Aaron’s number pops up on my

screen.

They're obviously trying a more conciliatory approach this time, since Aaron and I are old friends. Sort of.

I sigh. "Gentlemen, will you excuse me again?"

I wait until the room clears, then accept the call. "Aaron? Do you lot really have nothing better to do at fuck knows what time in a morning over there?"

"I'm sorry, my friend, but no, we don't." At least he has the grace to apologise for disturbing me. "We have a problem, and you might be able to help."

I get straight to the point. "I have nothing of yours."

"I get that. We don't want the guns back. Well, we do, but they're yours now, bought and paid for."

Exactly.

He continues. "What we need is information about who you bought them from."

I exchange a puzzled glance with Cal. "Aaron, how do you even know...? Oh, I get it. The delightful Casey." I was somewhat intrigued by my previous encounter with the younger sister, so I did a bit of background checking of my own. It seems she's a computer whiz kid or something, a bit of a genius, by all accounts, who makes herself very useful to her brothers' business interests.

Aaron ploughs on. "Who was the seller, Jed?"

"How does she do that stuff?" I press him, ignoring his question.

"She has her ways."

"She hacked into something, right?"

"Yes, I guess so."

Well, fuck. That's quite a talent. And useful. I wouldn't mind rekindling my acquaintance with the lovely Ms Savage. "You should introduce us some time."

"She's not hot on socialising."

“Pity. Is she there? I could say hello.”

“She—”

He goes silent suddenly. I can imagine the scene. She’s there all right and is refusing to talk to me. Which must mean she knows who I am. We weren’t properly introduced before. We met by chance in a waiting room at a private clinic in Scotland, and one thing led to another. We ended up fucking behind a vending machine. Not my finest hour, perhaps, but it remains a fond memory. Not knowing her name didn’t seem important at the time, to either of us, but she’s obviously shit-hot at putting things together and has worked it out since. The only reason I was aware of her identity was because her brothers came looking for her and I recognised Aaron. Neither of them saw me, and as far as I know, they still have no idea what happened between me and their sister.

Just as well, probably, but I must confess that this is getting more and more interesting.

There’s a muttered conversation on the other end, then Aaron comes back on the line. “Er, no. She... she had to leave. I’ll tell her you were asking after her.”

“Do that,” I reply

Aaron is back to the business in hand. “The seller, Jed?”

“Aaron, you know I can’t...”

He knows as well as I do that I’m not going to share the details of my business arrangements. Why the fuck is he even asking?

His tone drops to something more conciliatory. He’s trying to negotiate with me. “Jed, our issue is that we have a leak. Someone on the inside here is supplying intelligence to our enemies. We need to expose the security breach and plug it.”

Now, this is bad news. We all value loyalty, it’s the glue that keeps our organisations together. We rely on it, on the integrity of our men, our associates. A traitor is a traitor, in anyone’s book, but are the Savages’ problems really my own to worry about?

Actually, yes. Because if our situations were reversed and I asked him for help, I'd expect him to give it. I have to reciprocate. It's about honour, and self-preservation.

"Okay," I reply, eventually. "I have a name for you. One name, then I'm done. We don't speak of this again."

"Agreed."

"Psycho."

"Psycho? As in the movie?"

Is he taking the piss?

"Are you intending to be a muppet all your life?" I'm going to give him what he wants, but just this once. He'd better be listening because I won't be repeating any of this. "As in Sykes. That's his last name, don't know the first, but he always goes by Psycho. Deals in just about anything, usually operates out of Manchester but he's been spending a bit of time in the US recently. I guess he got stranded when they closed down international travel."

"Why was he over there to start with?"

What am I? Psycho's social secretary? "How the fuck would I know? Maybe he likes the climate. It beats bloody Manchester, for sure."

Aaron clearly realises he'll get nothing more from me. "Thanks, Jed. I owe you."

"You bet you fucking do." I hang up on him again. "George, Marco, get your arses back in here."

CHAPTER 3

C asey

JED O'NEILL

“Jed fucking O’Neill.” I say the name out loud, in the hope it will make this whole situation less bizarre, less of a catastrophe.

It doesn’t.

I gaze around my domain, for once at a loss. There’s nothing my banks of computer screens and keyboards and processing units can do to help solve this dilemma. I sink into my leather office chair and spin slowly around, my head tilted to rest on the back. I stare at the rotating ceiling and wonder how the fuck I let this happen.

I don’t regret those amazing minutes spent with the stranger in the waiting room at the Rothwell Clinic. I was there with Cristina, Ethan’s wife, at the birth of her baby boy. It had all gone well, and I was pleased as fuck for them both, but the entire episode sort of unnerved me. All that raw emotion was overwhelming. Hope, worry, joy which morphed into absolute elation and unconditional love lavished upon that tiny scrap of humanity. It was more than I could handle, so I made a run for it. I needed a drink, my usual beverage of choice, a can of cola loaded with caffeine and sugar. Just my luck that the vending machine in the self-service café was broken.

Jed found me trying to beat the shit out of the bloody machine and helpfully picked the lock on the front to get my drink for me. I had no idea who he was, but he was charming, funny, handsome as a Greek god, and had the most amazing Irish accent. I was mesmerised, pretty much drooling, and for a few minutes there I lost control of my senses.

I must have. There's no other explanation. One moment I was swigging my cola, the next I was ripping my knickers off and spreading my legs. He was as enthusiastic as I was, and it was pretty wonderful.

Actually, it was mind-blowingly awesome, beyond exquisite. I'm usually a bit of a hard sell in the orgasm department, but I came within moments, and it was the best ever. I now know exactly what they mean in those trashy novels when they say the earth moved. My world shifted on its axis that day.

I was still quivering when reality came crashing back in the form of my brothers who were looking for me. I managed to get myself decent before they spotted us and steered them away from where my sexy Irish lover was hiding.

It had been an awesome interlude, but the man I fucked that day was a stranger to me. I would never see him again, and that was just as well, probably. The absolute anonymity was part of why it all happened, I think, the sense that this glorious event was outside my normal reality, a different life.

I don't normally fuck strangers but I suppose there were extenuating circumstances. Lockdown, for instance. We'd all been captive for months, stuck on Caraksay, our family island. We had to protect Jacob, my brother's little boy. He was immunosuppressed so had no natural resistance to the virus and we were all desperately keen to keep him safe. Caraksay was covid-free and my brothers were determined to keep it that way. There was no coming or going, not for any of us, and I was every bit as invested in that as anyone else.

For fuck's sake, I donated the kidney that saved Jacob's life, I wasn't about to jeopardise all of that. Except, I had.

I spent two weeks locked in my apartment, claiming to be ill, or busy, or just plain antisocial. I tested myself every other day to make sure I hadn't caught the virus and constantly berated myself for being so bloody reckless.

Half a dozen negative tests later, I began to believe it would be all right after all. And it was around then that I realised there might have been other consequences. Unprotected sex. Christ, how had I been so stupid?

I can only think that, just briefly, I was someone else, and all things were possible.

But not anymore. Now, it's all become complicated. It's a mess on so many levels.

One. Jed O'Neill is not a stranger anymore.

Two. He's a friend and associate of my brothers'.

Three. He's head of the Irish Mob, part of our criminal network, as powerful as my own family.

Four. He obviously knows who I am.

Five. He wants to see me again. *Holy shit.*

And six. As if all of that wasn't enough, I'm five months pregnant, and it's his baby.

TWO DAYS HAVE PASSED since the telephone conversation when my world caved in. Two days for me to consider my position, try to work out what to do.

I'm a naturally skinny person. Always have been, and my usual wardrobe consists of oversized tops and slouchy jeans. Mercifully, my pregnancy is visible but only to me so far. I've managed to hide it under my clothes, and apart from Megan, our resident medic on the island, no one is any the wiser. Yet.

I'll have to tell my brothers soon, I realise that. I'm not exactly looking forward to it but not dreading the moment either. They'll be surprised, angry perhaps. But not for long. And not with me. Ours has never been a family where women were treated as property, objects to be bartered. My sex life,

sparse though it is, is my business, and they'll be okay with it. They'll want to know who the father of my baby is, and naturally I won't be sharing that little snippet.

What happened between Jed and me is private. More to the point, it was a once-in-a-lifetime thing, and never meant to be more. I won't trap Jed O'Neill with this, and I won't shackle myself into a relationship with someone who doesn't want me or is simply obligated because we share a child.

I don't need anything from Jed. I don't want anything. I'm more than capable of handling this alone, and that's what I mean to do. It's what I decided to do in those first weeks when I discovered I was pregnant and still had choices.

For the first time, I understood what had been going on in that hospital room with Cristina and Ethan, their utter delight at being parents, their love for their infant son. I love my family, always have, but this was different. This went to my very soul, became part of who and what I am.

I felt that adoration, too, and I owned it, right from the start.

For one fleeting moment, I considered terminating the pregnancy. Of course I thought about it, in an intellectual sense. It was a theoretical option, but I knew I didn't want to do it. So, I didn't. I chose to keep my baby, and I understood exactly what I was letting myself in for. It's not as though I'll be hard up, roughing it, scratching around for a living. Ours is a wealthy family. I have skills and talents, enough to earn a good living for myself and my child. My baby will want for nothing, and I'll have enough love for two parents.

That's all been settled in my head for a while now, and this recent turn of events makes no difference to my plan. It can't. I won't let it. My strategy is simple. Keep my head down, stay well away from Jed O'Neill, and pick the right moment to tell my brothers that they're going to be uncles.

“YOU'RE TWENTY-TWO WEEKS NOW. We need to arrange another scan.”

I nod. Megan's right. She's ex-US army and more accustomed to the medicine of the battlefield, but she's been brilliant throughout all of this. I went to her as soon as I suspected I was pregnant because I needed to know everything was all right. A few months ago, I gave away one of my kidneys. I was reasonably certain that it wouldn't affect my pregnancy but I had to be sure. She checked me over, confirmed that I was, indeed, going to be a mother, and that the fact that I function on just one kidney would be something to watch but not inherently a risk.

She has religiously kept my secret since, on condition that I see her regularly and let her organise the usual checks and screening. She got me sorted with a hospital on the mainland — not the Rothwell as their discretion couldn't be relied on. Our family are good customers, and they wouldn't risk upsetting Ethan by keeping this from him. So, I put my faith in the anonymity and expertise of the NHS, bound by the Hippocratic oath. It's worked so far.

I hop down from Megan's examination table. "I feel another trip to Glasgow coming on. Can you make me an appointment?"

"Sure. And we really should be getting you booked in somewhere for the birth. Really, at this stage, you need to be seeing a midwife every week."

"I can see you, can't I?"

She types her notes into her computer. "I'm not a maternity specialist."

"I know, but—"

"I'm giving you my best advice, Casey. I won't be hassling you over this and I'll go on caring for you as long as you need me to, but you have to tell Ethan and Aaron sometime. Once it's out in the open there won't be an issue about getting the best and proper care for you and your baby."

"I know that. I just..."

"If you're worried about how they'll react, I don't think you need to be. They're protective, but it's because they love

you.”

“It’s not that. Well, it is, a bit. There’ll be a row, but I can handle that. I can stand up to them if I have to, and it’ll blow over once they get used to the idea.”

She reaches for my hand. “Think about it. Please.”

I bow to the inevitable. “I will.”

MY OPPORTUNITY COMES a few weeks later. Ethan has summoned us all to a family meal. I find myself seated at the huge table in the great hall with both my brothers and their wives, and Megan as an honorary Savage. The conversation turns to the recent news that a vaccine for Covid has been approved for use in the UK.

We’ve been isolating on our island during the pandemic to protect Jacob. The transplant went without complications, thank goodness. I am personally very invested in his recovery, for obvious reasons, and he is doing well now. He’s a perfectly healthy little boy except that he is on anti-rejection drugs and the treatment eradicated any resistance he might have had to the virus. Aaron brought Jacob, and his mother and grandmother, to Caraksay to protect them from the infection that is still rife on the mainland. It’s been a good solution but can’t last forever. A vaccine might well be the lifeline Jacob needs, so it’s no surprise that Megan has been watching developments carefully, especially as the world seems to be opening up again and life could soon be back to normal for most.

But not for Jacob

“I was checking the results of the clinical trials this afternoon. The entire medical world expects the Pfizer vaccine to be licensed in a matter of weeks for use in the UK.” Megan addresses her announcement directly to Beth, Jacob’s mother.

“I know,” she replies. “I’ve been following it, too. But that’s just for adults.”

Megan explains that adults have priority because they are most at risk, but it could be right for Jacob, too. The consensus is that as soon as it becomes available we should acquire enough doses for all of us, and Aaron instructs Megan to order it in. He sees no point in getting Jacob vaccinated if the rest of us are breathing germs all over him, so we're all going to get jabbed.

Except, I can't. The vaccine hasn't been tested for pregnant women as far as I know. I've got this far and I'm not taking any risks. I maybe should have asked Megan to check if the jab is safe for me and my baby before speaking up, but I blurt it out anyway.

"Not for me."

Everyone turns to glare at me with varying degrees of astonishment. "Don't tell me you're an antivaxer," Ethan remarks, frowning his disapproval. "I'd have thought you more than any of us would be following the science or whatever the phrase is."

"I'm fine with the science," I reply, "it's just not for me. Not right now anyway."

"Oh. So, when will it be 'for you'?" Ethan asks.

I meet his gaze and hit him with my news. I could have been more delicate, I suppose, but diplomacy was never my strong point. "In a few months. Four, maybe. When I'm not pregnant anymore."

Everyone gapes at me. Ethan drops his fork.

"I beg your pardon?" My brother's tone has become deathly quiet. "I thought you just said..."

"I did. You heard me."

"Are congratulations in order?" Aaron enquires, as blandly as his brother. "Who's the happy father-to-be?"

Time to tough it out. "Yes, I'm happy about *my* baby. And no, I won't be telling you who the father is."

"Like fuck..." Ethan starts.

My stomach churns, whether from nerves or lingering morning sickness that afflicted me earlier on in my pregnancy. I get to my feet, intent upon making a dignified exit while I still can. “If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go back to my apartment now. I believe I might be about to throw up.”

IN THE COUPLE OF weeks since I dropped my bombshell, events have progressed pretty much as I thought they would. Ethan demanded to know who the father was. Repeatedly, and with increasing levels of heat. I refused to tell him. He can barely contain his anger and frustration, but he’s managing not to lose it. Aaron is more philosophical, but I can tell he’s not happy either. I suspect he’s the one keeping Ethan calm, relatively speaking, which is something of a reversal of roles between them. Ethan is usually the cool-headed one among us.

They’re both worried about me, convinced I’ve been ‘taken advantage of’.

As if.

They both assume the culprit, the villain who knocked up their precious little sister, is one of the men on the island because none of us have been gadding about exactly during the pandemic. The list of potential candidates is somewhat short. I’ve left them to draw their own conclusions, but I’m not sure how long I can keep that up. Sooner or later, and despite Aaron’s best efforts, Ethan is going to start demanding answers from the men, and that will get messy.

I’m mulling over this dilemma when my phone buzzes. It’s Ethan.

“Have you forgotten we’re doing a stocktake today?”

I have to think for a moment. “Stocktake?”

“Yes. We’re in my office. Are you joining us?”

“Shit! Yes. I’ll be right down.”

Stocktake is our shorthand for a review of the general state of our many and various businesses and other operations. I did know about the meeting, but I had completely forgotten in my

preoccupation with more personal issues. I'm not directly involved in anything too nefarious, but I do manage our online investments in bitcoin and I've been developing a nice little sideline in gaming software so I need to feed back on that. During lockdown, when so much of our activity is curtailed or closed down entirely, my online enterprises have been one of the mainstays of our empire.

"Are you sure? If you don't feel up to it..." Ethan may be exasperated with me, but that doesn't stop him being concerned for my health. Or that of my baby.

"No, I'm fine. See you in five minutes." I grab my iPad and my phone and dash out the door.

By the time I arrive at Ethan's office, Megan has joined the meeting, too. She is reporting on the plans to vaccinate everyone. This doesn't directly concern me, so I take a few moments to get settled and fire up my iPad.

Megan finishes and gives me an encouraging smile on her way out.

Ethan turns his attention to me. "So, little sister. How's the world of cryptocurrency going?"

"Not bad at all." I go on to outline the growth of my portfolio, which has increased in value by twenty-two percent since I last reported on it. If I decide to cash it in, we'll be just over fifty-seven thousand pounds richer, which isn't bad for just a few weeks' work. Not that it *is* work exactly. I monitor my bitcoin assets every day and make adjustments if needed, but the software I developed to automatically manage my investments takes most of the strain.

I've been thinking about selling the programme commercially, but I haven't put it out there yet. There are a lot of scammers on the web selling get-rich-quick schemes to desperate people, and crypto is a favourite ploy. Although my system does actually work, unlike a lot of the so-called foolproof methods, it still requires a degree of investment experience, otherwise people could lose a lot of money really fast. I'm not comfortable with that. I don't want innocent punters who've already been hard-hit by lockdown losing

money they can't afford because of me. Ethan agrees, so unless this pandemic drags on a lot longer and times become hard for us, we'll leave that option on the back burner.

In the meantime, I've developed my system into a gaming app, and that's selling like hot cakes. *CryptoHero* is in the top fifty on both Apple and Android platforms, and with over a hundred thousand downloads so far at four ninety-nine a throw, I'm not complaining.

Neither are my brothers.

"Go you," Aaron crows when I report on my profits. "You'll keep us out of the gutter for a while at this rate."

Ethan is less effusive, but I can tell he's pleased.

"Well done," he murmurs. "Nice work."

We move on to a roundup of what's going on across our various clubs and casinos, which is fairly brief given that most have been closed for months. We're just winding up when there's a tentative knock on the door.

"Come in," Aaron calls out.

The door opens, and Janey enters.

Janey is one of Ethan's projects. He came across her sleeping with one of his business rivals, a nasty piece of work who Ethan later had a dispute with and subsequently despatched to an early grave. That was a couple of years ago, and Janey was just seventeen at the time. Ethan took her under his wing. He brought her to Caraksay to train as a cook, her lifetime's ambition, apparently, and recently helped her to enrol on a catering course. She's just started the first term. She's bright, and she works hard. Most of all, she's fiercely loyal to Ethan. Janey will end up running one of our restaurants one day, I'm sure of it, or maybe all of them.

She asked Ethan for a loan to fund her college fees and accommodation, but he refused. Instead, he gave her the use of a house he owns in Stirling. It's been converted into flats, and Janey lives in one while she's studying. The other five she lets out to other students, and uses the rents to pay for groceries,

heating and lighting and the like. It's a generous offer by Ethan, but it's also the sort of thing he does occasionally.

Janey went off to college a month ago, and we didn't expect her back until Christmas, so we're all surprised to see her. And even more surprised that she's interrupting our business meeting.

"Is something wrong?" Ethan demands at once.

Janey hovers in the doorway, twisting her fingers together.

"Come in and sit down," I say. "Do you want some coffee?"

"No, thank you." She shakes her head but does venture a few steps further into the room. "I was just... I need to talk to you..."

"Me, or all of us?" Ethan has got to his feet and pulls out a chair for her.

Janey sinks into it but doesn't relax. She perches on the edge and appears close to tears. "All of you, if that's all right...?"

"What's the problem?" Aaron asks her. "Is everything okay at college?"

"Yes," she answers. Then, "Well, no, not really..."

"Okay?" Ethan sits back down, and we all wait.

Janey takes a deep breath, then, "One of my tenants is missing."

"Missing?" Aaron pours her a coffee despite her earlier refusal. "You mean, they did a flit without paying their rent?"

Janey shakes her head. "No. She paid up front. Or her father did. The whole term. And all her stuff is still in her room. I think... I think she's been abducted."

There's a few moments' silence. Aaron is the first to speak. "What makes you think that?"

"And more to the point," Ethan continues, "why bring it to us? You don't think we had anything to do with it, do you?"

We've yet to stoop to abducting young women."

"Of course not!" Janey is clearly appalled at the very idea. "But her father is very upset. He's been round to the house looking for her and he's talking about going to the police."

Aaron's brow furrows. "Well, that sounds like the right approach if he's concerned for her safety. Why not just let him do that?"

"Because... because Rosie was snatched from Club Wicked."

Ethan's tone sharpens. "When?"

"Two nights ago."

He arches an eyebrow. "And, you know this how?"

Janey flushes bright crimson under his stern gaze. "I was there," she mutters. "We went together. We were... watching a demonstration, and Rosie went to the loo. She never came back."

Club Wicked is a BDSM establishment, part of our portfolio. Aside from the awkward fact that the premises should not have been open during lockdown, the club is legal, just about, if rather hardcore. It's renowned for being discreet, and the clientele rather select. For which, read wealthy. Quite how Janey managed to find the price of an entry pass is probably a question for another time. We were aware that the manager there was holding private parties in contravention of the Covid rules, but the revenue was useful, and provided she didn't draw unwelcome attention, we were ready to turn a blind eye.

The kink club on the upper floor is a front for a drugs processing operation in the basement. Tens of thousands of pounds' worth of product go through there every week. The last thing we need is the police sniffing about as they mount a search for a missing girl.

"Holy fuck," Aaron breathes.

We all appreciate the implications, and Janey was right to bring it to us. As well as the difficulties created by too much

police interest, we can do without the reputational hit if women are known to disappear from our clubs. That's very bad for business.

Ethan is already barking out orders to help minimise the damage. "Aaron, you need to talk to this father, convince him to let us deal with this and not involve the police."

"Got that, bro."

"And get on to Jack. Ask him to speak to Madame Roxanne and find out what she knows about this."

Jack Morgan is Ethan's second-in-command, equal in rank and status to Aaron but based on the mainland. He has a reputation for being hard as nails, brutal when required, but I've never really seen that side of him.

Roxanne DeVine, not her real name, I'm sure, is the manager at Club Wicked. She's a fearsome dominatrix, and I've always had the impression she runs a tight ship. Aaron evidently thinks so, too.

"We've had no complaints about Roxy. She's worked for us for years. I'd be astonished if she's involved..."

"Fair enough, but let's be sure. Tell Jack not to get rough unless he thinks she's hiding something. And, Casey, I daresay you can get hold of any CCTV in the premises or nearby area."

Immediate issues in hand, he turns to glare at Janey, who visibly shrinks in her seat. "And as for you, when did you start going to places like that?"

It would be comical, given we actually own 'places like that', but Janey is close to tears.

"Leave her alone," I snap. "She's a consenting adult."

"Hardly," he growls. "I brought her here to stop her from prancing about in sex clubs with her tits out and her pussy on offer."

Janey blushes pillar box red. "I wasn't... I mean, I would never... Not anymore. I was... I was just curious, that's all."

And Rosie wanted to go. I thought it would be safe, because it was our club, but...I'm sorry," she wails, dissolving into sobs.

"Now see what you've done." Aaron produces a handkerchief and shoves it into Janey's hands. "Was there any need to speak to her like that?"

Ethan is on his feet and pacing. He rakes his fingers through his hair, then returns to lay his palm on Janey's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I just..."

"I'm sorry," she sobs.

"There's nothing to be sorry about," I chip in and put my arm around her. "You were entitled to go there if you want."

"Like fuck. They shouldn't have let her in," Ethan mutters. "I'm raising the age limit. No one under twenty-five..."

Aaron crouches beside Janey. "Is there anything else you can tell us, love?"

"She shakes her head. "I tried to find her, and I asked everyone if they'd seen her. No one had, so I went home. I thought... I thought maybe she didn't like the club and left earlier than we planned without telling me she was going. But she wasn't at home, and she didn't come back. Hasn't been back to her flat since that night. The next day, yesterday, I went back and spoke to Madame Roxanne, just in case she might have...taken something and maybe passed out in the toilets. She searched the building, but Rosie wasn't there. Then her dad showed up. She was supposed to go home, to Yorkshire, yesterday. Her mum's birthday or something. When she didn't arrive and wasn't answering her phone, he came looking."

Aaron narrows his eyes. "Does he know where his daughter was when she disappeared?"

Janey nods. "I told him. I shouldn't have, I know that, but he was... he was a bit scary."

"He threatened you?" Ethan snarls, incensed.

"No, nothing like that. He was just... insistent. I told him I knew the club owners and I'd talk to you, but he shouldn't go

to the police. I don't think he was buying that, though."

"Shit! We need to—"

Ethan is interrupted by the sound of his phone buzzing in his pocket. He checks the screen. "It's Roxy," he announces to the rest of us. He hits 'accept' and puts her on speaker.

"Roxy?"

"Boss. I just had a visit from the police."

"The missing girl?"

"Right." There's a pause. "You know about that, then?"

"Yes. Janey's here now."

"They searched the club but didn't find anything."

"Nothing?"

"I was expecting them. The girl's friend was here, asking about her. With a missing teenager, it was only a matter of time until the authorities came sniffing, so I thought it best to temporarily move anything we might prefer them not to concern themselves with."

Thank goodness for staff ready to use their initiative. Ethan obviously thinks so, too.

"Thank you, Roxy. But unless the girl turns up soon, they'll be back."

"I know. We'll not be giving them anything to worry about." By which she means, no more breaking lockdown rules, at least for a while.

"What about the girl? Any ideas what happened?"

"No, boss. I remember seeing them, her and her friend, in the playroom. We had a breath-play demo going on, and they were watching..."

Ethan glares at Janey.

'... but I didn't see them leave. First I knew of it was when the friend turned up yesterday, worried because the other girl hadn't come home. I searched the place, but there was no sign

of her. The police didn't find anything either, though I expect we'll be fined for breaking lockdown rules."

"Could have been worse," Ethan concedes. "Don't argue with the police over that, just put your hands up to it and we'll pay the fine. And make sure you cooperate fully with their enquiries."

"Will do, boss."

"Bye, Roxy. And, well done." Ethan hangs up.

"Do you still want me to talk to this father?" Aaron asks. "Though it does sounds like the horse has bolted already."

"True, but if you could reassure him, calm him down... Since they're involved now, we'll let the police investigate and this thing will run its course."

"But, what about Rosie? You have to find her," Janey wails. "She's only eighteen. Anything might have happened..."

"The police will—"

"No, they won't," Janey insists. "You know they won't. They'll have no clue. She's been snatched, I know it. Someone has her, and they'll hurt her. You have to help. Please."

"If the police can't find her, what makes you think I can?" Ethan replies.

Janey's not buying that. "You're not the police. You have other ways..."

No one is arguing, and I know my brothers well enough to realise that they will be no happier to leave it to the authorities than Janey is. Our drugs operation may be safe, but our professional reputation in the kink club community is at risk.

Ethan clearly sees it the same way and doesn't take a lot of persuading. "Okay. Casey, you get on with checking any CCTV footage, and Aaron, you talk to Rosie's father. Try not to set hares running, but if you can find out if he has any idea why someone would abduct his daughter, that would be good."

“You don’t think this was random, then?” I ask. “You think she might have been targeted?”

Ethan shrugs. “I don’t know, but let’s assume, for now, that she was. That way, we have something to go on.”

“I’ll get on it,” Aaron replies. “Do you know the name of this father, Janey? Did he leave a number?”

She stifles her sobs long enough to dig in her pocket for a crumpled business card. “He left this,” She hands it to Aaron, who glances at it then tosses it faceup on the table.

Nathan Darke.

Black Combe

Yorkshire

CHAPTER 4

J ed

IT'S STARTING TO RAIN. That cold, bone-numbing drizzle that Ireland is famous for. I quicken my pace. Maybe I can get back to my apartment before the heavens truly open. Not for the first time, I question my spur of the moment decision to hitch a lift back across the Atlantic Ocean on Ethan Savage's yacht. I figured he owed me a favour since I'd helped him to get his hands on a cocky little arms dealer who he particularly wanted to talk to. I called it in, so here I am, back on my native soil. And getting piss-wet through.

My feet slap against the pavement, and I take the final two miles at a brisker jog than I really care for. Still, the weather may be vile, but nothing really dampens the adrenaline rush I get from a good predawn ten-mile run. The roads are empty; I have the city to myself at this time in a morning. It's only just turned six, and still pitch dark. By the time I get home, shower, then dress for the day in my usual business attire, the streets will be heaving.

I burst through the plate-glass doors into the foyer of my apartment block and stop to shake the droplets of rain from my hair. The concierge at the reception desk eyes me with disapproval but says nothing. He's not stupid, and I do own the fucking building, so I'm entitled to drip on the carpet.

My penthouse is, naturally, on the top floor, fifteen storeys up, with a magnificent view of Dublin's cityscape. I like to be able to see my domain, which is one of the reasons I took up

residence here a year ago rather than remaining in my family's mansion in the leafier suburbs.

I never intended to live here when I first commissioned the building. It was part of my more-or-less-legitimate commercial empire, intended to be let out to those with a taste for luxury and the means to pay for it. Footballers, soap stars, minor nobility with independent means.

The lower six floors are for business use, the rest for residential. But I realised the potential and had the penthouse designed to my exact specifications. Open plan, minimalist and practical, no frills but comfortable as fuck. I have my private office here, as well as a games room, a home cinema, and a spa.

And a view to die for.

I'm in the private elevator travelling skyward when my phone rings. It's a bit early for calls, whether social or business related, so I'm mildly intrigued and more than a little suspicious when I extract it from the pocket of my sweatpants and check the caller ID. I'm surprised to see the name on the screen.

"Nathan? How are you?" I wasn't expecting to hear from the architect who designed my tower block, though we do have several other construction projects on the go. "You're up early."

"I need to talk to you."

"Okay. Will it wait until—?"

"Now," he snarls.

Whoa. Did I fail to pay his last invoice?

I'm not best pleased at his tone. Blood would usually be shed when anyone talks to me like that, but we've done a lot of business together, and he's good at his job. The best, actually. So, I bite my tongue, this time.

"Right. Go ahead." I exit the lift and prop the phone between my shoulder and my ear while I let myself into my penthouse.

“Are you at home?”

“Where else would I be at six-thirty in the morning?”
Actually, I suppose there are plenty of options, but I don’t dwell on that as I amble across my kitchen and reach for the coffee percolator.

“I’m outside. I’m coming up.”

I pause. This is all getting a bit bizarre. I put the coffee pot down and check that I have a gun to hand. In my experience, nothing good usually comes of unexpected dawn visits. “All right. I’ll call security and get them to let you into the lift.”

Five minutes later, he’s in my foyer. I check the cameras to make sure he’s alone, then I buzz him through into the flat.

I’m struck, and not for the first time, by what an impressive figure Nathan Darke cuts. Same height as me, maybe a little leaner. And ten years older, though he doesn’t really look it unless you peer closely at his hair which is just beginning to show a scattering of grey among the dark brown. None of that detracts from his air of power and control, though.

In another life, he would have been Mafia or Mob himself.

But this morning, there’s something different. Normally impeccable, he seems... I struggle for the right word and settle on ‘haggard’. I’d lay money that he’s not slept for a week and probably not shaved for the same length of time. His clothes are distinctly dishevelled.

I take in his appearance at a glance,, forget about the gun, and put a mug of coffee in his hands. “Drink that. You look like shit.”

“Thanks.” He sits without waiting to be invited and takes a sip. “Rosie’s gone.”

I take a moment to process. “Rosie...?”

“My daughter.”

“Ah.” I recall the girl now. Pretty little thing, eighteen or nineteen, long dark hair. Plays the violin if I’m not mistaken. Now I come to think of it, I recall Nathan telling me that she

won a prize at school for composing some tune or other and was going to study music at Glasgow university. Is that what he means? Is it empty nest syndrome? Maybe he's missing her.

“When you say ‘gone’...?”

“Disappeared.” He glares up at me. “She’s been kidnapped.”

Fuck. I take a seat opposite. “What happened?” *And more to the point, why are you telling me?*

“I don’t know what fucking happened. I can’t find out anything. The police are useless.”

Tell me about it.

“How do you know she was kidnapped? Have they been in touch?”

He shakes his head. “No, but I know who has her.”

“Right. That’s a start. Who?”

“Some bastard called Ethan Savage.”

If he wasn’t so distraught, he’d probably laugh out loud at my expression. “Ethan Savage? What makes you think that?”

He takes another gulp of his coffee. “He’s some sort of crime boss. Lives in Scotland. My Rosie was taken from one of his clubs.”

“Why do you think it was him, though?” I persist.

“Because that’s the sort of business he’s in. Fucking Mafia. Human trafficking and all that. And, he has my daughter.”

“I don’t think—”

“If he doesn’t have her, he knows who does. He came to see me. Or his brother did. Warned me off meddling, told me to keep quiet or I’d never see her again.”

I’m not buying this. The Savages are as ruthless as the next crime family, but this is just not their style.

“Aaron Savage said that? Doesn’t sound like him. Or Ethan for that matter.”

His eyes widen. Hope flares. “I thought so! You do know them?”

“I do. Not well, but...” *I fucked their sister one time...*

“I need to talk to them, face to face. I’ll pay whatever they want, but they have to let her go.”

I try to talk some sense into him. “Nathan, they don’t have her. I’m sure of that. I can—”

“Where does Savage live?”

“What? You’re not thinking of—”

“I need to see him. He must have an office somewhere, Some way of contacting him.”

“Ethan Savage is a hard man to find. He likes his privacy.”

“And I like my daughter, so I’ll be tracking him down, with or without your help. And when I do...”

I groan inwardly. It sounds as if Nathan intends to march in and start throwing his weight around with Ethan Savage, and I know how that’s likely to end. I’ll be needing to commission another architect at this rate, and good ones are thin on the ground. I try again to instil a dose of reality. “Nathan, I seriously doubt if the Savages have Rosie. Abduction. Violence against women. This is... it’s just not their sort of thing.”

“They’re criminals, aren’t they? Organised crime?”

“Well, you could say the same about me, but you’re not suggesting I took her.”

“It was *his* club that she disappeared from. And, why else would they warn me off?”

Fair point, but even so, I’m not buying this. “If you want me to talk to Ethan, I will.”

“I’m coming, too.”

“No, you are not. He’ll shoot you on sight.” Maybe a bit harsh, but in the end, Nathan will end up dead if he’s foolhardy, or desperate enough to confront Ethan Savage. I

pour both of us another coffee and reluctantly conclude that he probably is desperate enough.

“I have other business to conduct with the Savages. Let me get a meeting with him, and while I’m there, I’ll ask what they know about Rosie.”

Nathan shakes his head. “I want to see him. I want to get eyeball to eyeball with the bastard who took my little girl.” He glares at me. “Looks like I’m on my own, then.”

I know how much Nathan adores his family, so his determination to get his daughter back safe is a sentiment I can understand, but he’s still barking up the wrong tree. Worse, it will get him killed.

“I’m not telling you where Ethan lives, but I will talk to him. I’ll let you know what he says. You have to just trust me. Believe me, there’s no other choice.”

“I thought you were my friend.”

No, he didn’t. We’re business associates, that’s all. But I probably am the only person he knows with the right connections to make a difference here.

“Go home, Nathan. Get some sleep. Shower. Eat. I’ll be in touch.”

I WATCH from the veranda as Nathan’s Porsche exits the underground car park and disappears into the early morning traffic. If I’m to stop him doing something stupid, and seriously inconveniencing me by getting himself killed, I need to bring forward my plans concerning the Savages.

I’ve arrived at a solution to my little predicament with Maria Sorza and I need to talk to them. I was intending to seek a face to face with Ethan and Aaron soon anyway, the business I have in mind is best conducted in person. I’ll give them a ring today.

First, though, I need to get that shower. And some more coffee.

THE HELICOPTER CIRCLES the remote island where the Savages have their home and headquarters. Caraksay is a bleak place but lovely in its own way. Too isolated for my taste, though.

I enjoy the city. Bright lights, din. And crowds.

As we descend, I spot two men waiting for me on the forecourt of an imposing medieval castle. The phrase 'Monarch of the Glen' was made for those two. They won't welcome my proposal, and I expect a fight to get what I want. But I will have my way.

I always do.

As soon as we touch down alongside the two helicopters belonging to the Savages, I hop to the ground and duck under the rotors to jog over to them. The wind hits me full in the face. How do they survive in this climate? I thought Dublin could be chilly, but this is something else entirely.

I hug my jacket close and offer my hand, first to Ethan, then to Aaron.

Ethan welcomes me politely enough but with no real degree of conviction. I don't really blame him. He's known for not welcoming visitors in his private domain, but I sort of twisted his arm.

He owes me. He knows that. I helped him to apprehend the traitor who sold his secrets to his enemies, as well as taking his nephew hostage. The boy was returned safe, largely because of my intervention. I didn't get involved with any intention of using it as leverage, but I'd be a fool not to trade on my advantages.

He also needs me to help him track down his consignment of missing guns. He hasn't spelt it out yet, but I know he wants to use my contacts and networks in the US. So, one way or another, I'll be negotiating from a position of strength.

Still, he won't like my proposition. I steel myself for a fight.

Pleasantries exchanged, Aaron suggests we get inside, out of the wind. I'm glad enough to do just that. It's not lost on me that the two Savage queens, Cristina who is Ethan's wife and Beth, Aaron's partner, are waiting in the great hall ready to greet me. That is indeed an honour. Either the Savages fear me, or they want to impress me. I doubt if Ethan Savage is afraid of anyone, especially not here on his own turf, so that leaves just one explanation. The women make themselves scarce as soon as the introductions are over.

Despite the austere external appearance of the castle, its interior is modern and bright. And mercifully warm. Somehow, Ethan Savage has managed to restore the old ruin to create a luxurious place to live and work, but without wrecking the grandeur or character of the place. Ancient stonework and traditional furniture blend perfectly with twenty-first century technology. The works must have cost millions.

"This is a stunning place you have here," I say, taking in the massive flatscreen television mounted on the wall beside a huge carved oak dresser that probably predates Robert the Bruce.

"Thanks. It suits us," Ethan replies. "Shall we go up to my office?"

So, we're to get right down to business, then. Suits me.

He leads the way up the grand staircase to the first floor, then gestures me into his private office. I briefly take in the huge desk and top-of-the-range laptop, as well as the glorious view of the cliffs and roiling sea below. Ethan Savage has an eye for the dramatic.

I'm not short of a bit of theatrical flair myself, when called for. This is such an occasion.

I take a seat on a plush leather sofa. My hosts settle in armchairs on either side of me.

"You have a proposition for us, I gather." Ethan Savage opens the proceedings.

“That’s right,” I reply. “I’m wanting to call in what you owe me.”

Ethan’s gaze is unwavering. He inclines his head. “We were very grateful for your assistance in the matter of Jerry Lynch. And Sykes. I believe the sum of thirty thousand pounds was mentioned.”

Indeed it was. Aaron was very keen to secure my assistance in getting Richard Sykes, the gunrunner trading his stolen firearms, back to the UK so they could question him about the theft of their gear. I think he’d have agreed to pretty much anything I asked. Well, we shall soon know.

“It was, but I’ve decided I prefer payment in kind.”

“In kind?” Aaron’s eyes narrow. “You mean, you want a favour from us in exchange?”

I sip my coffee. It’s remarkably good. “You might describe it like that, I suppose.”

“Go on.” Ethan urges me.

“I want your sister.”

They both gape at me in the deathly silence that follows my bombshell. Then they erupt in unison. “No fucking way!”

“What the fuck?”

Ethan is on his feet. “That’s not happening.”

I continue to enjoy my coffee. They’re rattled, seriously so. In contrast, I’m utterly calm, at least on the outside.

“I thought we already established that you owe me. Big style.”

“And we’ll pay you what we owe, no problem. But not that way.” Ethan is already at the door. “This meeting is over.”

I ignore him. “You haven’t heard my terms yet.”

“We don’t fucking care what your terms are,” Aaron snarls. “Casey works for us. No one else.”

“Ah, you misunderstand me. I wasn’t really referring to her skills as a hacker, though of course those would come in

very useful. What I mean is, I want to marry her.”

“You...?” Ethan looks beyond astonished. Aaron, too.

“That’s... impossible,” Aaron manages to stutter.

Now, I get to my feet and pace to the window. I lean on the sill to regard them. “I don’t see why. She’s not involved with anyone else, is she?” I pause, just in case. There is no answer, so I plough on. “It would be an advantageous match, for both of us.”

Aaron is emphatic “Casey would... She would never agree.”

“How do you know? Why not ask her?”

“We don’t need to ask her,” Ethan snaps.

“Well, tell her, then. Point out the advantages. She might even like the idea.” I can but hope, especially as she didn’t seem exactly hostile the last time we met in person.

Aaron is having none of it. “Our sister is not part of any bargain, and she won’t be. That’s not how we operate. What will you accept instead?”

“Nothing. I want her.”

Ethan is rather less polite. “You can’t have her. Now, get the fuck out of my home.”

“Why can’t I have her? Why won’t you even put the proposal to her?” Time to get heavy. “Let me speak to Casey.”

“Not a chance,” they both answer at once, and a little too emphatically for my liking.

I have a bad feeling suddenly.

“Is there a problem? Is she all right?”

“Not exactly,” Aaron mutters.

“What does that mean?” I demand, rounding on him. I didn’t come here looking for a fight, but no way am I leaving without answers.

Ethan is the one to reply. “It means, she’s pregnant.” He levels his gaze at me, defying me to argue further. “So, you

see, it really wouldn't work. I daresay in the circumstances you'll be happy enough to withdraw your... offer."

"Pregnant?" A wave of relief washes over me, closely followed by a rush of emotion I can't quite name. Could it be excitement? Joy, even? I return to the sofa and sink back onto it. "I see."

Aaron ploughs on. Clearly, he considers the matter to be settled now. "So, obviously..."

I'm not listening, still processing, joining the dots. "Is she... I mean they... are they doing well?"

They both eye me with curiosity. Since when did we concern ourselves with small talk?

Aaron answers. "Yes. Well enough."

"That's good." Now for the six-million-dollar question. "When's the baby due?"

"February," Aaron tells me.

"A boy or a girl?"

He regards me quizzically. "A girl."

"A little girl. That's...nice." A daughter. *My daughter...?*

"Yes, we think so, too," he continues, oblivious to the thoughts churning in my head. "But obviously, now you can see why—"

"My offer stands. And I want to see Casey."

"Jed..." Aaron's tone is more conciliatory now.

Ethan remains silent.

Enough bullshit. I drop my bombshell. "I think she'll agree to talk to me. You see, the baby is mine."

They both just gape at me.

Ethan recovers first. "Not possible. You've never even met her."

"Clearly, I have. Did she not mention it?"

"No, she fucking didn't. When? Where?"

“I never fuck and tell. That would be rude. But if you insist on a DNA test, I’m sure we could—”

I should have been ready. Aaron Savage is known for his temper, and he has been sorely provoked. Even I can see that. What I don’t see is his fist coming. I take the punch full on my jaw. It sends me sprawling back across the sofa, closely followed by over two hundred pounds of vicious, outraged older brother. Aaron manages to land another blow to my gut, and to my ribs before I succeed in diving out of his reach.

Naturally, he’s not done. He hurls himself at me again, but this time I’m prepared. I side-step and swing a few blows of my own. I get a good one in that I know will leave a decent bruise on his ribs, and another to his kidneys. My jaw takes another direct hit, then he succeeds in felling me with a nifty kick that slices my legs from under me. We’re rolling about on Ethan Savage’s fine Kashmir carpet, trading blows, and grunts, and at least one of us is bleeding. There’s a crash when we upturn the coffee table, sending crockery flying.

I really couldn’t say which of us is winning, but probably the honours are even. Our murderous assault on each other comes to an abrupt halt when the sound of a single gunshot rips through the general din of the fight. We roll apart and peer up at Ethan.

He is standing by the window, which is now open, a Glock in his hand. He glares at us, then tucks the gun back in the holster beneath his suit jacket. It’s not lost on me that he was armed throughout our meeting. I’m probably fortunate that all I have to show for my efforts are cuts and bruises, though I suspect that one of my teeth might be loose.

“Look at the fucking state of this place,” Ethan seethes. “One of you has bled all over my rug. No, both of you! What the fuck?”

“You heard what this bastard said,” Aaron starts.

Ethan is clearly not interested in discussing the whys and wherefores. He produces his mobile phone and hits a number on his speed dial. “Megan? My office, quick as you like. Bring your bag.”

He pauses, listens to the answer, then, “No, not gunshot wounds. At least, not yet. Yes, I know. That was me, getting their attention.” Another pause, then, “You can tell the rest to stand down. The fun’s over.”

He ends the call, then turns his attention back to us. I’m on my feet, more or less. Aaron is still sitting on the floor, dabbing at his nose which is bleeding nicely.

Ethan tosses a handkerchief at him. “Now see what you’ve done. Half the island is on its way up here. And stop dripping blood on my floor.”

I glare at my adversary and draw a degree of satisfaction from the fact that I probably came off better, though there’s no guarantee that happy situation would have continued. My ribs hurt like fuck. I doubt if I’ll be able to breathe easily for a week. Still, since we’re going to be family whether Aaron Savage likes it or not, I offer him my hand to help him up. He tells me to fuck off, which is fair enough. I’d have said the same in his shoes.

I stagger back to my sofa, just as the door opens and a rather stunning woman with flaming auburn hair charges into the room. She takes in the scene with a glance, then crouches beside Aaron. She has a medical bag in her hand and throws it open.

“Patch them up,” Ethan instructs her. “No need to be gentle. And you two, behave yourselves while I’m gone. Oh, and I expect you to get this lot cleared up.”

“Where are you going?” Aaron mutters, then winces when the medic, Megan, shoves a wad of tissues on his nose.

“I’m going to do what we should have done in the first place,” he growls. “I’m going to talk to Casey.”

CHAPTER 5

C asey

I'M ALREADY ON EDGE, waiting for something — anything — to happen.

Jed O'Neill's helicopter landed almost twenty minutes ago. I watched from my window as he dashed across the paved forecourt to meet my brothers. He looked ... sort of amazing. I'd almost forgotten why I did what I did, but one fleeting glance at the lean body and ridiculously handsome features brought it all back with a shuddering jolt. I've spent the time since then arguing with myself.

Should I go down there and confront him? Or continue to hide up here in my cosy garret? Why is he here anyway? Does he know about me, who I am?

He can't know. How would he? This visit has nothing to do with me. It's impossible. Best to stay out of the way until he's gone.

But... I might never see him again. And that thought is perhaps even more terrifying than the prospect of coming face to face and him recognising me.

I raid my refrigerator in search of yet another can of diet cola — I'm more health conscious since I've been pregnant so I try to stay away from the full-fat sort — and plonk myself in front of my desk to continue scrolling through CCTV images. I was working on this before the sound of incoming rotors disturbed me and sent my nerves into overdrive. I've managed

to access various bits of surveillance from around Club Wicked on the night young Rosie disappeared. There's our own, and I checked that at once. It took a bit longer and a fair bit of unauthorised hacking to get my hands on footage from other premises and businesses in the area, and, best of all, the cameras mounted all over the public transport system. Not just in stations, but on buses, too. It never ceases to amaze me how much they pick up, trundling around the streets.

I make up my mind to focus on the job in hand and stop mooning over Jed O'Neill. Moments later, I shoot out of my chair when a gunshot explodes into the silence.

What the holy fuck?

I rush to the window and lean out, scanning the forecourt and the cottages beyond. There's quite a gale blowing, but already men are streaming from the various outbuildings and heading for the castle. Megan, too, is fighting her way through the wind, coming up from the cottage she's adapted into a sort of clinic, her medical bag at the ready. She halts to take a call, then waves down Tony as he charges past her. They converse quickly, before he shrugs and turns to go back to wherever he came from. The rest of the men follow him.

Megan carries on up to the castle at a halting run. I lose sight of her when she takes the front steps two at a time.

I swirl away from the window when my office door bursts open with a clatter. Cristina dashes in, baby Sebastian in her arms and Magda hard on her heels.

"Did you hear that? Someone's shooting..." She pants.

"I know. I just saw Megan arriving. Where did it come from?"

Magda answers, "The offices, I think. That man was here, the Irish boss. Do you think he...?"

"I don't know." Christ, I expected my brothers to be pissed off when they found out, *if* they found out, who my baby's father is, but surely they wouldn't have murdered Jed in cold blood.

Would they?

“I need to go down there,” Cristina decides, her jaw firming. “Magda, please look after Sebastien. If there’s any more shooting, you need to get him away from here. Keep him safe for me. Please.”

“Of course.” Magda’s role here is loosely defined. She’s a helicopter pilot, tutor, and a sort of nanny to the children, as well as being Cristina’s closest female friend, probably. Without further ado, Magda takes the baby and rushes from the room.

Cristina turns to me. “Do you have a gun?”

“In here? No.” I can shoot reasonably well, my family made sure of that as I grew up, but I rarely feel the need to have a weapon to hand. Especially not in my own home.

“There are several in our apartment,” she replies. “Come with me.”

“Right, I...” I give myself a mental shake. I need to get my arse in gear. “Okay, I’m coming.”

We’re halfway down the stairs when we run into Ethan coming up. Cristina lets out a sob and flings herself at him.

He manages not to topple backwards, though it’s a close-run thing. “Hey, sweetheart, it’s all right.”

“We heard shooting,” I say. My heart is still thumping. Surely he can hear it above Cristina’s relieved weeping.

“I thought you were dead,” she wails. “We were coming to...”

He gives her a hug and kisses her hair. “Not yet, darling, though it’s reassuring to know you care.”

“Idiot,” she mutters, swiping her tears from her cheeks. “Do *not* scare me like that again.”

“I’ll try not to, but right now I need a word with Casey.” He tips her chin up with his fingers. “Will you be okay?”

“Of course.” Cristina’s powers of recovery are second to none. She gives him a haughty scowl and carries on down the

stairs. “I need to find Magda in any case, before she evacuates the children to the mainland.”

We wait until she’s out of earshot, then I start on him. “What happened?”

“Your room,” he replies, and gestures for me to lead the way.

No sooner is the door closed behind us than I round on him again. “Why were you shooting? I assume it *was* you?”

“Yes. A warning shot to get Aaron’s and Jed’s attention before they totally wrecked my office. As it is, I doubt the carpet will ever be clean again.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bloodstains,” he replies. “A bugger to get out.”

My jaw drops. “Wh-whose blood? Is he all right?”

He quirks his lip. “Which one are you worried about?”

“Both,” I snap. “I assume they were fighting?”

“Like ferrets in a sack. I must say, for such a pretty boy, O’Neill can handle himself. I think he might have broken Aaron’s nose.”

“Oh God.” I sink into my chair and bury my face in my hands. “Was it...was it about me?”

Ethan pulls up another chair and settles opposite me. “Certainly was. Jed tells us he’s the father of my little niece.”

“Oh God,” I repeat.

“It’s true, then, I take it?”

I can only nod.

“Thought so. Things would have been a lot simpler if you’d told us that before he arrived here.”

“I’m sorry. I should have, but I just... I thought ...” I raise my gaze to his. If he’s going to give me a roasting, we might as well get it over with.

He offers me a rueful smile. “Ah, little sis...” He beckons me to him with the fingers of both hands.

I take no more urging. I fly at him and throw my arms around his neck. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. You wanted that alliance, and now Aaron’s hurt, because of me...”

“Aaron swung the first punch. And he’ll live. And yes, I do want to join forces with Jed O’Neill. I still might. It depends how all of this plays out.”

“What did he say?” It must have been something pretty awful to make Aaron go for him like that.

“He told us he wants to marry you.”

I take a step back and gape at my brother. “He... he what?”

“You heard.”

“I don’t want to marry anyone. I don’t need a husband, just because of...” I lay my palms over my rounded abdomen.

“True.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him to fuck off, as far as I can recall. Aaron emphasised the point with his fists.”

For want of something better, I revert to swearing again. “Oh God. What a fucking mess.”

“Sounds like it.”

“What should I do? What do you think I should do?”

“I think you should start by telling me the whole story. How did we get here? How did you and Jed come to be making babies together, since I know for a fact you’ve hardly been off Caraksay for the last year or so?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Let me rephrase that. You’re *going* to tell me how, when, and where this happened, and you’re going to tell me now.”

“You’ll be so angry...”

His eyebrow goes up. “Really?”

“And disappointed.”

“Casey, do I strike you as some Victorian patriarch? I’m not judging. You can fuck who you like. I just need to know the facts so that I can work out what I’m dealing with.”

“Ah.” The light dawns. “You want to know if he forced me.”

His voice gentles. “Did he?”

I shake my head. “No! Absolutely not. I was... It was consensual, and it was wonderful.”

“That’s a relief. I have to say, I barely know the man, but Jed didn’t strike me as the sort to stick his dick where it’s not wanted. Still, I had to ask. So, what did happen?”

I draw in a shuddering breath. Best to spit the whole story out at once. “It was when Sebastien was born. At the Rothwell. I was in the cafe trying to get a drink. The cola machine was broken. It took my money. Jed came along, and he offered to help. We got talking and...”

His brow furrows. “I remember you’d disappeared. Aaron and I came looking for you and found you in the café. But Jed wasn’t there.”

“He was. He stayed out of sight because I asked him to. I didn’t want you to know that I... what we’d been doing. And, well, you know the rest.”

“I didn’t realise you even knew Jed.”

“I didn’t.”

Both dark eyebrows shoot up. He shakes his head. “Well, aren’t you full of surprises?”

“I don’t make a habit of fucking strangers behind vending machines in hospital waiting rooms.” Even I find the indignation in my tone laughable.

He grins. “Well, I suppose that’s something.” He’s silent for a few moments. “So, what do you want me to do about Jed?”

“Do about him? What do you mean?”

“I could get rid of him.”

“What? Kill him?” My heart lurches at the very thought.
“No, please...”

“Calm down. I may be pissed off, but not that much. I daresay even Aaron would find that a bit excessive. I meant, do you want me to send him packing?”

“Like, away?”

“Yes, away. I’d be happy to break his legs for you, too, if you want.”

“Aren’t you going to make me marry him?” I’d expected Ethan to be summoning a registrar within the hour.

“Nope. That’s your call.”

“But the alliance with the Irish...?”

“I don’t strike bargains with my family as bait. You know that. I want to work with him, I’ll try to persuade him it’s a good proposition, but you won’t be part of it. Whether or not you get married, and who to, is your choice.”

I swipe a stray tear from my cheek. “I’ve caused you so much trouble.”

“Bollocks. Though, I suspect, if you do turn him down, he’ll still want to be a part of his daughter’s life.”

“He knows about that?” I gape at Ethan, horrified.

“Yes. It came up in the conversation. I must say, I thought it would put him off the idea of marriage.”

“Doesn’t sound as though it worked. Did he actually say he wanted to be involved?”

“He never got the chance. But I didn’t get the impression the news that he was going to be a father was unwelcome, exactly.”

“The news? You mean, he didn’t know, about the baby before he came here?”

“No, he didn’t. I’m sure of that.”

“When did he say he wanted to marry me?”

“Pretty much straight away.”

“Before he knew?”

“Yes, before.”

“But why? Why would he want me? That one time, it was just a quickie, it meant nothing.”

Ethan doesn't answer. He simply holds my gaze and says nothing.

“Where is he now?” I demand.

“With the weather closing in, I asked Mrs McRae to prepare a guest room in the east tower, just in case he needed to stay. I expect he went there once Megan finished patching him up.”

“I don't want to talk to him.”

“So I gather. You're intending to skulk up here a while longer, then?”

“I have work to do.”

His arms are around me, and he kisses my hair. “You need to sort this out with Jed, arrive at some sort of understanding. Would it help if I were to talk to him with you? Or Cristina?”

“No, but thank you for offering. I know you're right but I just... I need to think.”

He smiles down at me. “I love you, little sister. Whatever happens, whatever you decide to do, know that.”

I bite back a sob. “I love you, too, big bro.”

CHAPTER 6

J ed

I LEAN into the mirror to inspect the damage. I flex my jaw and wince. Aaron Savage swings a mean right hook, but I suppose the bruising could be worse. Maybe it will be, in an hour or so. I don't think I have a rib that's not throbbing right now, and as if that's not pissed me off enough, I just took a call from my pilot who tells me the weather is too wild to even contemplate taking off in the chopper for a while.

So, I'm stuck here.

Is that such a bad thing? I came to Caraksay looking for a handy solution to the Maria Sorza situation. My reasoning is, I need a wife. Or at the very least, a significant other. I need to come up with a solid reason why I can't marry Maria, and the girl I met a few months ago at the Rothwell will do very nicely indeed. She was intriguing, beautiful, and off-the-scale feisty. It all seemed very convenient; she was the perfect woman for me. The discovery that she's carrying my baby threw me for a loop momentarily, but it simply adds spice to the deal.

I came here wanting Casey Savage. Now, I simply have to have her, so it's just as well that her protective brothers can't throw me off their island. At least not yet.

I have to hope they don't decide a knife between my ribs would solve the matter equally well.

I stroll to the window to check the weather and have to agree with my pilot. The few trees which manage to survive

on this lump of rock are bent almost double in the wind, and it's starting to rain. In just a few moments, water is lashing at the outside of the pane and streaming down in noisy rivulets. The din is so loud, I don't even hear the door open behind me.

I do, though, hear the clearing of Ethan Savage's throat.

"How is she?" I ask over my shoulder.

"Tearful. Worried."

Now I do turn to face him. "Worried? Why?"

"She's scared about what you'll do next. Or me."

"I know what I mean to do. What about you?"

He regards me for several seconds, then quirks his lip. "You still mean to try to convince her to marry you. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Okay, you can try. But hear this. If she says 'no', then it's no. It won't be happening."

"You'll let me talk to her?" I can barely conceal my surprise. I expected to be fighting off both Savages and all their men to get anywhere near Casey.

He shrugs and takes on a philosophical air. "The way I see it, this shitshow won't be settled by keeping you locked in here and leaving Casey to sulk in her room."

I narrow my eyes but don't respond to the veiled suggestion that I'm some sort of prisoner here. Instead, I wait for him to finish.

"I agree you need to talk," he continues. "The pair of you. Calmly would be good. I suggest you give her a few minutes, then go up. But, have a care. I won't have my sister pushed around or bullied. And I won't be far away."

More veiled threats, but what he says is fair enough. If nothing else, it's clear how much both brothers care about their sister.

"I can live with that," I reply. "Where's her room?"

“End of this corridor, then left. Two floors up.”

“Thanks.”

He inclines his head, then turns on his heel and leaves me to it.

I WAIT the suggested few minutes, which is enough time for me to down a cup of coffee brought up by the maid from earlier. She's back soon after with my overnight bag which I left in the helicopter. I select a clean T-shirt as I doubt if it will help my cause to arrive in Casey's room with her brother's blood on my clothes. I pull it over my head, then make for the door.

The narrow stone staircase is easy to find. I pause at the top of the first flight to take stock of my surroundings. I'm at the end of a corridor which stretches away from me, with about half a dozen doors on each side. The walls are trimmed granite, with concealed lighting set into the stonework somehow. The scale and size of this place is becoming obvious, and from what I know of medieval Scottish history, admittedly, not a lot, the castle has been extended substantially from the original version. It may have started life as a sturdy little fortress perched on an isolated outpost, but now it's home to a large household and serves as the nerve centre for a multinational organisation.

Ethan Savage does not do things by halves.

I continue on up to the next landing to find myself peering down a similar hallway, but there are fewer doors. Just four, all closed.

The sound of a toilet flushing to my right signals Casey's current whereabouts. I try the door to my left. It opens onto a store cupboard.

I move the next one and try the handle. It's locked.

I turn to the door opposite. Bingo!

This one opens to reveal a generously proportioned workspace. A bench runs the length of the far wall, beneath a

pair of mullioned windows. Screens, electronic equipment, and at least three different laptops are ranged along it, and the air is alive with gentle humming. Lights flicker, and indecipherable streams of letters and numbers flash across the various screens.

A leather office chair on wheels is set before one of the laptops, turned sideways as though she just got out of it to go to the loo. I head over to it and glance at the screen.

I do a double-take. *Is that—?*

“What the fuck are you doing in here?”

I lift my gaze from the monitor. Casey is glaring at me from the open doorway. She looks fucking wonderful. And very pregnant.

“Nice to see you, Casey.”

“I said—”

“I’m here to see you.”

“You’ve seen me. Now get out.”

I try a smile. “How are you?”

“Knocked up and pissed off. This room is private. You’ve no right to be here.”

“I needed to see you, to know that you’re okay. And we have to talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

I slide the chair towards her. “Sit down, Casey.”

“I’ll sit down when I’m ready. When you’ve gone.”

“Do you mind if I do?” I park myself in the only other chair.

“Actually, I do mind. I want you to leave.”

“I get that. What I don’t get, is why.”

“Why?” she echoes.

I note that she does, at last, approach her chair, which I take as a promising sign.

“Why won’t you talk to me?” I probe.

“I just... I just want to be left alone,” she mutters, sinking into her chair. “That time, it was... it was a moment of madness. There’s no need for you to—”

“It didn’t seem mad to me. I want to help.”

She glowers at me over her glasses. “I don’t need your help. I don’t need anyone. I—”

She’s interrupted by the trilling of her phone on the bench behind her. She swirls around to pick it up and glances at the display. “Hi.”

There’s a brief pause, then, “Yes, he’s here...”

Ethan, obviously.

“No, that’s okay... Yes, I’m sure... That’s not necessary, but thank you. Yes, I’ll tell him.”

She hangs up, sets the phone back down, then smirks at me. “Ethan says his offer to break your legs still stands.”

“How civil of him.”

“He likes you.”

“He’s growing on me, too.”

“Maybe you should marry him instead. Quite the little bromance you two have going on.”

“I gather he’s spoken for. And in any case, it’s you I want.”

“Why? Because of the baby?”

“She’s turning out to be an added bonus.”

Casey furrows her brow, clearly baffled. “Why, then? Ethan intends to form an alliance with you anyway. He said so. You don’t need me.”

“I don’t need an alliance either. That’s his idea, not mine. But I’ll go along with it since he’s going to be family.”

“Only if I agree to marry you?”

I shrug. “That would sweeten the deal, definitely.”

She snorts and goes off on another tack. “You don’t even know me. I’d make a rubbish wife.”

“I know enough. You’re gorgeous, sexy, smart as fuck. Loyal. All excellent qualities. I suppose I’d have to learn to live with your stubbornness.”

“And you’re arrogant as fuck,” she snarls back. “I’d have to learn to live with that.”

I sense her coming around to the idea. “You forgot to mention handsome, charming, wealthy.”

“You’re about as charming as a rat sandwich.”

Ah, so she’s happy with handsome and wealthy, then. I push my advantage. “Have you seen the weather outside? I’m stranded here for a day or two at least. How about we use the time to get to know each other a bit better, if that’s what’s worrying you?”

She glares at me. “If you think I’m going to sleep with you again...”

My cock twitches at the prospect, but even I know this is neither the time nor the place. “That would be nice, but I’ll settle for just spending some time together. Hopefully your brothers won’t murder me in my bed, and you’ll come around to realising I’m quite a nice guy.”

“Like I said, arrogant.”

“And like I said, stubborn.” I extend my hand. “Shall we call a truce and see what happens next?”

She stares at my hand. Her eyes narrow. “I’m not agreeing to anything.”

“I understand. A truce?”

“Okay. A truce. Until the weather clears and you can leave. That’s all.” She shakes my hand, then turns back to stare at the screen closest to her. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

I get to my feet. “I’ll leave you to it, then. But there was just one more thing...”

“What?”

I lean over her shoulder to study the screen. The image I spotted when I first entered the room is still there. “Care to tell me why you’re viewing footage of Rosie Darke?”

She starts and swings around to face me. “You know her?”

“Not really. I’ve met her a couple of times at social functions. Her father is an associate of mine, though. He’s very worried about her.”

“I know that. He’s been kicking up a real shitstorm.”

“Can you blame him? She disappeared into thin air. He’s frantic and he thinks your brother had something to do with it.”

“I know he does, and that’s bullshit. Why would Ethan do anything of the sort? Or Aaron?”

“I get that. It’s pretty much what I told Nathan.”

“Nathan?”

“Nathan Darke. Rosie’s father.”

“Okay. Well, I’m glad you set him straight. But the girl disappeared from one of our clubs, so I’ve been trying to find her.”

Now, this does surprise me. Why would the Savages concern themselves with the disappearance of a kid they don’t even know?

“Tell me what you’ve found out,” I say.

Her gaze is suspicious now. “Why would I? It has nothing to do with you.”

“Nathan Darke is my friend.” That’s a slight exaggeration, but I do quite like the guy, and I think he deserves to know what happened to his little girl. After all, I can empathise. I’m a father myself now. “He came to me to ask if I could help.”

“Ah. So that’s why you’re here,” she replies, her tone bitter. “It had nothing to do with me, did it? What am I? Another added bonus?”

I take her chin in my palm and tilt up her face so she has to meet my eyes. “Listen to me, Casey, and hear it. Really hear. I came for you. I want you. I agreed to talk to Ethan about Rosie because I was coming to speak to your brother anyway. That’s the truth.”

“Is it? The whole truth?”

“Yes.” *Well, almost...*

She glowers at me, but her temper subsides. “Right, well, we were going to tell Mr Darke about all of this anyway, if only to get him off our backs. We can do without the fuss he’s causing.” She reaches for the mouse and clicks to set the image moving.

Together we watch Rosie make her way along a darkened street, then turn left at the end.

“Where is that?” I breathe.

“Carmichael Street in Stirling. About a mile from the club.”

“You tracked her that far?” I’m impressed.

“The hard part is getting sight of the images in the first place. There are cameras everywhere, if you know where to find them. And how to access them without anyone knowing.”

“And you do, obviously.”

She doesn’t bother to answer that. “I have her on our own cameras at nine-fifty that evening, entering the premises with Janey.”

“Who’s Janey?”

“She works for us. You probably saw her downstairs.”

“The maid?”

“Well, not really a maid. More a trainee cook. She’s doing a catering course in Stirling and she and Rosie were housemates. They went to Club Wicked together.”

I think back to the few times I’ve frequented that particular establishment. It’s pretty hardcore. I can only assume that

Rosie is a chip off the old block. Nathan's not much of a clubber, but I know he enjoys the BDSM lifestyle. We talked about it once or twice. I suppose his wife, Eva, must be into it, too. But Rosie...?

Ah, well, she's legal. Just about.

I return my attention to the screen. "She's on her own," I note.

"She left Club Wicked through a fire escape at the back, alone, at ten twenty-seven. She was on foot and made her way along the various streets until she got to where she is here, almost half an hour later. She's walking briskly, but I wouldn't say hurrying, and doesn't appear to be in any distress."

"Did anyone follow her?" I ask.

"No. I checked. Nothing sinister."

"Can you see where she went next?"

"I can try."

I watch in silent admiration while Casey flicks between screens, bringing up CCTV images in rapid succession. After a couple of minutes, she stops to zoom in.

"There she is." She peers at the top-right corner of the screen. "It's now eleven-fifteen, and she's in Water Lane." She switches to another screen displaying a map and marks the spot where the most recent sighting was. There are several more markers already in place, indicating the route Rosie took that night.

"Where do you think she's headed?" I wonder.

"My guess would be the station," Casey replies. "I think I'll skip to there and see if I'm right."

There's more dancing between screens, but a few moments later, we're looking at the forecourt of the railway station in the centre of Stirling. Casey rewinds the tape to eleven-fifteen on the night of Rosie's disappearance, and we wait.

A thought strikes me. "It's well after eleven. A bit late for catching a train, wouldn't you think?"

“Local trains, yes. They finish by around ten-thirty. But the overnighter to King Cross leaves Stirling just after midnight. I suspect she’ll be on it.”

“You might be right.”

“Keep watching the screen. I’ll do some more digging.”

I pull my chair alongside hers and settle in. A companionable silence descends, while Casey busies herself consulting that great fount of all wisdom, Google.

“So,” she announces, leaning away from the screen, “the London train stops at various stations before it reaches King Cross, and they’ll all have cameras. I’ll start checking the footage to see where she gets off.”

“We don’t even know for sure yet that she—” I stop in mid-sentence. “There she is.”

The slim figure of Rosie Darke hustles across the forecourt and enters the station. It’s two minutes to midnight.. Casey flicks to the camera on the platform. We watch in silence as the sleek inter-city train rolls slowly to a halt. The doors glide open, and Rosie hops on.

“She’s planned this,” I murmur.

“How do you know that?”

“Did you notice her shoes?”

Casey shakes her head and rewinds a few minutes. “Flats,” she says.

“Exactly. Good for walking, but not what a woman would normally wear to a BDSM club. Six-inch spikes would be nearer the dress code.”

She arches an eyebrow. “And you’d know, I suppose.”

“If you don’t believe me, ask your brothers. Another thing. Where’s her bag?”

“She didn’t have one.”

“Again, why? Where would she keep her cash? Credit cards? Phone?”

“In her jacket pocket?”

“She’d take her coat off inside the club.”

“Down her bra, then. Or her corset or whatever.”

I can’t resist it. “And you’d know, of course?”

“Shut up,” comes the succinct reply.

“I bet you’d be stunning in a corset. Did Janey say what sort of outfit Rosie wore that night?”

“I’d look like a beached whale right now. And I don’t know what Rosie was wearing. I don’t think we asked that.”

“Fetish gear would be the norm at Club Wicked, as I’m sure you know, but she appears to be wearing jeans in these images. You can see them, under the coat, from the knee down.”

“Let me check something.” Casey brings up an image of Club Wicked, and we watch the two young women make their way up through the queue to the doors. “See there? No bag, so she didn’t bring a change of clothes. And the flat shoes.”

“And she allowed herself just the right amount of time to walk to the station, having already bought her ticket in advance. She arrived at Club Wicked prepared to make a break for it.”

Casey turns from the screen to regard me. “So, it’s a runaway situation. What will you tell her father?”

“The truth. He needs to know. Better still, he should see these images for himself. Would that be possible?”

“If Ethan agrees to let him come here. He’s not keen on visitors.”

“So I gather.”

“I might be able to copy some of the footage, but a lot is encrypted. I have the gear to unscramble it, but most wouldn’t. I’ll talk to Ethan, explain why Mr Darke needs to come over. I can— Oh!”

She jerks in her seat, her hand splayed over her rounded belly.

I'm normally hard to rattle, but I know a sudden moment of panic. "What's wrong? Do you need a doctor?"

She grins at me and shakes her head. "It's just baby Roisin making her presence felt. She started moving a few weeks ago."

Holy fuck!

I can only gape in wonder. Am I imagining it, or did I just see Casey's abdomen ripple?

Casey grimaces and strokes her swollen belly in a gentle clockwise motion. "That was a hard kick, but she'll settle down soon. Probably. Sometimes she goes on for hours. In the night, mostly."

"Do you need to take break? Lie down?"

"No. It's perfectly normal. Megan said to expect it."

I remember Megan, the brisk, no-nonsense medic who offered to strap up my ribs for me. I might even let her, now that my more urgent business is in hand.

"It's not because of me, is it? Turning up like this?" Fuck, I should have thought before charging up the stairs and bursting in on her.

"No, I... ouch! You know, I think I might take a breather. I have a couch over there."

She starts to get up, so I reach for her.

"Let me help."

"Really, I can manage."

She might be able to, but I'm not at all sure I can. Genuinely surprised by the surge of emotion coursing through me, I wrap my arm round her waist and support her as she shuffles across the floor, then sinks onto the couch. There's a pillow at one end, and a blanket draped over the back. She leans back, drags the blanket over herself, and sighs.

“That’s better. I’ll just stay here for a bit.”

I perch on the edge of the couch, by her feet, and look around. I spot the tiny kitchenette in the corner. “Cosy setup. Do you actually eat and sleep in here?”

“Occasionally, when I’m really busy and lose track of time.” She stretches like a contented cat and closes her eyes. “You know, I might have a little nap. I do get tired easily these days.”

“Go ahead.”

“If you see anyone downstairs, could you ask for a tray to be brought up later? I don’t feel like going all the way down for my dinner. Or I could just phone the kitchen...”

“I’ll see to it.” I pause, then, “Roisin? That’s a pretty name.”

“I had a doll called Roisin when I was young. For a while, I wished it was my name. But it’s still my favourite.”

“Mine, too. Now.” Another thought occurs to me. “Do you mind if I touch you?”

“Touch me? You already did that, and more.”

“Your belly. I’d like to feel her kicking, if that’s all right with you.”

“Are you sure?”

I nod. “Please.”

“My brothers are too squeamish. Big, tough gangsters.” She snorts in derision. “They’ll love her when she arrives, but right now they seem to think she’s some sort of alien. Or breakable.”

“May I?” I reach for the blanket.

“I suppose so.”

She lies still while I slide my palm across her distended abdomen. At first, I feel nothing, just the hardness of her pregnant belly. Then, out of nowhere, there’s a fluttering, like butterflies beneath my fingertips.

I meet her gaze and can't contain my stupid grin. "This is beyond amazing."

She smiles back. "I know."

The kick, when it comes, takes us both by surprise. One determined little foot lurches out. Casey's belly bulges, then seems to shift to one side.

"I think she's turning over,' Casey mutters. "See, her foot was at my right side, and now her bum's there."

I study the undulating flesh and wonder if she might be right. Something's going on down there, certainly. Is my daughter going to be a footballer? Or a dancer? Maybe both.

The wriggling and writhing continues for several minutes. Casey seems to be dozing off, though I can't start to imagine how, with all this going on. But eventually the movements stop, and the soft, even breathing tells me Casey is asleep.

Time to go. I stand and pull the blanket back over the pair of them, then leave as quietly as I came in.

CHAPTER 7

C asey

I WAKE up to the growling of my stomach and the low whirring of hard drives. I stretch, then wince. My couch isn't the most comfortable place to sleep. It's time I invested in a new one, probably. I take a few moments to work the kinks out of my spine, then swing my legs over and settle my feet on the floor.

My nostrils are filled with the aroma of boeuf bourguignon, a favourite of mine and another of Mrs McRae's specialities. It's one of the few rich dishes I can bring myself to eat these days. My pregnancy has been relatively easy and uncomplicated, as far as I can make out. I'm no expert on these matters, but Megan assures me it's so. But I'm fed up of it now. I'm ready to meet my daughter and get my life back.

I want to be slim again. And mobile. I want to be able to get through a day without needing an afternoon nap. My brothers and the men who live here on the island with us intend to be kind, but they either treat me like a time bomb that could explode at any moment, or a fragile piece of porcelain. I just want everything to be normal again.

Or should that be, my new normal? With a baby and a husband?"

I give myself a mental shake. There will be no husband cluttering things up, though I might not be averse to seeing Jed from time to time. My hormones might be all over the place, but I can still appreciate a bit of eye candy.

He left while I was sleeping. I sense his absence, the chill of it, the emptiness, and that surprises me. He was an intruder, not welcome here.

Wasn't he?

Why, then, would I miss his presence? I don't need him. I don't need anyone. I love my own company, I value my solitude, my work. And that's enough. It has always been enough.

I ease myself upright, take a moment to get my balance, then totter off in search of the delicious-smelling food. My centre of gravity has shifted, I'm prone to stumbling these days so I need to be cautious. I've taken to clutching at handrails and feeling grateful when one of the men carries my laptop for me.

The meal is waiting for me on a tray, the plate covered by a metal lid. There's a pot of coffee, too, and a generous helping of tiramisu.

"Ye're eatin' fer two now, lass," Mrs McRae is fond of reminding me when she heaps my plate with food.

I'll be lucky if I'm not the size of a Transit van by the time I give birth. Still, that doesn't stop me lifting the lid, inhaling deeply, and stabbing at a succulent lump of beef with my fork.

Fifteen minutes later, I've almost finished the main course which included roast potatoes, tender stem broccoli, and baby sweetcorn as well as meat which melted in my mouth. The whole lot was drowning in a thick sauce bursting with flavour. I've also downed a cup of coffee, and I'm reaching for the pot to pour myself a refill when the door behind me opens.

"Nearly finished," I manage between mouthfuls. "Do you want to wait rather than trail all the way back up here?"

Janey will be looking to collect the empty plates, and she has enough to do without running up and down two flights of stairs looking after me.

"I'm in no rush. Take your time."

The masculine voice, laced with that delicious Irish lilt, takes me by surprise. I slop coffee onto my wrist.

“Shit!” I shake my hand and turn to scowl at him as though my clumsiness is his fault. “I thought you’d gone.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, *acushla*.” He saunters over to the chair he occupied earlier in the afternoon. “There’s still a force-nine gale out there.”

“What does that mean?” I mutter, pushing my empty plate aside and casting an admiring glance at my pudding.

“It means I’m still grounded.”

“No, idiot. That word you said...”

“*Acushla*? It’s an Irish Gaelic word. It means ‘darling’ or something of the sort.”

“I’m not your darling.” I scoop up a generous mouthful of tiramisu and spoon it into my mouth. “Did you forget something?”

“Ah, yes. Plenty, I daresay. Can you spare some of that?”

I wrap my arm around the dessert and brandish my spoon at him. “If you value your life, you’ll keep your distance. This stuff is precious, and I need to keep my strength up.”

He grins at me and raises his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. Good sleep?”

“Good enough.” I shovel in another mouthful of creamy loveliness. “What have you been doing?”

“Talking to your brother, mostly.”

I pause, my spoon halfway to my lips. “Oh?”

“About the footage we saw. He’s agreed to let Nathan come to Caraksay.”

I don’t try to conceal my surprise. “You must be persuasive.”

“I try.”

I shovel in the final few mouthfuls then scrape the plate clean. “Don’t waste your charm offensive on me. I’m

immune.”

“It worked before. At the Rothwell.”

“And see where it got me. That time was different. I was horny. It had been a while...”

He arches an eyebrow. “Whereas now, you’re getting plenty? Is that right?”

“That’s not what I said. And it’s none of your business how often I get laid.” *Jesus, where did that come from?*

He quirks his lip and chuckles. “I disagree. It’s most definitely my business as you’ll be my wife soon enough.”

“I will not.”

“Your brother gave his permission.”

“Yes, probably. But he’ll have also said it’s my choice.”

“A detail. You’ll choose wisely. Eventually.”

“I already did. I said ‘no’.”

He shrugs. “We can come back to that. I was wondering if you’d got any further with tracking young Rosie, but I guess not.”

“I was going to hack into the footage from the stations on the route to London, but I got waylaid by this beef stew and Mrs McRae’s tiramisu. Just give me a minute, then I’ll—”

“No rush. That stuff needs to be savoured. And you look tired.”

“I just woke up. You can leave me to get on with it, and I’ll give you a shout when I have anything.”

“Not tonight you won’t. It’s almost nine o’clock. You need to rest.”

“What am I? Cinderella? I often work late.” I swallow the last mouthful of my dessert and set my spoon aside. “You need to get out of my chair.”

He ignores my protest and instead leans back and fixes me with his level, dark-chocolate-coloured gaze. “What else do

you do? Apart from work, I mean? What do you do for fun, Casey?"

"I have plenty of fun." I stare at him, incredulous. What sort of a question is that?

"Recreation? Enjoyment? How do you like to relax and unwind?"

"I just..."

He raises an eyebrow. "Well?"

"It's none of your business."

Undeterred, he goes on. "When did you last get laid? Or even have an orgasm?"

I gape at him, my mouth hanging open. I shut it again.

"Thought so. It was at the Rothwell, right?"

"No!" I shake my head, as though that will make the lie more believable.

"Yes," he asserts. "Do you even have a vibrator?"

How am I supposed to respond to that? I settle for a fudge. "Not in here."

"Your room then?"

"Maybe," I splutter. "What does it have to do with you?"

"It's not healthy, and I care about your wellbeing."

"I don't need you to scratch my itch, if that's what you're offering."

"Well, I'd be happy to, but I was more meaning you should scratch it yourself. Take some time out, see to your own needs."

"I don't have needs."

"*Acushla*, we all have needs." His tone has softened. He holds my gaze, and try as I might, I can't break away. "I need you, and you need... more than this." He gestures to the wider room with a wave of his hand. "You can't live your life among machines."

“I’m happy here. I love what I do.”

“And you’re good at it. The best, I gather. No one expects you to give that up. It’s your talent, your superpower. You should use it. But there’s more to life. Our daughter, for example. She’s going to complicate everything.”

“I don’t regret anything.” Belatedly, I remember I should have pointed out that Roisin is not *our* daughter, she’s *mine*.

“Good,” he continues. “You shouldn’t. My old grandmother used to say we only regret the things we don’t do.” He offers me his hand. “Come with me, Casey.”

“Where to?”

“Your room. We’ll dust off that vibrator.”

“I don’t think there are any batteries in it.”

“Right. I’ll get batteries while you have a soak in the bath.”

“I told you earlier. I’m not about to jump into bed with you. Done that, got the T-shirt.” *And the rest...*

“And I told you, no fuckery. This is about you, not me.” He smiles, and my pussy contracts.

It occurs to me, finally, that my underwear is damp with all this intimate talk. Maybe he does have a point about my lack of sexual interest. Come to think of it, he must do. I took the batteries out of my vibrator to put into a torch when I lost my favourite pen down the back of the sofa, and I never put them back. How pathetic is that?

And why not take what’s offered? I’m not in the market for a husband, but no female with a pulse would kick Jed O’Neill out of bed. Maybe this will complicate things between us, but since he’s here, and he’s offering...

I take his hand and let him draw me up from the chair. “My apartment is the next door along.”

I LOWER myself into the foaming bathtub, sighing as the comforting heat of the water penetrates my tense muscles. I

can't recall when I last had a soak rather than a quick shower, but I won't leave it so long next time.

Jed ran the bath, and he added the peach and mango aromatic foamer. I'd forgotten I even had such a thing. The dense bubbles reach my chin. I can lower my head and blow a channel through them. It reminds me of being child, when my mother used to wash my hair in the bath.

I rest my head against the rim and listen to the sounds of Jed O'Neill moving about in the next room. I wonder if he'll find the torch and retrieve the batteries or go downstairs to ask for more.

Christ, I hope not. My brothers would be sure to know what he wanted them for...

I start to call out but stop myself. I'm a big girl now, I can do what I want. Ethan said so.

I close my eyes, which seems to be Roisin's cue to burst into life again. Maybe it's the heat of the water that disturbed her.

I lay both my hands on my abdomen. "Calm down, baby girl. We're supposed to be relaxing. It's good for us."

"I'm glad you're coming around to the idea."

I turn my head. Jed is lounging in the doorway. "Is she kicking again?"

"Just a bit."

He perches on the edge of the bath and trails his fingertips in the dwindling bubbles. "Do you need me to wash your back?"

I sink lower in a fruitless attempt to conceal my breasts under what remains of the foam. "I can manage."

"Okay." He starts to rise.

"But you could wash my hair for me. If you like, that is..." I can't think why I said that. A sudden rush of blood, obviously...

He nods and reaches for the shampoo.

His fingers are gentle but capable. He uses the shower attachment to run clean, unsoapy water through the tangles, then massages the shampoo in. It feels wonderful. I could almost be seven years old again.

Too soon, he turns on the shower once more to rinse out the suds, combing his fingers through the strands. But he isn't finished. He squirts more shampoo into his palm and begins all over again, more slowly this time. His touch is less businesslike, more a caress.

I sigh. "That feels nice."

"I wanted to do this, that first time. You have beautiful hair, *acushla*. I wanted to touch it, to take more time. But it all happened too fast, and suddenly you were gone."

I turn to peer up at him, surprised. "I never realised..."

He kisses the top of my head. "I know. But it's important that you understand. That's why I'm telling you now,"

Understand what? I'm silent. Confused. Emotional scenes were never my thing, too messy. Unpredictable. That's one of the reasons I love my tech. You know where you are with an iPad Air. For want of something better, I mumble, "Oh."

"Conditioner?" He starts the second rinse.

"Oh, yes, please."

We sit in a weird sort of silence as he completes the task. I wouldn't call it comfortable, exactly. More... expectant.

"My water's going cold," I say, eventually.

"Ready to get out? Your vibrator awaits."

"Where did you get the batteries from?"

"Never mind the details." He stands and holds out a towel, ready to wrap me in it. "Can you manage?"

I'm about to tell him I can, then realise I probably can't. I'm not used to this new shape of mine. My legs don't always do what I want, and my core strength is crap right now. "If you could just..."

He drops the towel and offers me both his hands. I take them and let him help me to my feet.

“Did I tell you already how beautiful you are?” he murmurs.

“You don’t have to say that.” I know he’s just being polite. I look like a barrage balloon.

“No, but it’s what I think so I might as well tell you.” He picks up the towel again and drapes it around my shoulders. “Hold on.”

I yelp when he slides his arm behind my knees and lifts me out of the water, then he turns to amble back into my bedroom.

“Put me down,” I protest. “I’m not an invalid.”

He does put me down, but not until he reaches the bed. He places me gently on the duvet, next to my ready-for-action but sorely neglected sex toy. It’s a wand type, with a bulbous rubberised head. Very effective, I seem to remember

“Do you want me to stay?” He stands over me, arms folded.

“Stay?” I echo.

“While you do the business. Better still, do you want me to help?”

“You’re very direct,” I complain. “It’s not as though I’ve never...”

“You’re out of practice. You might fumble, and that would be a pity.” He picks up the wand. “You know, you can get rechargeable ones these days. You need never run out of batteries again.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

“You should. Shove up.”

“What?”

He settles himself next to me on the mattress, then picks me up again, this time to arrange me with my back to him, settled between his thighs. “Spread your legs, *acushla*.”

“You can’t just—”

“Lean back, close your eyes, and open your legs,” he commands softly. “Let me do this for you.”

Oh Jesus...

I lean back and close my eyes.

Mary, Joseph, and the fucking donkey...

I spread my legs wide.

There’s a soft glug when he squirts the lube on. I would have totally forgotten that bit. He leans around me to swipe his palm through my folds. It comes away damp.

Mortified, I pray he won’t mention that.

He uses his fingertips to gently ease the hood back from my clit, then strokes the tip with the pad of his forefinger.

I abandon any further attempt at indifference and let out a moan.

Christ, it really has been too long. Far, far too long...

His breath tickles my ear when he chuckles. I have the uneasy feeling suddenly that I may have said that out loud.

“How do you like this?” he murmurs. “Hard or soft?”

“I don’t know...”

“Well, we’ll find out, then.”

He rolls the head of the wand across my clit, from left to right.

My entire body jerks in an involuntary shock. I gasp.

“Too intense?”

I shake my head. “No. It was just... unexpected.”

He rolls it again, more slowly this time, sending a rush of sensation straight to my core. I arch in appreciation.

“Nice?” he enquires.

“Yes,” I breathe. “Nice.”

He continues, angling the toy this way and that. Each new position creates its own wave of delight, shifting the focus in ways which are both subtle and utterly exhilarating. I was never this good on my own.

My arousal soars. My orgasm is rushing to engulf me, but it's too soon, too fast. I want more.

"Wait," I pant. "Not so quickly."

"We have all night," he whispers. "Just relax and enjoy."

"But I... Oh! Ooooh..." My pussy convulses. My whole body stiffens for long, timeless moments, then my muscles dissolve. Waves of sensation rush from my core to my fingers and toes. The climax is unstoppable, relentless. It overwhelms me, shatters me.

It's wonderful, awesome, beyond superb, leaving my mouth dry and my bones liquid. All too soon, I'm drifting back to reality.

I straighten my legs, but Jed's low voice stops me. "Whoa, *mo cara*. We're not done yet."

"Not done? But I came."

"I know. It was beautiful, so let's do it again."

"I can't. I never manage more than once."

"*Acushla*, you've not been doing it right. Spread for me."

I do as he says, if only to prove my point.

And I fail miserably. Jed O'Neill and his clever vibrating wand, ably assisted by his gentle fingers, manages to coax four more mind-blowing orgasms from me before he's finally satisfied. Or I am and can go no further.

He sets the toy aside and draws me up the bed to cradle me in his arms. It feels weird to snuggle like this, but sort of natural, too. I rest against him, limp as a dishrag and just as wrung out.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

“Good, “I reply. It’s the understatement of the century, but my postcoital vocabulary is sparse to say the least. I’ve never felt better, more powerful, more alive. I’d convinced myself I was fine before, and maybe I was, on my terms, but this is something quite different. This was soul-deep.

I’ve decided that sex with Jed O’Neill is on another level entirely, transcending the physical. And he didn’t even fuck me this time.

CHAPTER 8

J ed

I WAKE, momentarily disorientated. The warmth and softness of Casey's naked body slowly penetrates my consciousness. She's snuggled up close into my side, one slim leg slung across my thighs. Thin sunlight permeates the room, so it must be morning, and I guess that's what woke me.

A soft thump just below my ribcage disabuses me of that notion.

Ah, Roisin. You don't like to be left out, do you, a pháirtín.

I remain motionless, intensely conscious of the tiny fluttering movements. It's a moment just between the two of us, and I savour it until Casey finally rolls over and my brief contact with my baby daughter is severed.

Awake now, I decide that coffee is needed. Fast.

I ease myself from the bed, careful not to disturb Casey. She needs her sleep. I'm convinced she doesn't get nearly enough of it. The girl may be brilliant, but she's a workaholic and needs to slow down. I said as much to Ethan when we spoke yesterday. He wished me luck with that.

He didn't know about the vibrator, though. My secret weapon.

I pick it up from the carpet beside the bed and carry it through to the bathroom to wash it. While I'm in there, I pull

out the plug to empty the bath from last night and tidy up the toiletries. Then I head off looking for the kettle.

Halfway through the bedroom, I pause when there's a gentle knock at the door.

Casey doesn't stir, and whoever is out there knocks again. A female voice calls out, "Casey? Are you up?"

I find the jeans I discarded last night when I decided to climb into bed beside Casey and tug them on, but don't bother to fasten the button. Barefoot, I pad to the door and open it.

Cristina Bival-Savage peers up at me in astonishment. "Oh," she stutters. "You're here." She manages to stifle her surprise. "I came to see Casey."

"She's still sleeping."

"Is she... is she all right?"

"Seems to be."

The Savage queen stiffens, gathering her wits. "Can I see for myself?" Which translates roughly as 'I don't believe you. What have you done to her?'

I shrug. "If you like. Try not to disturb her, though. She's very tired."

Cristina tilts her chin up and bestows a haughty stare on me, then shoves past me to enter the apartment. She marches to the bedroom door which is still ajar and peeps inside. "Casey?"

I grimace. What did I say about not waking her?

Too late. Casey opens her eyes, blinks, then shoves herself up on one elbow. "Is something wrong?"

"I just..." Cristina has the grace to flush. "I was worried about you."

Casey shoves back a handful of her tangled mane. "Why?"

Now Cristina does send a meaningful glance my way. "Ethan told me that you and...Mr O'Neill had talked. I wondered if you might be upset. Or... or..."

If I'm being objective, I don't suppose the concern is misplaced, exactly. This is a family that looks out for its own, and Casey had apparently made her feelings regarding me clear. Even so, I bristle.

"As you can see, Ms Savage, there's no need to be worried."

She glances in Casey's direction, seeking confirmation. Casey remains silent.

Cristina's response is a less than elegant snort. "I shall leave you to it, then. There's breakfast in the kitchen, if either of you want it."

I incline my head in thanks, then stroll beside her to the door. She pauses to hurl one final glare at me.

"For what it's worth, I think she may love you. My husband thinks so, too. I just hope you deserve it." She spins on her elegant heel and leaves me to stare after her.

Well, holy fuck.

WHEN I RETURN to the bedroom, two mugs of coffee in my hands, Casey is at the window. She's pulled on a loose T-shirt which reaches as far as her mid-thighs. Her pregnant body silhouetted in the morning light is a glorious sight.

She turns to me and takes the coffee with a murmured 'thank you'.

"The weather's cleared," she announces.

"I know." Rick, my chopper pilot, called first thing to tell me conditions were fine for flying again. "I have to leave soon."

"I see." She takes a sip and grimaces. "This is strong."

"More milk?"

She shakes her head and perches on the foot of her bed. "You stayed. All night."

"Yes."

“Cristina’s sure to tell Ethan.”

I shrug. I daresay he’s heard worse news.

“When are you leaving?”

“Soon.” I’m enjoying Casey’s company, and that of little Roisin, too, oddly. But I have work to do, matters that need my attention. My organisation won’t run itself. “I’m expected back in Dublin by lunchtime.” At one stage I had hoped she might come with me, but that was before I learned she was seven months pregnant.

“Will you be back?”

“Do you want me to be?” I’ve no intention whatsoever of staying away, but it would be good to know what she thinks.

“I don’t know. You confuse me. And you’re a distraction.”

Good answers, all things considered. And honest.

“You need distracting,” I reply. “Often.”

She flushes but can’t hide her smile. “I enjoyed what we did.”

“Me, too.”

“Both times.”

“Yes.”

“Before you go, do you think we might have time to...?”

“Ms Savage, are you trying to take advantage of me?”

“Well, you do have your uses.”

I grin. “If you feel a sudden and pressing need to bounce up and down on my cock, I’m at your disposal, madam.”

“Oh God...” She flushes to the roots of her tangled hair.

I remove the coffee mug from her limp fingers and place it on the windowsill. “Come back to bed.”

She follows me happily enough and reaches for my jeans as soon as she’s scrambled back onto the mattress. “I want to touch you.”

Seems fair enough. I lie on my back while she slides my zipper the rest of the way down, then inserts her hand beneath the denim. Her fingers close around my shaft.

“Do you like this?” Her tone is uncertain, hesitant.

“Fuck, yes.”

“Take your jeans off. I want to see you.”

“Okay. And you can lose the T-shirt.”

I shove the denim down my legs then kick it away. She hasn't removed the T-shirt, and I'm pretty certain I know why. She's hinted at it often enough, her embarrassment at her pregnant body shape. I opt to leave it for now and concentrate on what I'm apparently good at. Distraction.

She reaches for my cock again, the tip of her tongue gliding across her lower lip. I quell the urge to pull her on top of me. Instead, I lie still and let her explore.

“You're beautiful,” she whispers. “I never thought... I mean...”

“So are you.”

She doesn't reply, just shakes her head and runs her fingers up and down my cock. Droplets appear around the crown, and she smears them with her thumb. I abandon my attempt to appear unmoved and let out a groan.

She brings her fingers to her mouth and licks them. “Salty,” she says, sounding surprised.

“Now you,” I reply. “Taste yourself.”

I sense inexperience, and perhaps a touch of shyness. But not inhibition, and in any case, rampant curiosity will always win out with Casey Savage. I've learned that much about her by now. I don't recall ever meeting anyone with such a thirst for discovery. She continues to stroke my cock, while with her other hand she explores her own folds.

I damn near explode there and then when she licks her fingers, her gaze locked on mine. Anything she might lack in

experience or technique is more than made up for in raw instinct.

“It’s not the same,” she observes.

I roll onto my side. “My turn. Lie back and spread for me.”

Her eyes widen, but she does as I say. She might have expected me to use my fingers, as she did. I have other ideas. I rest on my elbows, between her spread thighs, and draw the flat of my tongue along the length of her slit.

“Jesus,” she gasps.

I do it again.

She moans. Her hand drops from my cock, and she grasps a fistful of the duvet, arching against the mattress.

I press my advantage, using my thumbs to part her pussy lips so I can spear my tongue right inside her. Casey writhes and wriggles, threading her fingers in my hair and holding me close as though she thinks I might change my mind and stop.

I use one hand to rub her clit, and the other to raise the hem of her T-shirt until her entire abdomen is exposed. She makes no protest, so I reach further to cup her breast.

Her luscious tits, swollen with pregnancy, are fuller than when we first met, that incredible encounter in the hospital cafe. She winces when I squeeze her lower curves.

“Tender?”

“Mmm,” she whispers. “A bit.”

“Tell me if I hurt you.”

“Not you as well. I won’t break.”

I ignore her indignation. “Tell me,” I repeat, more firmly.

“Okay. Just... don’t stop what you were doing.”

Fair enough. I return to my task, scraping my teeth against her plump clit then flicking it with my tongue.

Casey is panting, moaning, rolling her hips and thrusting against me. She’s close, I know it. I prefer to draw matters out a little, let both of us savour the moment for longer. Each time

I sense she's on the brink, I draw back, slow down, move to nuzzle somewhere less sensitive.

"Jed," she moans, her voice ragged with lust. "Please..."

"Please what? What do you want, *acushla*?"

"I want you to fuck me. I need you..."

I roll onto my back again and reach for her. I pick her up and set her down on top of me, her legs straddling my waist.

"Okay. Take what you want."

"I... I don't know..."

"Like this." I raise her a few inches, then fist my cock to position it at her entrance. "Now, sink down. Take your time."

Her lips are parted, her breathing uneven. She impales herself on me, aching slow, an inch at a time.

"Oh," she gasps as she finally settles, my cock buried balls-deep inside her. "Oh."

I'm barely any more articulate. She's tight, hot, wrapped around me, squeezing my entire length in her snug channel. The Lord could take me now and I'd die a happy man.

I thrust, just short, jerky movements at first. She catches on fast and takes over, setting her own rhythm, finding her own pace. I leave her to it, let her control what happens next. My hands are on her waist, supporting her weight each time she lifts herself.

My thumbs find the hem of her shirt again, and I slide it a little further up with each smooth stroke. She's so absorbed in her task, her eyes screwed up shut and her brow furrowed in concentration, that she's oblivious to what I'm doing. She doesn't even react when I draw the garment right over her head and drop it on the floor.

I sit up and take one turgid peak between my lips. She gasps. Her eyes fly open, but she's smiling. I suck gently and curl my tongue around her nipple, first the left, then the right.

She flings her arms around my shoulders for balance and ratchets up the pace. She's squeezing her inner muscles around

me, making herself even tighter. I wouldn't have thought it possible, but she does it. Her hips are gyrating, creating more friction, more heat.

“Oh God,” she rasps. “Jed, I need to come. I can't...”

“Come on my cock, *acushla*.”

She does, with a scream torn from somewhere below her navel. Her pussy convulses around me. I share every wondrous ripple and wave of her pleasure moments before my own erupts.

After, still joined, we lie on the bed, panting, our heartbeats in synch. Casey is the first to speak.

“How soon do you have to leave?”

I should have been on my way already but I don't say that. “Later, there's no rush. I suppose we missed breakfast.”

“I don't usually bother anyway, but I can fix you something up here.”

I doubt that. I already saw the state of her tiny kitchenette. Her fridge contains half a pint of milk, three dozen cans of cola, and an apple. Thank goodness the cook sends her meals up.

“Let's go down. I'll sweet talk your Mrs McRae. And I need to see Ethan before I leave.”

“Do I have time for a shower?”

“Of course.” I roll away, separating our bodies. “Fancy sharing?”

WE ARRIVE in the huge castle kitchen forty minutes later, our hair damp and our bodies even more sated. Far from having missed breakfast, the entire household seems to be assembled and working their way through mountains of toast, eggs, bacon, coffee, and croissants. The plates of food on the massive oak table empty as soon as they're filled.

Two boys aged around ten or eleven are seated at the table, squabbling over which cereals are best. A woman I've not

seen before is feeding a baby in a highchair, yoghurt by the looks of it. It's a messy business.

Aaron Savage helps Mrs McRae to transfer sausages from pan to the table. I'm pleased to note his swollen nose, and that reminds me that my ribs still ache like a bitch.

The rest of the crowd are mostly on their feet, chatting and chewing. Aaron's wife, Beth, I think, laughs at some remark made by Cristina, then tells the boys to finish up and go find their school things. The noise level drops fractionally when they clatter from the room.

"What'll ye be 'avin', lass? Sir?" The cook shoots us a grin from behind the huge stove set in the middle of the room. "There's bacon, an' sausages. Black puddin', too."

"I'll have some scrambled eggs if you have some," Casey replies. "What about you, Jed?"

"A bacon sandwich?" I reply hopefully.

"Ye just sit yersel' down, lad. I shall see tae that."

So much for formality. What happened to 'sir'?

Mrs McRae carves a doorstep of bread, slaps butter on it, piles on more bacon than I could normally eat in a week, folds it in two, and passes it to me on a plate. "There ye go. Cannae have ye leavin' on an empty stomach, can we?"

There's little chance of that happening. I thank her and bite into the crusty bread, still warm from the oven. "Jesus, ma'am, this is wonderful."

The cook beams but mutters something about taking the Lord's name in vain.

I make a mental note not to swear around her and continue to tuck in.

Over the next few minutes, the crowd drifts off. The men disappear to whatever keeps them busy all day. Aaron and Beth go off in search of the boys, along with the woman who was feeding the baby. From the conversation swirling about, I gather she's a pilot and is needed for the school run to the mainland.

I'm surprised to find myself a little overwhelmed at this frantic domesticity. Even when my parents and brother were alive, our home was never so busy, so chatty, so filled with everyday life. The Savages seem to enjoy a complete lack of formality here on their private island, and no one thinks it odd. I can't recall ever seeing my father clear dirty dishes from the table, even less grab a flannel to wipe a sticky baby's face, but Ethan does all of that while Mrs McRae sits with a cup of tea.

He has the baby bouncing on his lap when he turns to me. "Do you have a few minutes before you go?"

"I do. I wanted to talk to you."

"My office, then." He gets to his feet, the baby in his arms. He bends to kiss his wife. "Seb's with me. Can you come up and get him when you're done here?"

"Of course." She kisses the baby and tells him to be good.

The significance is not lost on me. Ethan is clearly a hands-on father, but it's more than that. The fact that he'll let me close to his family, his children, is a sign of trust and not one made lightly.

IN THE OFFICE, the scene of yesterday's altercation, I note that some serious cleaning up has been done. The expensive Kashmir rug that had occupied pride of place in the centre of the room is gone, presumably to have the bloodstains professionally removed.

Ethan sets his son down on the carpet then retrieves a colourful plastic lorry from behind his desk. The little boy grabs it and gets set to at once, pressing buttons to light it up and play tunes. Satisfied that the child is happy, Ethan turns to me.

"Have a seat, Jed."

I make myself comfortable.

"I can see you and my sister are on speaking terms now."

"We are."

“And you slept together.”

“That’s right.”

“Do I need to buy a new suit? And my wife will certainly expect new shoes if there’s to be a wedding.”

“It’s a work in progress,” I reply.

He lets the matter drop there. “When are you returning to America?”

“In a couple of weeks, or at least that was my plan.” I’d hoped to be accompanied by my new bride, which would have put an end to Maria Sorza’s machinations. “I might delay a while longer.”

“Because of Casey, and the baby?”

“I want to be at the birth.” I haven’t said as much to Casey yet, but I’m hopeful.

“New York is only a few hours away,” he counters. “You could get back here if you had to.”

“She might not even want me there.”

“She will, even if she doesn’t realise that yet. When the time comes, I’ll let you know.”

“What do you want in return?”

He pauses to watch his son playing on the floor by his feet. “Nothing,” he says. “I told you already, I don’t bargain with my family. You should be there, it’s that simple. I’ll do what I can to make that happen. For Casey, and my niece.”

“Roisin.” I smile, anticipating the day I’ll get to meet her properly.

“Is that her name?” Ethan asks. “I didn’t know.”

“Casey chose it already. I like to think she decided on an Irish name on purpose.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. So, about your return to the States. I need an introduction to the leader of the New York Dragons.”

Now, this is from left field. I furrow my brow and ask the obvious question. “Why?”

“He has property of mine.”

“Those guns you lost?” I know full well he isn’t going to let this matter drop.

“They were stolen,” he corrects me. “I mean to find out who took them.”

“It wasn’t the Dragons, I’m pretty sure of that. Their reach isn’t international.”

“Maybe not, but I want to know where they acquired my merchandise from.”

“Psycho, surely.” I even helped out by delivering the small-time arms dealer to Ethan’s men who brought him back across the Atlantic for interrogation.

Ethan shakes his head. “That’s what he said, but I’m not buying it. That implies he managed to shift eighteen machine guns across the ocean, in the middle of the pandemic when air travel was shut down, the ports closed. Psycho didn’t have that sort of clout.”

“Didn’t? So, he’s dead, then. Well, that’s a pity. I’ll need to find somewhere else to do my shopping, and you can’t go back and ask him again.”

“Which is why I want to speak to the New York Dragons. I have some names to follow up.”

“Names?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“I fucking do...”

He casts a sharp glance at his baby son. “Not around him.”

“Fair enough. I’m sorry. But if you want my help, I need to know the score. I want to know just what I’m getting into.”

He considers my words for a few moments, then nods. “Okay. Here’s what I have.” He holds up one finger. “First, I intend to kill the men who robbed my warehouse. Three are

already dead, including Psycho, but that leaves two to deal with. I'm about making examples."

I can get behind that. "Go on."

"One of them is apparently a big Russian thug, with a lot of tattoos."

"Not much of a description."

"Agreed, but it's all I have for now. The other has a name, Marlon something, but goes by Brando."

Now here I can help him. "That'll be Marlon Logan. His father and older brother worked for any family until about fifteen years ago. They were traitors, sold us out to a rival outfit, so my father had them executed. Marlon was younger, about the same age as me at the time, early teens. He wasn't directly involved, so my father let him live. His mother was Eastern European and took him home to Leningrad or wherever. I heard he was active again, but as long as he stays out of my way, I've decided to let him live."

"Do you know where I can find him?"

I shake my head. "Not me. But from what I've seen of her work, I bet Casey could track him down for you."

I can tell by his grim smile that he agrees.

"Is that the lot?"

"No. There's one more name. The Widow. Psycho coughed her up as well, before he died. I think she might be Russian, a Bratva queen of some sort."

"Can Casey not find anything on her?"

"No. She seems to be invisible. No digital trace at all."

"Okay. That's unusual."

"Agreed, but there you have it. And, last but not least, the New York Dragons. Which is where we came in."

"Their president is one Salvatore Martelli, and he's a seriously mad bastard..."

Ethan scowls and sends a meaningful glance in his little boy's direction.

“Sorry. But you need to know that Martelli's violent, ruthless, greedy. And totally not to be trusted.”

“Noted. How big is their gang?”

“A couple of hundred or so, and most of them as dim-witted as Martelli. The best way to get information out of them is to pay for it, so bring plenty of spare cash. And I mean, plenty.”

“You'll put me in touch with Martelli, then?”

“If you insist, but make sure you go well protected. Choose carefully about where to meet and take a lot of men. Be ready for it to all kick off. They're a volatile bunch. They once set a traffic officer alight when he tried to issue a ticket on one of their bikes. Not nice men, Ethan.”

“Well, neither am I.”

I get to my feet. “I need to be off. I'll be in touch when I know my plans for returning to New York.”

“Do that. There's no rush, Martelli will keep.” He offers me his hand.

I shake it. “Take care of Casey for me.”

“Always.”

CHAPTER 9

C asey

JED HAS BEEN BACK HERE TWICE since that first visit. Each time he spends an hour or two closeted with my brothers, and the rest with me. Mrs McRae no longer prepares a room for him. It's assumed he'll share mine, and I find that suits me just fine.

The first visit, he was accompanied by his friend, Nathan Darke. I didn't expect to like the man, not after the bother he caused us when his daughter disappeared, but I was wrong. Aged around forty, he's attractive, intelligent, and astute. I showed him the footage, and he was able to see why we were so convinced she left voluntarily. That didn't soften the blow especially, but I suppose coming to terms with the fact that his daughter is a runaway is less traumatic than if she had been abducted.

By the time Nathan arrived on a fast launch from the mainland, I'd tracked Rosie to Kings Cross station in London but lost her as soon as she emerged from the concourse and headed off on foot along Euston Road. The city was quieter than usual as it was early in the morning when the train from Stirling got in, but still she managed to lose herself and hasn't surfaced since. I have various searches set up and constantly running, so sooner or later there will probably be something, but for now the trail has gone cold.

Nathan thanked me for my work and left after a couple of hours.

The second visit was for a council-of-war with my brothers but included me as I've been working on tracing Marlon Logan. He wasn't easy to find as he keeps changing his last name and creating new identities for himself. I've discovered at least five separate passports, drivers' licences, and so far over a dozen bank accounts.

But everyone has their Achilles heel, and Marlon's is football. He holds a season ticket for Manchester United, and I gather these are as precious as gold dust. He inherited his from his father and has hung on to it for years, in his original name, and hardly ever misses a home match. All I have to do is hack into their CCTV to check when he arrives at Old Trafford, then cross-match with whatever credit card he uses in the shop or food outlets.

And now, having established some regularity in his movements, the plan is to pick Marlon up when he leaves the ground after a match. Manchester United are playing at home in a few days' time, and I gather there will soon be a season ticket up for sale. It won't take long to shift. There's a waiting list of a hundred and twenty thousand.

Jed accepted my invitation to spend Christmas on Caraksay. I didn't expect him to, but he agreed. He even asked me what presents he should bring for Tomasz and Jacob, and for little Seb.

I haul myself to my feet in readiness to make my way down to the courtyard to meet the helicopter. With just two months to go, I find myself reduced to an ungainly waddle, and it seems to take a massive effort to get anywhere. By the time I totter out onto the front steps, the sound of the rotors can be heard through the low cloud.

It's bitterly cold. Not unusual for December in the Outer Hebrides, but I feel it particularly since I stopped being able to fasten my coat up. Aaron appears beside me and flings his sheepskin jacket around my shoulders.

"You shouldn't be out here," he fusses.

"I'm fine." Even so, I pull the fleecy coat tightly around me. "Look, there's the chopper."

“So it is. You wait there.”

He jogs down the steps and waits for the helicopter to land, then grabs the holdall that Jed flings to him.

A moment later, Jed O’Neill hops down onto the granite flagstones. He greets Aaron warmly enough, their scuffle of a few weeks ago seemingly consigned to history now. Then he looks up at me and smiles.

All thoughts of chilly December days evaporate. I smile back and take a step toward him. He’s too fast. Jed takes the steps two at a time, then wraps me in a hug.

“I missed you, *acushla*,” he mutters into my hair. “Both of you.”

“We missed you, too,” I reply, though my words are muffled by his thick quilted jacket.

“Ready to marry me yet?” he enquires in a bland tone.

“I need my dinner first, then I might think about it.”

We go indoors, Aaron bringing up the rear along with the pilot.

“Ethan’s in his office,” Aaron tells Jed once the door is closed behind us. “He wants a word.” He tosses Jed’s holdall to Tony, one of my brother’s men. “Could you take this upstairs, then join us?”

“Sure.” Tony shoulders the bag and sets off up the main stairs while the rest of us dump our coats on a chair before following him up.

Ethan is pouring coffee when we troop into his domain. He glances up at Jed. “I saw you arriving. Good trip?”

“Good enough.” Jed takes the cup that’s offered and sits.

Ethan pours three more, for himself and Aaron, and Tony when he arrives. He tosses me a can of cola.

“So,” Ethan begins. “Marlon.”

“I take it you located him, then?” Jed crosses one ankle over his denim-clad knee.

Whilst both my brothers favour formal business suits when they're working, even at home, I've never seen Jed other than casually dressed. It doesn't detract from his air of confidence and authority one jot.

"Casey did," Ethan replies. "It seems he's a fan of the beautiful game."

"A man of some discernment, then, despite all other appearances."

"We're fairly certain he'll be at Old Trafford on the twenty-ninth," Ethan continues. "His usual habit is to hop in a taxi when he leaves the ground and head for the station. We've managed to acquire some mug shots," he pushes a bundle of photographs across the low coffee table, "and we believe he's currently living in Dumfries."

Jed picks up the photographs and flicks through. "Yes, that's him. Fifteen or so years older than when I last saw him, but it's him all right. Do you need me for this?"

"No," Ethan replies. "Not directly. But it would be good to know the history. What did his father and brother do to piss your father off?"

"Embezzling money. He was taking extra backhanders from business owners we had in our protection scheme. A sort of two for you, one for me arrangement. It all unravelled when a restaurant owner went bust, and he said it was because we took too much of his profits from him. My father was never careless like that and looked into it a bit further."

"They admitted to it?"

"As far as I know. I didn't do the interrogation."

"Most people will admit to anything, once they've lost a finger or two."

"True, but such persuasion works more often than not. And there was other evidence. The word of the various business owners they'd been leaning on, for example. The Logans were greedy, thieving bastards, no doubt about it. And our Marlon is no different by the sound of it."

Ethan nods. “How long can you stay?”

“Until the day after Boxing Day, maybe.”

“That’s only a couple of days,” I protest.

He reaches for my hand. “I have responsibilities in Ireland, *acushla*, but there’s nothing to stop you coming back with me.”

“Yeah, right.” I gesture to my whale-like abdomen.

“We have clinics in Dublin. Midwives, too. Good ones.”

I’m tempted. A change of scene would be good, and the prospect of spending more time with Jed is intoxicating. He’s like a drug. I’m finding that I need my fix, or withdrawal sets in. In my weaker moments, I let myself imagine I might be just a little bit in love with him, or maybe it’s simply that I appreciate good sex. But better sense prevails, along with a newfound dose of maternal responsibility. This is not just about me.

I shake my head. My baby is to be born in a couple of months, and my hormones are all over the place. Megan said so. Now is not the time to make big, life-changing decisions.

What am I thinking? It’s a trip to Ireland, I remind myself. A couple of hours in a helicopter. Jed lives in Dublin, not on the moon.

“I want her to be born here,” I insist, as much to convince myself as anyone else.

Jed kisses my forehead. “Okay. But I’m not going to stop asking.”

No one actually mentions the obvious flaw in my logic. Roisin won’t come into the world here, on Caraksay. She’ll take her first breaths in the Rothwell Clinic, an hour away by chopper. Dublin isn’t much further. Even so, I’m determined to stick to my plan, for no better reason than it seems like the right thing to do.

CHRISTMAS PASSES IN A RAUCOUS BLUR, as always. For the last couple of years our numbers have been growing, including families and children. That changes things. We never used to bother with decorations really, but this year we have a huge Christmas tree which was ferried across from Oban, and glittery stuff hanging everywhere because Cristina and Beth insisted. Even old Isaac Pharoah, the captain of our yacht, *The Lydia*, has agreed to dress up as Santa.

Including Mrs McRae, Janey, and all the men who are stationed here, there are over thirty of us, and everyone assembles in the great hall for the Christmas meal.

Mrs McRae had help. Ethan brought a few cooks over from his restaurants, all freshly Covid-tested, naturally. They took the strain of the cooking for the most part, though Mrs McRae oversaw everything. The extra help were packed off on ferries yesterday, leaving just the island residents to celebrate together.

Jed is seated next to me at the table and chats easily with anyone within earshot. He even pulls crackers with the boys and is persuaded, briefly, to wear the paper hat that drops out onto his lap. He gives one of his prizes, a miniature pack of playing cards, to Tomasz, but the other prize, a huge gaudy yellow plastic ring, he offers to me.

“Try that for size.”

I manage to shove it onto the end of my little finger.

“Keep it anyway,” he says.

By early evening I’m exhausted. Jed helps me to make my way up to my apartment.

“If I have any more babies, I’m getting a lift installed,” I pant as we get close to the top of the second flight of stairs.

“I have a lift in my apartment block,” he assures me, “in Dublin and in New York.”

I decline to reply.

In my apartment, we agree to spend the evening watching movies. He wants a crime thriller, and I fancy some Marvel

superhero thing. I love those. We toss a coin, he wins, then lets me have my way.

By the time Ironman has finally vanquished all the bad guys, I'm almost asleep. Jed nudges me and tells me it's time for bed.

"I can't sleep. You haven't fucked me yet."

"*Acushla*, you were snoring."

"I was not!"

"Bed," he insists. "Do you want me to bring you anything to eat? Or drink?"

I rub my belly. "I'm still stuffed. I should never have let you persuade me to have that extra trifle."

"It would have been rude not to." He helps me off the sofa.

"I hate being so feeble," I complain.

"I wouldn't call this feeble, exactly."

"What then?"

"Awesome. Generous? Brave? Fucking wonderful?"

"Idiot." I begin my weary trudge to the bedroom. "I don't suppose you could magic up some hot chocolate, could you?"

"I bet Mrs McRae can. I'll be right back."

The next time I open my eyes, it's early on Boxing Day morning. My hot chocolate is clap cold, but I sit up and take a sip anyway. I grimace. Maybe it can be microwaved.

Beside me, Jed is still asleep. I take a moment to study his features, soft in the wintry morning light. He looks so peaceful when he's sleeping, a far cry from then intense, efficient, and occasionally ferocious Mob Boss.

I have never seen that side of him, though there have been glimpses when he was talking to Ethan. And naturally, being me, I've stalked him online. His business interests are very similar to ours, though where we specialise in financial crime and, of course, my crypto portfolio, he concentrates more on construction and development. But the O'Neills and Savages

are both heavily involved in running clubs, casinos, restaurants and bars, drugs, protection, and prostitution here and there where it oils the wheels of everything else. Ethan doesn't run the girls themselves. He rents out rooms to them and provides a level of security. They are self-employed. It seems to work.

I grew up a part of this life. I have no squeamish qualms of conscience about what we do and how we go about it. We have a code, obviously. The normal rules for our way of life. We stay under the official radar, don't involve civilians in our grimy underworld if it can be helped, and we try not to hurt innocent people. Ethan, Aaron, Jed, they operate according to the same code. Our men, too, our soldiers.

Loyalty is everything, and trust. Obedience and discipline are fundamental. Ethan is our leader, his word is law, despite his usually affable demeanour. We all know that. He rules over an organisation of hundreds scattered about Scotland and the north of England, and since his marriage to Cristina, the princess of the Moldovan Bratva, his reach is even further.

He's hard as nails, and deadly when the occasion calls for it. Aaron is the same, and I know Jed will be, too. Whether Mafia, Bratva, Mob, gang, firm, cartel, syndicate, or however groups such as ours are organised, the core qualities are the same. The ruthless succeed, and those who break the rules are eliminated.

This is my life. I've found my own odd little niche in it, and what I do makes a difference to my family. Had I been born into a different life, I might have been an academic, or, and here I shudder, a law-enforcer. What I don't know about online fraud isn't worth knowing, though I never feel tempted to dabble myself. I have no need to. I have all I need and more.

Or I thought I did. Before Jed O'Neill. Before Roisin.

Now, I have to find a place for him in my life, and for her. Is their place together? Are we a family, too, a unit within a unit?

I want him. I can admit that much to myself, whether it's for his company in my life or his cock in my pussy. I wasn't a virgin when we met, but no one else has ever compared. Never

will, I'm sure of that. Maybe I should marry him for that alone. There's a lot to be said for mind-blowing sex.

So, why don't I? What's stopping me from just saying 'yes'? Ethan would be delighted, though he'll never say so.

Habit perhaps? I'm used to my life as it is. I don't appreciate upheaval and change. I've been pretty much all over the world already and don't particularly yearn to travel a lot more, at least not physically. Digitally, I can go anywhere I want, and I do. I like my home and the people I share it with, for the most part. I'm content. Why change things?

Why not?

The inner voice niggles at me.

Is this all there is? All you actually want? And if it is, why so restless? So uncertain? So confused?

I slide from the bed. I need to get a grip.

What if you lost him? This is a dangerous world, a world where anything can happen. Violence, bloodshed, disaster lurk around every corner. What if he left here tomorrow and you never saw him again?

I come to a juddering halt halfway to the bathroom. I look back over my shoulder at the bed, the man sleeping in it, on his back, arms across the pillows.

I love him.

The realisation hits me like a mallet, I actually stagger under the weight of it, the awesome implications. He's Roisin's father. He loves her. He may love me, too, or could come to love me. I could have what Cristina has, and Beth. I've never put myself in the same category as them before, the category that includes happily married women with families, with husbands or lovers, a home, and a dog.

A dog? Where the fuck did that come from?

I expected to be on my own, alone in the crowd.

I may not marry Jed O'Neill. I may not need to. Or perhaps I will, if I feel like it.

But I *will* go with him when he leaves. Roisin *will* be born in Ireland. We *will* be a family.

He opens his eyes, as though the din of my thoughts has disturbed him. His mouth curls in a smile. “You’re up early.”

“Yes.”

“What time is it?” He reaches for his phone to check. “Shit. It’s not even six o’clock yet.”

“I’m hungry.”

“You might have to make do with toast, for now. I doubt if Mrs McRae will be about for hours, not after the way she was knocking back the sherry yesterday.”

“I don’t want toast. I want you.”

He rakes his fingers through his hair, then scratches his beard. “*Acushla?*”

“I want to fuck you. Then I want you to tell me all about our apartment in Dublin. And New York. And I want us to buy somewhere quiet, in the country, by the sea, with a garden for Roisin. And the dog.”

“We don’t have a dog.”

“We need one. A dachshund. Oh, and a husky, too.”

“That’s two dogs, but I daresay we can manage all that.”

“I’m not sure I want to get married, but I do want to be with you.”

“Good enough.” His expression becomes thoughtful. “That’s quite a to-do list you have there.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

“Best get started then.” He flings back the duvet. “Get back into bed.”

CHAPTER 10

J ed

CASEY SCRAMBLES BACK onto the mattress beside me, then positions herself on all fours. As her pregnancy has advanced, she's found this the most comfortable position for making love, and I can't say I blame her. It's perfect.

I admire her lush, upturned buttocks for several moments. "Christ, what did I do to deserve you, *mo cara*?"

"You fixed the cola machine," she mutters. "So, you're a hero, but don't milk it."

I palm her buttock with my right hand and use my left to fist my cock. I'm already hard, the usual morning wood. A couple of strokes bring me to rock-solid readiness.

I part the cheeks of her arse. One day soon, after she's given birth...

Casey's pussy lips glisten with her juices. Slowly, I insert one finger, then a second.

She squeezes me and gyrates her hips. "Get on with it. I need you inside me," she urges.

"So impatient." I land a gentle slap on her bottom. "When we no longer have Roisin to worry about, I mean to teach you some manners."

She shivers, and I swear she becomes wetter.

"I want you to come for me before you can have my cock."

“How many times?” she moans.

I grin. It’s good that she’s getting with the programme. “Just one or two will do to be going on with. Wait there.”

She glares at me over her shoulder when I get out of bed and pad over to my holdall which remains on the floor where Ethan’s man left it. I crouch, unzip it, and retrieve a small purple box. “I brought you a Christmas present.”

She looks interested. “What is it?”

“Your ancient wand is okay, but I decided you needed to extend your collection of sex toys. For a tech geek, you’re so last century. This little beauty mimics the sensation of suction. It comes highly recommended.”

“Who recommended it?” she demands.

“Over two hundred five-star reviews. You can leave one yourself. After.” I position myself behind her and take her swelling clit between my fingers. “I think we’ll cut to the chase, since you seem to be in such a hurry.” I roll the plump nubbin between my finger and thumb and tug gently

“Oh God,” she moans. Her forehead drops onto the pillow.

The toy consists of a handle about the length of my palm, with a carefully shaped and moulded suction cup at one end. There are half a dozen settings, and I start off with the lowest. It hums in my hand, and a soft light glows from inside the cup.

Carefully, I slide the cup into position over her clit. “How does that feel?”

“I’m not sure. It’s not very... Ooooh!”

I crank it up a few notches. Now I have her attention.

“Too much?”

She pants and shakes her head. “No, it... it’s fine. I was just not expecting it. Jesus, that feels weird.”

I maintain the pressure, at the same time sliding two fingers deep into her pussy. Her inner walls quiver around me. I make a mental note. Next time, I won’t make her wait for my cock.

The first orgasm soars almost out of nowhere. She comes hard and fast with a strangled scream and would have collapsed onto the bed but for my arm under her hips. I allow her a few moments to settle down again, then I adjust the angle slightly, switch to pulsing mode, and go up another setting.

It takes a minute or two longer the second time, but the result is much the same. This time, just as she starts to climax, I ram my cock balls-deep into her and hold still to enjoy the sensation. Her pussy convulses around my shaft. She clenches, thrusts back against me, enveloping me in tight, lush wetness.

“Harder,” she groans. “Jed, fuck me. Fuck me hard.”

I wait for just a few moments, until her initial frenzy calms to a simmer, then I withdraw halfway and do as she asks. Each stroke is long, firm, smooth and deep. The toy is still nuzzling her clit, but more gently now. She writhes under me, slamming her hips back and forth in rhythm with mine.

We come together. It’s noisy, and messy and utterly exhausting. I promise myself this is exactly how I mean for us to go on.

OVER A LATE BREAKFAST, Ethan takes the news that his sister is to accompany me to Dublin later today with good grace. Luckily, like Ethan, I have a helicopter at my disposal so we can slip under the official lockdown radar fairly easily.

“We’ll miss you,” he tells her. “Remember, you have a home here, always. Both of you.”

“I’ll be on the end of a phone,” Casey assures him. “And I’ll still be working for you. Whenever you need anything, just call me.”

“Oh, I will.” He hugs her, then passes her to Aaron for more of the same. “We’ll be keeping you busy, and I daresay this one will, too, soon enough.” He gestures to her swollen abdomen. “I want to know, the minute there’s any news.”

This final remark is aimed at me, and I remember he made me much the same promise not long ago. “You have my

word,” I reply. “And I’ll be expecting a full report on how things go with Marlon.”

“You’ll get it. What time are you leaving?”

“Soon. Casey needs to pack a few things, but we’ll come back often.”

“I’ll need to transport all my equipment, as soon as I get my new workroom set up.”

She already has several laptops and other gadgetry in the process of being boxed up and loaded onto one of the Caraksay motor launches, ready for the voyage to Dublin. I’m thinking I may need to take the apartment beneath mine as well, to house all her stuff. And we’ll soon be needing extra space for Roisin, too.

And I couldn’t be happier. This started as a convenient way to extract myself from Maria Sorza’s plans, but all of that means nothing to me now. It hasn’t, not really, since that first visit, when I saw Casey again and found out I was to be a father. She started as a means to an end, though I already knew based on that one, brief encounter, that I liked her, that she intrigued me. Clever, sassy, beautiful, what’s not to love?

I’m not certain when it changed. There was no blinding moment, no flash of realisation. She just sort of grew on me, got inside my head, then my heart. The seeds were sown the night we tracked Rosie, working together, in harmony. Then later, when she let me share Roisin’s kicking and wriggling, making it all so real.

I was gone. Hook, line, and sinker.

Now my main concern is to get us on our way before she changes her mind.

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER. Casey Savage takes her own sweet time to arrive at a decision, but once she’s there, there’s no turning back. Despite her determination, though, I’m not mistaken about the glistening in her brilliant emerald eyes as my helicopter takes off and circles the island.

Quite a crowd is assembled in the courtyard to see us off. She waves to them from the chopper, surreptitiously swiping moisture from her cheeks. They become smaller and smaller until they are swallowed by the North Atlantic mist.

She turns from the window and offers me a smile. “Well, that’s that.”

I wrap my arm around her shoulders. “You won’t regret this, *mo cara*. I promise.”

“I’d better not.” She digs her elbow into my ribs to better make her point. “And I’m serious about those dogs.”

THE CHOPPER COMES to a gentle rest on the roof of my apartment building. I help Casey down onto the asphalt, then we stoop to scramble away beneath the downdraught from the rotors. Once we’re clear, Rick takes to the air again and soars off into the distance.

There are two doors from the roof, situated at opposite ends. One leads to the main staircase and lifts, the other to my private penthouse. I open the door to my apartment using the keypad and lead the way down a narrow flight of stairs onto a fairly utilitarian landing. Maybe I should get it tarted up a bit, since I’m not the only one using it now. Perhaps some artwork. Carpeting at the very least.

There’s just one door leading off the landing, controlled by another keypad. I open it, and we are in the plush foyer.

“You’ll need the codes,” I tell her as we walk across to the main door to my not-so-humble abode, “so you can come and go. There’s one for our personal elevator, too.”

“Jot them down for me. Who else knows them?”

“Just Cal.”

“Cal?” She slants me a glance. “Cal Paterson? Your underboss?”

“How do you know that?” I definitely haven’t mentioned him. We’ve not discussed my business at all, though I suppose that will change. I have no intention of being one of those

moody, brooding husbands who never speaks to his wife about anything important.

“I checked you out online. I know more than you might imagine, so don’t even think about keeping secrets from me.”

She says it with a smile, but there’s more than hint of steely resolve lurking beneath her words. I should be more nervous than I am, irritated even. Instead, I admire her talent and her unrelenting honesty. Casey Savage and I will get on very well indeed.

“You’ll meet Cal soon enough. He’s in the US right now, covering for me there.”

“I’ll look forward to that.” She tosses her ponytail back and precedes me into the apartment.

Once inside, she pauses, then turns through three hundred and sixty degrees. “Wow,” she exhales. “This place is... just... wow.”

The penthouse is mostly open plan. I tend towards the minimalist, and my main home reflects that. The interior was designed to my specifications. It suits me fine, and I’m hoping Casey will agree, though, security considerations aside, I wouldn’t die in a ditch over any changes she might like to make since it’s to be her home, too. Full-length windows run the length of one wall, offering fabulous views over the city. The vista is impressive now, in daylight, but nothing short of stunning after dark. As if reading my mind, Casey is drawn to the huge panes of glass. She stands, her chin raised, surveying the scene laid out below.

“The glass is one-way,” I explain. “We can see out, but from the other side it’s just mirrored.”

“I doubt there’s much danger of Peeping Toms,” she replies. “How high up are we?”

“Nineteen floors.”

“Ah. Passing aircraft, then. Very wise.”

“There’s a veranda,” I point out. “We can get some grass on it, make it nice for Roisin to play outside. And your dogs.”

She nods thoughtfully. “There’s an associate of my brother’s, in Leeds, who has two Labradors running about on his rooftop veranda. Astro turf, the lot. It’s not as high up as this, and you can see them from the street. Looks pretty weird.”

“There you are, then.” I add a lawnmower and a gardener to my mental shopping list. “Do you want to see the rest of the apartment?”

“Can I just wander round?”

“Sure. Go for it.”

I brew coffee and order a takeaway dinner for us while she gives herself the unguided tour. As it’s Christmas, not to mention lockdown, a lot of places are closed, but the Shebab Balti House down on the corner never lets me down. I order a selection of curries and various sundries and ask them to bring it round in an hour, then go off in search of Casey.

She’s in my bedroom. Correction, our bedroom. This also benefits from floor-length glazing and amazing views, and I suspect she has already sampled those as the curtains are pulled back. I know I left them closed. I find her stretched out on the bed, the television remote control in her hand, flicking through channels.

“Wow, you have everything,” she squeals.

“Naturally.” I have eclectic tastes so subscribe to just about every streaming service on the planet. Sports, movies, science, the arts, entertainment, international news, all there at the touch of a button. “I thought you’d probably appreciate all of this. Did you find the home cinema yet, or games room or the spa?”

She shakes her head. “This place must be the size of an aircraft hangar,” she exclaims. “I expected something... smaller.”

“You’ve seen the kitchen and dining area already, out in the main space, and the building has a pool. As well as the games room and spa, there are two more bedrooms. You can have one for your office and workroom if you want, just until

we find something more spacious for you. The other is my home office, though I do have my Dublin headquarters in a commercial unit in the city centre.”

“What about Roisin? She’ll need a room.”

“I’m there ahead of you. I already fired off an email to the lettings agent handling this building to say we need vacant possession of the apartment below. We can move our work-related stuff down there in due course, and the games room and cinema if need be, and just keep this penthouse as our home.”

She smiles at me. “Jed O’Neill, you amaze me.”

“Casey Savage, you absolutely fucking blow my mind.”

She tosses the remote to the foot of the bed. “We need to christen this room. Now.”

I couldn’t agree more.

CHAPTER 11

February 2021

Dublin, Ireland

CASEY

I'M IN LABOUR.

Jed insisted I register with a private clinic and midwife within hours of arriving in Ireland. I've been to two appointments already, just routine checkups, and once more in the middle of the night when I had stomach pains and thought it was starting.

The midwife who examined me said it was just cramps, not uncommon, but I was right to be cautious. As if I could have stopped Jed, when I woke him and told him what I thought might be happening. He had me in the passenger seat of his car within minutes and broke every speed limit on the way to the clinic.

We returned home at a more sedate pace, the wise words of the midwife ringing in my ears.

“Lots of first-time mums make that mistake. Believe me, darlin’, when you *are* in labour, you won’t just think you might be. You’ll know.”

And this time, I know.

I let out a startled groan and double up in the bed. This is the third or fourth contraction, each one a little more brutal than the one before. I've been awake for about half an hour, counting the minutes between them. They're still eleven or twelve minutes apart, not yet in the 'urgent' range, though what do I really know?

I wait until the awful gripping sensation ebbs, then lean up on my elbow to see the clock. Four-thirteen. Maybe I can wait until daylight, at least...

The next contraction convinces me otherwise. I whimper through the pain, and when I open my eyes again, Jed's fraught face is in front of me.

"How long?" he demands.

"Not long. Half an hour or so..."

"Holy fuck, Casey. Why didn't you wake me straight away?"

"I just thought..."

"I'll phone the clinic. Are you able to stand?"

"I think so. I need to get dressed."

"You can go as you are."

Is he demented? I'm stark naked!

"I am not turning up at a hospital with no clothes on," I insist. "Pass me my blue sack."

I have a wardrobe of maternity clothes, all of which seem like sacks to me. At least this phase of my life is coming to a close and I'll be able to contemplate jeans and T-shirts again.

His phone wedged against his ear, Jed talks to the maternity unit staff at the same time as he tosses the blue flowery concoction in my direction.

I drag it over my head. "I need my hairbrush."

"For fuck's sake, you're going to give birth, not attend a charity ball." Even so, he brings me my hairbrush and even

perches behind me to brush my hair and pull it back into a ponytail.

“Right. You wait there while I collect your bag. They’re expecting us in twenty minutes.”

He helps me out to the lift, then across the underground parking area to where his Land Rover Discovery is parked. Jed is fond of his cars and keeps four in this garage. As well as the Discovery he has a Porsche, a BMW, and a nippy little Toyota electric car.

“We have to do our bit for the planet,” he insisted when he took me out in the Toyota, but we agreed the Discovery was the one for this job. Apart from anything else, it’s easier for me to get in an out, and I can at least fit behind the dashboard.

He leaps into the driver’s side, and we’re off.

Two nurses meet us on the steps of the maternity unit, wheelchair at the ready. Despite my protests, I’m deposited in it by Jed and whisked off inside. The same midwife who issued her wise advice on my last visit takes one look at me this time and installs me in a delivery suite.

It’s very pleasant, not at all clinical. The bedding is brightly coloured, the furniture more akin to an hotel than a hospital. The midwife introduces herself as Natalie, which I suppose is an appropriate name for her profession, and turns on the wall-mounted television.

“We’re well on the way, darlin’, but we’ll be a wee while yet,” she explains. “Might as well make yourself comfy. Now, I shall just examine you if that’s all right an’ we’ll see just what’s what.”

Ten minutes and one pair of nitrile gloves later, we’ve established that I’m three centimetres dilated, and the contractions are coming every eight minutes.

“Babies take their own sweet time, so they do,” Natalie announces. She thrusts a plastic facemask into my hands. “Here’s your gas and air. You just take a big suck o’ that whenever you feel the need. It’s good stuff.”

“It’d better be,” Jed mutters from his seat by the wall, his words muffled by the regulation mask he’s been instructed to wear. “For what I’m paying you.”

Natalie does her best to conceal her irritation. “There’s a kitchen next door, sir, if you feel like makin’ yourself a wee cup o’ tea.”

“I don’t want fucking tea,” he growls.

“No, but maybe your wife might. It’s a thirsty business, givin’ birth.”

He looks to me, one eyebrow raised.

“Tea might be nice,” I suggest, mainly to give him something to do. I rarely touch the stuff. “And would you mind letting my family know we’re here?”

He gets to his feet and comes to the bed, then kisses me on the mouth. “Tea first, then Ethan, *mo cara*.” He rests his forehead on mine. “I love you.”

I gaze back, open-mouthed. It’s the first time he’s actually said it, but I suppose this is as good a moment as any. I lift my hand to cup his jaw. “I love you, too, Jed O’Neill.”

ROISIN MAEVE LIA SAVAGE-O’NEILL makes her appearance in the world seven hours and forty-one minutes later, red-faced and screeching at the top of her tiny lungs. The doctor hands her to Jed, who appears nothing short of wonderstruck. He gazes at the squirming bundle, then places her on my chest.

“We have a daughter,” he mumbles, his voice as close to breaking as I have ever known it. The normally confident, fearless Mob boss is reduced to a gibbering emotional wreck by one little girl. “A daughter,” he repeats, as though he can’t quite believe it.

I hug her to me, and I have to agree, it is all pretty awesome.

Beth and Cristina huddle around, determined to catch their first glimpse, too. They arrived a couple of hours ago, in time to hold my hands and add their encouragement to Jed’s. This is

one of the perks of private medicine, but Jed still had to fork out an additional fee to get permission for visitors to join us for the birth. Money is no object, it seems, so I gather the rest of the Savage clan are due to descend on us within the day. I should be getting used to it by now, but after the Covid-free informality of Caraksay, and then Jed's apartment, it's somewhat unnerving to be surrounded by so many masked faces. It's like Sebastien's arrival all over again, but this time I'm centre stage. And I don't feel the urge to make a run for it.

"She's beautiful," Cristina coos.

"Absolutely lovely," Beth agrees. "She looks just like you, Case. And you, obviously, Jed."

I'm not convinced I can see any resemblance to anything other than a wrinkled prune just now but have to agree I have never seen a vision more gorgeous or more welcome than my baby girl.

"Is Maeve a family name on your side, Jed?" Cristina wonders. "I know Lia was Casey's mother's name."

"Maeve was my mother," he confirms, smiling at me.

We didn't discuss names, having already settled on 'Roisin', but on further reflection, I thought, being an O'Neill as well as a Savage, our daughter should have the benefit of her entire heritage to draw on. It came as a surprise to Jed when I told him, but he seemed genuinely happy. I think it all has a rather nice ring to it.

"When can we go home?" I ask Natalie, who is buzzing about the room tidying up.

"The doctor needs to check both of you, but if there are no complications, probably tomorrow."

Jed looks horrified. "So soon? But shouldn't you—?"

Natalie smiles at him. "The birth went well. Casey is young, and fit. Baby is in rude good health, too, as far as we can tell. There's no reason to stay longer in hospital than she has to. Apart from anything else, there's some nasty germs goin' about in these places. Your wife just needs a decent

night's sleep, and she'll be good to go, you mark my words. They'll both be better off at home."

"But she only has one kidney," he protests.

"I know that. It's in her notes. But it makes no difference. Let the doctor examine them both, then we'll see. Okay?"

"No." Jed is starting to dig his heels in. "I still think she needs longer. What if something goes wrong?"

"Then you come back here." Natalie turns to me. "Unless you think you need a longer stay, darlin'? Will you have help at home?"

"Of course she fucking will," Jed insists. "She won't need to lift a finger if she doesn't want to."

"Well, then, it'll all be fine and dandy," the midwife announces cheerily. "Ah, here's the doctor now."

THE DOCTOR'S expert opinion concurs with that of the midwife, and despite Jed's misgivings, I am consequently discharged the next morning, but only because I add my voice to theirs. I think Jed would prefer if me and Roisin stay under medical supervision for the next decade or so.

Natalie escorts us to the door of the maternity unit. "You do have a baby car seat, don't you, sir?"

"Of course."

"Excellent." She hands the baby to him. "You can pop her in there, then, and be on your way." She turns to me. "The community midwife will be round to see you later."

"Thank you. You've been very kind. And patient." I cast a glance in Jed's direction.

She takes my hand and pats it. "You have a good man there, darlin'. He loves you very much."

"I know."

THE PENTHOUSE IS silent when we arrive. I enter first, followed by Jed who deposits the car seat with a sleeping Roisin strapped in it, in the middle of the floor. We look at each other, wondering what to do next. I have a brief moment of panic.

Surely the real owners will turn up any minute...

They must be mad, letting us loose with a baby. What do we know about anything? Jed was right, we need to go back...

Jed gathers his wits first and drops to his haunches in front of the seat. “Well, *a stóirín*, shall we get you out of there?” He unbuckles the restraints and picks her up.

“What does that mean?” I ask. “What did you call her?”

“It means ‘my little treasure’.”

“Ah.” Maybe I should make an effort to learn Gaelic, since it’s clear my daughter will be bilingual. “Should I feed her, do you think?”

“Probably. Sit down first. You must be shattered.”

Actually, I am. I sink onto the sofa, just as the door entry system buzzes.

It’s Beth. Cristina had to go back to Caraksay for Seb, but Beth is staying with us for a day or two, and I’m profoundly grateful that she’s here. Beth is practical, capable. Beth always knows what to do.

True to form, Beth is on it. I was given lessons in breast-feeding at the clinic, but flying solo is a very different matter. Beth shows me how to latch Roisin on to my nipple and reassures me that I can do this.

“What if she doesn’t get enough,” I wail.

“Then we’ll top her up with a bottle. You’ll know if she’s hungry.”

“How will I know?”

“She’ll scream the place down.”

“Right. But she’s crying now.”

“So, let’s get her fed and see if she settles.”

Twenty minutes later, peace is restored. Roisin is milk-drunk, fast asleep, and I'm well on my way. "What about her nappy?" I mumble, barely able to keep my eyes open.

"I'm sure Jed can cope with that," comes the no-nonsense reply.

I'm about to argue, but one look at my big, tough Mob boss lover puts a stop to that. He has his daughter on his lap, and he is gazing at her with such adoration I know he'll face down any monster for her. And for me. Messy nappies will be the least of it.

I WAKE up to find Jed stretched out alongside me on the mattress. Roisin is still asleep in her little lacy crib at the side of our bed. Beth is nowhere to be seen.

"Ah, you're awake." Jed sits up. "Do you fancy anything to eat? Or drink?"

I shake my head. "Is she okay?" I'm stretching to see past him, into the crib.

"Sleeping like a baby," he replies.

"Did you do her nappy?"

"Sure did."

I snuggle in. "My hero. Hers, too."

"Always." He buries his face in my hair. "That's what daddies are for."

"I wasn't sure at first. You seemed... like you were just playing at it. Playing with me. But now I know. You'll be a great daddy. The best ever."

"That's the plan," he murmurs.

"I never..." I pause, not sure if I want to go on. My own sorry excuse for an early childhood is water under the bridge now, and Roisin's life will be nothing like mine was.

"You never what?" he prompts me.

"Nothing. I was just thinking back, and wishing..."

He waits. He knows I'll tell him eventually, so I might as well get it over. I want to say it anyway. I want him to know me, the real me.

I sigh. "I wish I'd had a daddy. A real one, one who liked me. Wanted me." There. It's out.

Jed's brow furrows. He's confused. "I remember your father, met him a few times. He was a bit dour, a hard man. Everyone knew he wasn't to be crossed, but he was always kind to his family. Graham Savage was known for it. Are you saying he...?"

"Oh, no! He was wonderful. He took me in, protected me, and my mother. I adored him."

Roisin stirs, disturbed by our voices probably. Jed reaches over and scoops her up. She settles again in his arms, and he makes himself comfortable against the headboard before meeting my gaze once more. "Go on," is all he says.

I draw in a breath. Maybe I shouldn't have started all of this. I could have left things as they were, but really, it's no great secret. It just is what it is.

"My mother, Lia, and Ethan and Aaron's mother, Lydia, were sisters. My aunt Lydia married Graham Savage, and my mother married Jerome Archer. It was one of those arranged marriages, meant to create some sort of alliance between the Archers and the Savages."

"Hmm, I know Jerome Archer. Or should I say, I know of him. He's not a man I've ever done business with."

"I daresay not. If you take my advice, you'll keep it that way. He's a slimy weasel, can't be trusted, and way too handy with his fists."

"So I'd heard," he replies. "Am I to understand he was handy with his fists around you?"

"Not me. Not really. He just ignored me most of the time. But he battered my mother. She was in and out of hospital, and one time he almost killed her. She was in intensive care for almost a week. The police were involved. It was them who

took me to Auntie Lydia's, to be looked after until she was well again.”

I pause, my mind drifting back to those awful early years. I was terrified all the time, never knowing when my volatile father would fly into one of his rages and start on her. I'd thought it was all my fault, that somehow if I was different, he'd be nicer.

“Jerome Archer was a powerful man,” I continue. “It would have been difficult to get a conviction. Even the police knew that, but they did warn him off and they convinced her to leave him. That time, she listened. She turned up at Aunt Lydia's when she left hospital. She was still covered in bruises, and she asked if we could stay for a while. Auntie Lydia was nice, but she wondered if perhaps my mother and Jerome might find a way to live together. Uncle Graham was having none of it. He said we were never going back, and that was that.

“I remember, I loved Graham Savage from that moment on. Jerome Archer was powerful, and dangerous, but nowhere near as powerful or dangerous as Uncle Graham when he was riled, and riled he was. When Jerome showed up shouting the odds and demanding that my mother go home with him, Uncle Graham had him thrown in the cells under the mansion and his knee broken. That was the end of it. Jerome admitted defeat, limped off back down south, so to speak, and never bothered us again.”

“Sounds like a case of good riddance.” Jed smiles at me when I relate that part of the tale. “How old were you when this all happened?”

“I was just turned five when we moved in with Lydia and Uncle Graham. He could protect us when the police couldn't. So, we lived in the Savage family mansion near Glasgow, and I grew up with my cousins. It was meant to be just for a while, but it turned out to be forever. I loved it there. My mum died a few years later, Aunt Lydia not long after. Then, when Uncle Graham died, Ethan took over as leader of the family. He moved his headquarters and home to Caraksay, and I went, too. You know the rest.”

“So,” he regards me quizzically, “Ethan and Aaron are your cousins, not your brothers?”

“Nope. They’re my brothers all right. We all had to do DNA testing when we were working out who would be the best kidney donor for Jacob. It was Megan who explained what the tests had revealed. As well as establishing me as the best match, they also proved that we all had the same father. Graham and my mother must have been lovers at one time, and I was the result.”

“Holy shit,” he breathes. “That’s quite some discovery? You had no idea?”

I shake my head. “I wish I had known. Ethan and Aaron were just as much in the dark as me. But it explains why he took us in, and why he protected and cared for us all those years. Why he was so angry at Jerome and determined not to let us go back.”

Jed nods. “From what little I saw of him, that would fit. He looked after his own.”

“He must have known who I was, and my mother, too. They never breathed a word of it. I’m not sure if my aunt knew, but Ethan thinks not. Theirs was no grand passion. It was another arranged marriage just like Lia and Jerome, but Graham cared about his wife and he respected her. He wouldn’t have deliberately hurt her, but he did what he believed was right and he was there when we needed him.”

“Yes” Jed agrees. “Yes, he was.”

“I think... I think you’re a lot like him.”

His mouth curls in a sensuous smile. “I intend to be, *mo cara*.”

CHAPTER 12

Jed

IT'S BEEN A MONTH, and I make no secret of it, these past few weeks have been the happiest I can remember.

Roisin grows bigger every day, and more demanding. If ever there was a more beautiful child in the entire course of human history, well, I'd take some convincing. From her beautiful curled eyelashes to the tips of her gorgeous little toes, she is sheer perfection.

And she has me wound around her tiny finger. I'm besotted, there's no other word for it.

Casey thinks my devotion both hilarious and adorable in equal measure, but I can tell she's every bit as smitten as I am. She's just more pragmatic, better at getting on with the nuts and bolts of parenthood rather than just mooning over the baby as I do.

To be fair, Roisin has charmed the rest of her clan, and mine. Ethan and Cristina came to admire her, then Aaron with the boys. He persuaded Beth to return to Caraksay with him, but she was back after a few days, claiming she was more use here with us.

I tend to agree, and Casey certainly does. They get on as well as any sisters. Casey has blossomed as a mother under Beth's calm, confident influence, though I see no reason to suppose she wouldn't have got there on her own. But Beth definitely helped. She manages to be capable but not

overbearing, and I'm glad to know that when I'm not in the apartment, Casey has company.

I love spending time with my new family, but I have businesses to run, matters constantly requiring my attention. I'm in and out a lot, and Casey never complains.

My team are accustomed to me being hands-on, so my phone rings more or less non-stop

Mr O'Neill, you're needed at the casino.

Jed, do you want us to accept this shipment, or reject that one?

There's been a fight outside a nightclub.

One of the bar staff is on the take.

The stream of calls is endless. Casey just nods and tells me to get on with business.

I do have lieutenants, obviously. There's Cal looking after all my interests across the Atlantic, and here in Ireland I have Mattie Kincaid and Tom Devlin. Mattie is an enforcer, and Tom more of an accountant-cum-strategist, though both are pretty versatile, and along with the incredibly talented and reliable Cal, they amount to three pairs of seriously safe hands.

Which makes the call from Cal early one wet Tuesday afternoon even more of a surprise.

I'm in the back room at The Dubliner, a pub I'm intending to acquire, if the books seem to be in decent order. I'm poring over the spreadsheets when my phone trills. I glance at it, take in the caller ID, and hit 'answer'.

"Cal. How goes it?"

"Are you near a television, boss?"

I'm instantly on alert. "Why?"

"Can you tune in to CNN?"

I use my laptop for the task. Moments later, I'm streaming live news from the US, and I find myself confronted by nothing but flashing red lights and images of police and

ambulance staff rushing back and forth. Passersby are huddled together, most in tears. One paramedic is kneeling beside a small body, attempting to do chest compressions.

Captions scroll across the bottom of the screen, sharing the headlines with a waiting world.

Four children and one teacher dead in playground shooting.

Suspect still at large.

Thirteen in hospital; death toll expected to rise.

“Holy fucking shit,” I breathe, taking a moment to absorb the horror unfolding an ocean away.

“Where is that?” I demand. “What’s happened, and what the fuck does it have to do with us?”

“Mister Rainbow Kindergarten, in Manhasset Hills,” Cal replies, reeling off the name of one of the more respectable suburbs in New York City. It’s not an area I would normally do business in. “There’s been a shooting.”

“Right.” I’d worked that much out from CNN. “What does it have to do with me?”

“It was Gino,” Cal replies.

“Gino?” I try to place the name.

“Gino Sorelli. One of our soldiers.”

“Ah.” I remember him now. Young, arrogant, hot-headed. And ambitious. He sees himself as a future lieutenant. I see him as an eejit. “Are you sure?”

“There were dozens of witnesses, Jed. His picture is all over the news.” As if to prove Cal’s words, an image of Gino flashes up on the screen, followed by CCTV footage of him fleeing the scene on a motorbike.

“Where is he now?” I growl.

“Here. He showed up at the warehouse a few minutes ago, demanding protection and transport out of the country.”

“Did he?” The warehouse is a loose term for a converted industrial building, which houses my offices in New York, and doubles as a storage facility, training centre, and accommodation for my men if they need it. There’s even an interrogation suite in the basement. It’s a valuable piece of property to my business, and if I’m not mistaken, it will soon be swarming with police.

“Salvage what you can but get out. Take Gino with you, head for a secure house and keep him there until I arrive. Whatever else happens, don’t let the police get their hands on him.”

“Got it.” The line goes dead. Cal was never a man to waste words when there’s shit that needs doing.

My next call is to Casey. She answers after two rings. “Hey, how’s your day going? Roisin has just—”

“*Acushla*, listen to me.”

Her voice switches to serious without missing a beat. “What’s happened?”

“I need to fly out to the US. Today.”

“I’ll come with you. We can—”

“No. It’s too soon after the birth. You need to be taking it easy, not jetting across the Atlantic. And Roisin needs you.”

“I wasn’t thinking of leaving her behind.”

“Please, I need both of you to go to Caraksay for a week or two, just until I get back. I’ll send Rick and the chopper. Better still, could you get one of Ethan’s helicopters over to pick you up?” I could do with having Rick at my disposal as I need to get to an airfield fast.

“I’ll be fine,” she assures me. “Don’t worry about me.”

I let out a relieved sigh. “I love you.”

“I know. Is there anything I can do?”

I’m about to tell her ‘no’ but think better of it. “Can you give me a few hours, say, seven. Then hack into my phone

account and delete anything account and delete anything incriminating?”

She never misses a beat. “Of course. Do you care to be more specific?”

You’ll be able to work it out, I expect.”

“I assume you’ll want your data stored somewhere secure.”

“You’re fucking wonderful. Did I tell you that already?”

“You may have. I forget. Can you tell me what this is all about?”

“No time, but you can see it for yourself on the news.”

“Right.”

I’m grateful that she seems happy to leave it at that. Casey Savage is nothing if not well brought up.

“Let me know when you get there. And that you’re okay.”

“I will. Kiss Roisin for me.”

“Already done. Take care. And, Jed...”

“Yes?”

“I love you, too.”

AN HOUR LATER, I’m on a private jet on the tarmac at a little-used airfield a few miles from Dublin. At a curt command from me, the aircraft glides into motion, taxiing towards the runway. I have the plane to myself, apart from the skeleton crew. The usual estimated flight time to Teterboro, the private airport serving New York, would be a fraction under seven hours, but I’ll need to take a more circuitous route as the official airport is closed. On the upside, I’ve plenty of time to follow events as they unfold.

I could have chartered a private yacht for the trip, but it takes at least a week to cross the Atlantic that way, and a lot of shit could be plastered over Christ only knows how many fans

in that time. I need to get to New York quickly, whatever the cost, or the risk.

As it is, despite my precautions, it's likely the police will be on the lookout for me and I'll be arrested within minutes of setting foot on U.S. soil. They will be determined to link me to this massacre, and my conversation with Cal already implicates me. The less they are able to discover about my business dealings, the better, hence my request to Casey to conceal what she can.

The death toll has already risen to seven, two more children and one parent having succumbed to their injuries. The mayor of New York is declaring a major manhunt and promising that the entire resources of the New York Police Department is to be deployed on just one mission — to round up Gino Sorelli. He is described as a known offender with links to organised crime, and his sullen-looking mug shot is everywhere.

Shit. This is all I need, and everything I feared. The obvious assumption is that the shooting is some sort of terrorist attack, or a Mafia hit. I can't speak for terrorist extremists, but I totally fail to see what logic there would be in any Mafia gang gunning down little children.

I call Cal.

He answers at once. "Boss?"

"Where are you?"

"The apartment in Queens."

"Is everyone safe?"

"Yes."

"Gino?"

"Squealing at the top of his lungs that he needs a car, or a flight out of the state. And cash."

"Tell him I'm on my way and I'll sort him out as soon as I can."

"Right, boss."

“Did we lose much at the warehouse?”

“We were able to get the guns safely away but had to leave a couple of dozen kilos of cocaine behind. It’s well hidden, but they’ll have dogs...”

I resign myself to the loss. It could have been worse.

“Where are our men?”

“Some are here, the rest scattered around other safe houses.”

“I’ll need them assembled at some stage, but for now, tell everyone to keep a low profile. Our clubs and casinos can still operate, to close would look suspicious, but everything has to be above board and squeaky clean. I want no careless mistakes, nothing to bring the Feds down on us. We tick over quietly until I say different.”

“Yeah. No problem.”

“Do you know what it was all about? What the fuck was Gino up to?”

“He swears it was self-defence.”

“Oh? The toddlers were armed, were they?”

The derisive snort is answer enough. “It seems our Gino was putting it about a bit. He’s been screwing the wife or girlfriend or whatever of some bruiser from another gang. The Sorzas, for fuck’s sake. Anyway, this guy gets wind of it, and he’s outside the house waiting when Gino comes out after paying a little visit. He takes a shot at Gino. Gino somehow ducks and makes a run for it. He has his bike round the corner, but the other bloke is in a car and follows him, shooting. Gino finds himself cornered in a blind alley, and the playground is at the end. He rides straight through the gates, and apparently one little kid gets under the wheels of the bike, which is where the real carnage starts. Gino comes off and sees no option but to fire back. As Gino tells it, the Sorza soldier was firing, too, but that’s not what’s been on the news reports. They report just one gunman, firing from inside the playground and hitting anything that moved.”

I listen in silence, imagining if it had been my precious baby in that playground. Or Casey. All this destruction, these shattered lives, just because one fuckwit couldn't keep his dick to himself.

“What are the men saying?” I ask eventually.

“Not much, to be fair. From what I can tell, most think he's lost the plot.”

“Right.” He'll lose a lot more than just the plot when I get my hands on the stupid bastard. “Keep him away from them. I don't want him pleading his case and whipping up support.”

“I think he'd struggle to do that. A lot of them have kids of their own.”

I can but hope.

“What time are you due in, boss?”

I check my watch. “It's difficult to tell. Nearest estimate, around six your time.”

“Let me know where you'll be landing and I'll have a car waiting.”

“Fine, but tell them to keep their distance until I say different. The police will probably pounce as soon as they get wind I'm in the country and I don't want anyone else getting caught up.”

“You have a cast-iron alibi. You weren't even in the country.”

“Yes, but they'll be looking to prove I ordered the attack. That Gino was acting on my instructions. George Winsley will be a lot more use to me than a car.”

George is the New York attorney most of the underworld gang leaders have on retainer. His special skills come in very handy at times like this, and I'm reasonably confident that, worst case, he'll have me on the streets again in a day or so.

“I'll get on to him now,” Cal promises.

“Good. Keep me up to date. I'll let you know when I land.”

I SNATCH an hour or two of sleep here and there and keep up with the developing story on CNN. I'm treated to an endless diet of weeping families, stony-faced officials, and shocked bystanders. I stop watching when another four-year-old passes away and the death toll reaches eight.

"Sir, we're due to land in twenty minutes. I'll need you to fasten your seatbelt now, if you would, please."

The flight attendant flashes me her million-watt smile.

I buckle up and order a coffee. When she brings it, I drop my phone into the steaming latte. "Get rid of that, would you? Securely."

"Of course, sir." She picks up the tray and minces off to the galley to transfer a thousand quid's worth of tech to the waste disposal.

Half an hour later, I emerge from yet another private airfield. I've barely set foot on American soil before I'm surrounded by uniforms toting serious firepower.

I make a mental note to charge Cal with finding out who leaked my landing site to the authorities, but resign myself to the inevitable.

Sure enough. "Mr O'Neill? Would you accompany us, please?"

I play along. "Is there a problem, Officer?" *And where the fuck is George Winsley?*

"This way, sir." A burly guard bristling with weaponry gestures for me to precede him into the back of a van emblazoned with the livery of NYPD.

Even if I was minded to argue, he has a dozen colleagues all similarly tooled up, and I know any one of them would love to have an excuse to put a bullet in me. I'll do my best to avoid that.

After a short but bumpy ride into the city I'm bundled out in to a secure yard, then through double doors into what is loosely described to me as a waiting area. The so-called

waiting area turns out to be a secure detention room, where I'm strip searched. Naturally, there's nothing to find. Even my watch is back on the aircraft, and I knew better than to chance trying to smuggle a weapon in with me.

"Where's your phone, sir?" one of them demands.

"I prefer not to carry one," I reply. "Too many distractions."

"You some sort of wiseguy? He rifles through my small carry-on holdall. "Everyone has a phone."

"It would seem not, unless you can find one in there..."

"You think you're so fucking clever."

I shrug. That remains to be seen. Meanwhile, they won't be having the benefit of a trawl through my call log. They can probably access my iCloud account online, but by the time they get round to that, hopefully Casey will have done her magic and erased anything incriminating.

"Put these on."

I eye the bright-orange boiler suit type outfit with suspicion but do as I'm told. I've not been formally arrested or charged with anything so strictly speaking this is against the rules, but I have bigger fish to fry. This is just something to be got through, and the less I quibble the quicker it will be. I have shit to do. I need to get out of here. I even manage to stifle my protests and make no mention of my rights when they produce handcuffs and drag my wrists behind my back.

The journey to downtown police headquarters takes over an hour, and I pass the journey rolling around yet again in the back of a prison van. I'm almost as battered as I was that first time I went to Caraksay by the time the doors open and I'm ordered out.

I follow two armed officers through the forbidding steel doors into the custody area, and it is here that George miraculously appears.

"I shall be requiring a private space in which to confer with my client," he announces, shoving his spectacles up onto

the bridge of his nose. Why he can't get a pair to fit him with the fees he charges is beyond me.

George is just about five feet tall and almost as wide. His preferred style of clothing veers towards the flamboyant, some would say bordering on the ridiculous. Cravats, hand-made leather shoes in every colour of the rainbow, shirts and suits to match, he cuts a bizarre figure. But let him loose with US criminal law, and he's a barracuda. Even the most hardened murder detectives quail before him, and he takes no prisoners.

And I'm not even a murderer. Well, not this time anyway.

The police huff and puff, but they have no option but to comply with his demands. Ten minutes later, I'm seated opposite George, a mug of disgusting coffee to hand and the cuffs removed.

"Right. What's all this about, then?" George wants to know, pen poised above his bright-yellow lawyer's notepad.

It doesn't take long to explain, he's seen the news coverage just like more or less everyone else in the western hemisphere.

"Ah, yes. Nasty business." He sniffs. "Very nasty."

We can agree on that. "I need you to get me out of here as soon as possible."

"Naturally. That shouldn't present too much difficulty as there is no direct evidence to link you to these events. Is there?" He peers at me over the rim of his glasses.

"No," I grind out. "I'm not in the habit of murdering innocent babies."

"Quite so," he agrees. "I thought not." He gets to his feet to rap on the door. "We're ready to talk to you now, gentlemen."

The armed guards take up their positions just inside the door, and two plainclothes detectives seat themselves at the table. George has moved to sit beside me, and I have strict instructions to keep my mouth shut unless told otherwise by him. "I do the talking, Mr O'Neill. You do the nodding."

A sound strategy in my opinion. I'm content to let him work his magic. In fact, had I not been in such a hurry to be off and about my business, I would have rather enjoyed the performance.

George is a master of his craft, and he soon has the detectives wriggling in their seats and frantically consulting their notes as he rips their collection of half-truths, innuendo, and crudely formed assumptions to shreds. Arresting me at the airport was nothing more than an act of desperation because they'd linked Gino to my firm and arrived at the conclusion I must have known what he planned to do, or better still, orchestrated the massacre. Added to that, Gino has seemingly evaporated into thin air, so they have nothing else to go on.

Getting nowhere with their attempts to link me to the tragedy in the playground, they plough on, undaunted. They start on the haul of drugs discovered under the floor in my warehouse. By the time George has finished, they don't seem sure there even was a warehouse.

"So, in short, you have no grounds whatsoever to detain my client," George informs them.

"Mr O'Neill is a known offender," they argue. "He deserves to be in jail."

"What is the nature of these 'known offences'?" George wants to know.

No answer is forthcoming.

"What charges do you intend to bring?" he continues.

Again, uncomfortable silence.

"In that case," George collects his papers together in readiness to stuff them back in his briefcase, "we shall trouble you no further, gentlemen."

"You haven't heard the last of this, O'Neill," the one who appears to be the most senior detective snarls. "We're on to you, and we'll be watching."

"I trust it will not prove necessary to file for a restraining order on the grounds of harassment, Officer." George snaps his

briefcase shut and faces the official's frustrated glare with narrowed eyes. It comes as no surprise to see who backs down first.

The sullen detectives file out, along with one of the guards, who returns a few moments later with the clothes they took from me at the airport. I put my suit back on. It's a bit crumpled, but I'll do. George raps on the door again, demanding that we be released at once.

Outside on the pavement, I breathe in the sweet, frigid night air, then offer George my hand. "Nice job."

He bows his head and ignores my handshake. "My invoice will be in the post, sir. I wish you a pleasant evening."

CHAPTER 13

C asey

I STARE at my phone for several seconds after Jed hangs up, wondering what the fuck that was all about. Clearly, something has happened to affect his US interests that requires his immediate and personal attention. I hunt around the bedroom for the remote control and switch on the television mounted on the wall. It's showing a football match, but I soon find an international news channel.

Christ almighty! I'm not normally an emotional person, but the images bring tears to my eyes. I lift Roisin from her crib and hug her to me as I gape at the horrific scene unfolding in a playground in New York.

This must be it. The broadcaster is saying there are links to organised crime, a gunman on the loose, death toll rising. And apparently, this clusterfuck concerns Jed.

No way has he got anything to do with this. I reject that notion instantly. There has to be some sort of a mistake. He wouldn't.

He just wouldn't.

I'm interrupted by the buzz of the door entry system. I press the intercom button. "Yes?"

"Ms Savage. It's Mattie Kincaid. I'm here to escort you to Caraksay."

"I won't be going anywhere," I reply.

“But, Mr O’Neill’s instructions were—”

“I’m staying here,” I repeat and hang up the receiver.

Moments later, it buzzes again. I’m in no mood to debate this. “I told you, I’m not leaving. You can get on with whatever else you have to do, Mr Kincaid.”

“I’m sorry, Ms Savage, but my orders are to keep you safe. I won’t be going anywhere either.”

“Then you’ll have a long wait. Goodbye.”

I ignore the buzzing when he tries a third time.

A few minutes pass, then there’s a sharp rapping at the door to the apartment. I start. Apart from Jed and me, and Cal, no one knows the codes to get up here. All my instincts on alert, I place Roisin back in her crib and move into the kitchen. Jed keeps a few guns about the place, and he showed me where they were, as much as anything so I would know to keep Roisin away from them as she gets a little older. I reach into the back of the cupboard under the sink and select a Glock, then I make my way to the front door.

“Who is it?” I call out.

“Mattie Kincaid, ma’am.”

I relax slightly. “How did you get up here?”

“I phoned Mr O’Neill and explained the... the situation. He gave me the entry codes.”

“Bloody hell,” I mutter, but I unlatch the door anyway. “Right. I suppose you’ll have to come in.”

Mattie steps into the apartment. I’ve met him a couple of times before and found him pleasant enough, if somewhat formidable in appearance. He’s well over six feet tall, and his tattoos and shaved head add to his general air of menace, but he has always been unfailingly polite to me. This occasion is no exception.

“I apologise for the intrusion, Ms Savage,” he begins.

“I know, I know. You have your instructions.”

“I do, miss. Mr O’Neill asked me to specifically tell you that he really would prefer you to be at Caraksay with your family while he’s away.”

“Tough shit. Are your instructions to carry me and Roisin out of here bodily?”

Mattie shuffles on the spot. It’s an incongruous sight, almost comical. “No, miss. I don’t think Mr O’Neill would approve of that. My orders are that if you refuse to leave, I’m to stay here with you.”

“I don’t need security here in my own home.”

“Mr O’Neill thinks otherwise. And there’s the little one to consider, too.”

There it is, my weak spot. Jed has precision-bombed my least defended area, and deep down, I know he’s right. Whatever happens, however much I might resent being mollycoddled, we take no risks with Roisin.

“Well, I suppose...”

“I can stay out of your way, miss. You’ll hardly know I’m here. I can sleep on the sofa.”

I capitulate. “No, no, that’s all right. Make yourself comfortable. And there’s a spare room you can have.”

“Thank you, miss. That’s very considerate.” He’s already prowling round the apartment, checking windows and doors. “I’ll need to inspect the security system. The cameras, that sort of thing.”

I wave an arm at him. “Go ahead. Do you want coffee?”

“Well, that would be very kind of you, ma’am. Milk please, no sugar.”

AN HOUR LATER, Roisin is awake, and she’s been fed. I prepare to wheel her crib to the bathroom as I need to take a shower.

“I don’t mind watching the little one, miss.” Mattie leans over the cot with a dopey smile on his face.

I half expect her to be frightened of this ferocious-looking stranger, but she just gazes up at the huge man, perfectly unfazed.

“I’m not sure. She isn’t used to being left with people she doesn’t know.”

“If she cries, you’ll be able to hear her. But I think we shall get along just fine.”

I consider the options. I can always leave the door open, and it’s true, I will know if there’s a problem. “Well, okay. I’ll be quick.”

He just nods and offers his beefy finger to Roisin. She grabs it in her tiny hand and hangs on tight.

I complete my shower in less than ten minutes, but all I hear from the living room is Mattie’s low voice talking to my baby. When I return, it’s to find him just finishing off changing her nappy.

“You should have called me.”

“It’s no problem, ma’am. She did a... well, you know. And rather than leave her dirty, I thought I’d just sort her out.” He drops the soiled nappy into a bag and ties it up. “Best get rid of this.”

I’m amazed. Maybe I shouldn’t be, this is the twenty-first century after all, and Jed never baulks at nappy-changing duties, but I didn’t expect this tattooed giant to be a nanny as well as a bodyguard. “Do you have children of your own, Mattie?”

“No, ma’am. But my sister has three, so you pick things up, don’t you?”

I was already warming to him, but he’s finally won me over. “I think we’ll get on well, Mattie.”

“I hope so, ma’am. Mr O’Neill would definitely prefer that.”

“I’M THINKING we should order a pizza or something next time.” I make my announcement over a thrown-together meal of tomato soup and fish fingers. My repertoire doesn’t stretch to much more than that. When Jed’s at home, he usually cooks. Or we order a takeaway since all the restaurants remain closed.

Mattie doesn’t even try to conceal his relief. “That sounds like a good plan, miss.”

“There are menus on the fridge. Have a look and let me know what appeals.”

“Yes, miss.”

Our meal is interrupted by my phone trilling. It’s Beth.

“Hey,” she greets me, her tone unusually bright. “Jed rang. He said you might like some company.”

“Oh, did he?” He’s clearly still fussing about me. “Well, it’s always lovely to see you, but I’m fine. Really.”

“No, no, you can’t be there all on your own with little Roisin. We’ll be with you by lunchtime tomorrow.”

“There’s no need...”

“Aaron’s coming, too.”

Aaron?

“Just how much ‘company’ do you imagine I need?”

“Lots. Is there anything you need me to bring?”

I abandon the unequal struggle and give Beth instructions on what tech to bring from my workroom to enable me to erase files from Jed’s phone and store them elsewhere. Meanwhile, since the few hours he asked for have now passed, I’ll hack into his system and disable it so that no one else can come snooping before I manage to make it secure.

We clear away the remains of our meal, then Mattie settles down in front of the television while I fire up one of the laptops I have with me and get started on the task in hand. Jed asked me to remove anything incriminating, rather than to just

wipe everything, so I start by building an overview of what's there.

I begin with his financial records, banking apps and such like. Jed is in the habit of shifting eye-watering sums of money with alarming regularity, and he seems to do it all from his phone. It's probably best to cancel the online bank accounts and set up new ones when the coast is clear. I transfer all his funds into holding accounts in my own name that I set up for the purpose and make a note of any recurring payments that might need to be maintained.

"Mattie, I need to get a message to Jed, but I've cut his phone off. How can I contact him?"

"You could call Cal Paterson. He'll pass anything on."

"Do you have his number?"

"Sure do." He texts me the details.

I key them in.

The soft Irish brogue is so similar to Jed it's uncanny. "Miss Savage? How can I help you?"

"Oh?"

"Jed gave me your number in case I need to get in touch with you for anything. It came up in your caller ID."

"I see." He thinks of everything. "Is Jed with you?"

"No. Unfortunately not. Jed's been arrested."

"What?" I gape at my phone. "Arrested? Why?"

"On suspicion of conspiracy or some such trumped-up excuse."

"Oh God. What has he done? He didn't hurt those children. I know he didn't."

"No, obviously he didn't, but unless he can scotch it all quickly, our firm will get the blame. It's about damage limitation now."

"I doubt if those poor families who lost their kids feel the same way. Nothing can limit the damage for them."

“I guess not.”

“Jed knew he’d be arrested, didn’t he? That’s why he asked me to hide his phone records.”

“Yes. Probably.” It’s clear that Cal has been fully briefed by Jed, which is more than I can say for me.

“What will they charge him with?”

“Nothing. He’s committed no crime. Well, nothing that they know of and can prove. He’ll be out soon enough.”

“Should I come over?” I’m already calculating the pros and cons of trans-Atlantic flights for one-month-olds.

“No, miss. He wouldn’t want that. His lawyer is with him, and he’ll soon have it all straightened out.”

“Are you sure? I could—”

“Really, he’ll be fine. Shall I ask him to phone you as soon as he can?”

“Yes. Do that, please. Oh, and can you tell him I’ve shifted his reserve funds into new accounts and to let me know when he wants the access details. Or if he wants me to make payments on his behalf, I can do that.”

“I’ll pass that on.”

“I need to know what’s happening. Keep in touch, please. If there are any developments, anything at all...”

“Of course, miss.”

I end the call and round on poor Mattie. “Did you know they were going to arrest Jed?”

He shrugs. “He told me it was a possibility.”

“And you never thought to mention it?”

Another shrug, and he returns to his football.

If it wasn’t for the likelihood of waking Roisin, I might just scream.

THE NEXT MORNING, I'm awake before dawn. I check my phone to find a text from Cal Paterson.

Jed's out.

Short, sweet, and utterly uninformative. I stab the keys to send my reply.

Tell him to CALL ME!!!!

THAT SORTED FOR NOW, I deal with Roisin's immediate needs, then treat myself to a slug of cola before starting on my sift through Jed's phone log and his texting history.

Apart from the texts he's sent me over the last few weeks, pretty much everything else seems to be related to his various criminal or business activities. I begin assembling those messages in a separate file, sorting them by recipient rather than content since that seems simpler and it means I'm not obliged to read every one. I do the same with the phone records, sorting them by phone number. It's a monotonous task, but I stick at it. I'm known for my meticulous attention to detail, and it comes in handy now.

By the time Beth and Aaron arrive just before lunchtime, the task is more or less completed.

And I still haven't heard a word from Jed.

I'm half expecting Mattie to make himself scarce once Aaron is here. After all, there can be no doubts about my security with my big brother to hand. They have a little conference between themselves, though, and decide to join forces to look after me.

I sigh, but I'm done arguing over stuff I can't change. Instead I take up Beth's offer to take care of Roisin, leaving me free to continue my work uninterrupted.

About four hours later, I lean back in my chair and scowl at the screen. Mattie pops his head round the door to offer me a coffee.

"Thanks," I reply, glad of the interruption. "Is Roisin all right?"

My baby has been the centre of attention all afternoon, revelling in this influx of visitors.

“Right as rain, miss. I’ll get you that coffee.”

I take advantage of the break to call Cal. “Hi. Is Jed there?”

“He is, miss. You’ll be wanting to speak to him, I expect.”

“I would indeed.” Especially as he hasn’t seen fit to call me himself.

Jed comes on the line. “*Acushla*. How’s Roisin?”

“Sweet, as ever. She has everyone running around after her as usual. What about you?”

“Oh, not too bad, considering.”

I’m just so relieved to hear his voice that I forget to be livid. For now anyway. “They arrested you,” I say irrelevantly.

“Yes, well, I suppose they were stuck for something else to do. It’s all good now, though.”

I can’t believe he’s so calm about it. “How long were you in custody?”

“A few hours.”

“I was so worried. Why didn’t you let me know...?”

“I didn’t have my phone.”

“I know that,” I snarl. “Bloody hell, Jed...”

“I’m sorry, *mo cara*. It’s been hectic here. How are things working out with Mattie? He’s a good man, when you get to know him.”

“He can change nappies.”

Jed whistles. “I knew he was versatile. Should I pay him more?”

“Definitely. Aaron and Beth are here, too.”

“That’s good. *Acushla*, I’ve a lot to sort out here, and it’ll take me a day or so. Until everything is calm again and I tell you different, I want you to stay in the apartment.”

“I’m not going to be a prisoner in my own home,” I protest. “Roisin needs fresh air, and so do I.”

“It’s only for a few days. A week, tops.”

“Why? The shootings were in New York, not here.”

“But the ripples from something like that have a long reach, and feelings are running high right now. I have enemies, people ready to believe the worst. And...”

He hesitates. It’s not like him.

“Jed, you’re scaring me.”

“I have a child of my own now. Something to lose.”

I’m momentarily dumbstruck. Surely he can’t think... “They wouldn’t go after Roisin, would they? In revenge for what happened in that school?”

“I don’t know, *mo cara*, and that’s the truth. That’s why I want both of you protected. That’s why Aaron is there. As well as Aaron and Mattie on the inside, I have men outside the building, and your brother has sent some of his, too. Nothing’s going to happen, I swear it. But we have to be careful.”

“Oh my God.” I drop into a chair, unable to take all of this in. Jed believes Roisin and I might be targets for some vengeful maniac. My brothers clearly agree with him. “But it happened so far away,” I whisper, “and it wasn’t your fault.”

“True, but until I can resolve all of that, I’m taking no chances. I need you to follow my instructions.”

“I will. We will.”

“Good. I promise you, this *will* all go away.”

“What about that man? The one who shot those babies. Does he work for you?”

“Yes.”

“What will you do? About him, I mean? You should just hand him over to the police.” Even as I say it, I know it’s not that simple. We don’t do that sort of thing. We protect our own, it’s the code we all live by.

“Let me deal with this, sweetheart.”

“Yes, obviously, but...”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

The call ends. I set my phone aside and go in search of Roisin. I spend the next few minutes hugging my baby to me and gazing into thin air.

CHAPTER 14

J ed

I END the call with Casey, not sure if I did the right thing in telling her what danger she and our baby might be in. I don't want to frighten her unnecessarily, but there seemed to be no alternative if I want her to follow my instructions. Casey is not one to just do as she's told without any reason given.

It's one of her most endearing features. Normally.

Cal already told me about her work to protect my financial and contact details. It hasn't escaped me that there's no one else on this planet I'd trust with such information, the inside track on all my private and personal dealings. I find I'm happy to leave all of that to her and trust her to manage my affairs for me until I'm back and can pick up the reins again. I make a mental note to mention this to Tom Devlin when I get a chance so that he can help her to keep across it all and I'll have one less thing to worry about.

After all, it's not as though I'm short of things to do here.

Within moments of the police turfing me out in the small hours of the morning, one of my men pulled up. I hopped in the car and told him to bring me to the safe house in Queens, but to take the scenic route just in case the police are still on my tail.

Two hours and three changes of vehicle later, I arrived at the apartment block and made my way up seven flights of

urine-soaked stairs. Cal was at the door of the apartment waiting for me.

“Boss, it’s good to see you.” He gave me a hug and ushered me inside.

The apartment was crowded. At least fifteen of my soldiers had taken refuge there, and the air was heavy with cigarette smoke and the delicate aroma of greasy fry-ups. I spotted no shortage of empty beer cans, as well.

“Where is he?” I demanded as soon as the door slammed shut behind me.

“In the basement. There are some garages down there...”

“Excellent. He can stay where he is while I get some fucking sleep.” Not counting the catnaps I took on the flight over, it had been nearly twenty-four hours since I last got any serious rest. I was ready to drop, and I could barely think straight. I’d need to be on top of my game for what needed to be done, so Gino Sorelli would have to fucking wait.

“Through there, boss.” Cal indicated a door.

I opened it and stepped into a tiny bedroom. The only furniture was a single bed, but it looked clean and comfortable. I face-planted the mattress, and within moments, I was asleep.

I WAKE up to Cal offering me coffee and telling me Casey is on the phone and wanting to speak to me.

“What time is it?” I mumble, forcing my face up out of the pillow.

“A little after nine.”

“Morning or evening?”

“Morning.”

I take the phone, give my head a shake to clear it. “*Acushla*. How’s Roisin?”

CAL LEANS on the doorjamb throughout my conversation with Casey. I suppose I could tell him to fuck off, but there seems no point. He has the good manners to remain silent, only passing comment after I end the call.

“She seems... interesting. And very capable.”

“She is,” I grant him.

“I look forward to meeting her.”

I grunt. This is not the time for social pleasantries. “Let’s be getting on with this. I want everyone assembled in the basement. Tell them to go down there in ones and twos, don’t attract attention.”

“Right.” He leaves me to my coffee.

I stagger to my feet and make for the shower. I feel almost as grimy when I get out as I did when I got in, but I’ll have to do. There’s a change of clothes in my holdall, so that’s something. I drag on fresh jeans, a button-down shirt, and trainers, then had off in search of Cal.

He’s in the kitchen, and the apartment is almost deserted. The men have started to make their way downstairs.

Cal offers me a slice of toast, but I turn it down.

“How many men are we able to pull together for this?” I ask.

“A few dozen. They’re scattered around the city, but I sent word out, and they’re making their way here. It may take an hour or so, though, as they can’t move about mob-handed.”

“Fair enough. What about the police? What are they up to?”

“Charging around like headless chickens since they had to let you go. They’ve no idea where to start so they’re busting every one of our operations.”

Most of my businesses in New York are part of the night-time economy, so not much is open at this time of a morning. That gives us some respite, a few hours at least. It’ll be enough.

“Can’t do anything for an hour. Is there more coffee going?”

WHEN I THINK enough time has passed, Cal and I amble down the piss-soaked stairs, then through a discreet metal door on the ground level which leads into the underground parking area. Cal locks the door behind us.

We emerge into an open area, where perhaps thirty of our soldiers are already gathered. Their voices echo in the empty space but fall silent when I enter.

“Good morning. Thank you for coming so promptly.” I scan the room, catching the eye of one or two. Their expressions are, in the main, ones of curiosity.

Gino is not present, though I soon hear his voice coming from one of the garages. There’s a furious clattering as he kicks at the metal shutter door.

“Let me out, you fuckers. What the fuck is this?”

I scowl in the direction of the din. “As I was saying, and as you all know, we have a situation here. An awkward matter but one that affects us all.”

The men exchange puzzled glances. Several more enter from the door to the outside and join the group.

“Shall we just wait until we have everyone here,” I suggest. From what Cal told me, I’m expecting a couple of dozen more. I don’t want to have to repeat myself for the benefit of those caught up in the New York rush hour.

The ensuing silence is heavy. I make it my business to appear unconcerned and relaxed, chatting idly to Cal as the basement slowly fills up. Only when I’m sure we have all who can get here, do I turn to address them again.

“Bring Gino in.”

Cal signals to a couple of the men, who go over to the locked garage and raise the shutter door. Gino bursts out, dishevelled, panting from his exertions, and near enough spitting with rage.

“What the fuck?” He sees me and hurtles over in my direction. “Boss. I need help. I need you to—”

“Shut him up,” I order, my tone deceptively low and even.

Cal obliges by stepping forward and landing a vicious uppercut on Gino’s chin. He goes to the concrete floor like a sack of shit.

“You broke my tooth,” he whines, spitting a molar out past bloodstained lips.

I shrug. “Don’t interrupt me, then, or you’ll lose more of them.”

“But—”

Cal plants his boot in Gino’s ribs, then leans over the gasping man. “The boss wants you to keep quiet. I suggest you shut the fuck up.”

He gets the message at last, and I see that the true nature of this situation is beginning to dawn on the men, too. I turn my attention back to them.

“We have a decision to make. All of us, because what happened in this city yesterday concerns all of us.” I pause to let that sink in. “It concerns us because the police are never going to let this drop. They know Gino is part of this firm, so in their heads, we’re all responsible for what happened. They’re not going to let up until justice is done. Tell me, which of you feels happy about going to jail over those dead kids? Or losing your livelihoods because our operations are closed down?”

There are a few sullen mutterings about all for one and the code, but most remain silent.

I continue. “How many of you here are fathers? Uncles? Brothers?”

More confused glances, but about two thirds of them raise their hands.

“I have a baby daughter. I know how I’d feel if she died like those kids yesterday. A senseless killing, by a fuckwit who just didn’t care about anyone but himself. He didn’t care

about you. Or those kids, or their families. Or me. He was ready to ruin all of us, just because he thought he was entitled to fuck someone else's woman and get away with it."

One or two of the older men are nodding, muttering their agreement.

I press my advantage. "Gino wants me to help him escape. He wants a car, a flight to Mexico or some such place. Money. I could give him all of that."

"Aye, but what then?" demands one of the men. "The police will still be looking..."

"Exactly. Or I could kill him. Make him disappear."

Gino takes serious exception to that. "No! Boss, I was just defending myself. Anyone would have done the same." He tries to scramble away through the forest of boots.

Cal barks out a curt instruction, and he is hauled back by his ankles to lie at my feet.

"I'm not done with you," I tell him. "Stay there."

"As I see it," I resume, addressing the men again, "the only way to get the police off our backs is to give them what they want. The gunman who shot those children."

"You mean, hand him in?" one asks me directly.

I meet his gaze. "What do you think about that?"

"I don't know. I mean, we never..." He trails off, unable to string a together a coherent argument in Gino's defence.

"You can't," Gino protests. "They'll kill me, in the pen."

"Probably. But you thought it was okay to murder those little kids, so why should you matter anymore than they did? Prisons are full of men who care about their own children and won't be too impressed by a snivelling weasel like you. I'd give you a week. Two at best."

"No," Gino wails, sobbing now. "Please. Let me go. I promise I'll disappear. You'll never hear from me or see me again..."

“Much as that prospect might please me, it won’t solve our dilemma. Everyone knows who you work for. Your picture is everywhere. I’ve already been arrested once. It’s only a matter of time before they begin rounding all of us up. As long as you’re at large, the entire country will assume I’m protecting you. That makes me a target, too. It makes all of us targets. Our families won’t be safe, because of what you did.”

I let that hang in the air, allow the men to arrive at the only possible conclusion. It’s vital that they endorse this, that they support what I mean to do. I’m the leader here, my authority is absolute, but I still need their buy-in. Loyalty is a two-way street, and without their support, my actions would be a betrayal of everything we stand for. I need them to approve of what I’m about to do.

“I say we hand him in.” The call comes from the back. A bruiser of a man scowls over the heads of several close by, his heavily inked arms folded across his chest. “Why should any of us go down for what he did?”

“Rosco’s right. My cousin’s boy goes to that school,” chimes in another.

“I’ve got kids the same age.”

“And me...”

“Me, too...”

I wait for them to calm. With one or two exceptions, who wisely remain silent, it seems we’re in general agreement. Now for the crunch.

I raise my voice above the chatter. “We need to make a statement.”

“What do you mean, boss? What sort of statement?” This from the man whose cousin has children at the school.

“We need it to be clear — very, very clear — that we don’t endorse what Gino did. That we disapprove as much as the rest of the public do. That it wasn’t done in our name, in *my* name. That the O’Neill firm doesn’t murder babies in cold blood.”

“How are we going to do that?” he asks.

“We’ll give them their man, but he won’t be in one piece.”

“You mean to kill him, then dump the body outside police headquarters?”

Oddly, no one seems unduly bothered by that suggestion.

I shake my head. “Those families want justice, not another funeral. They need to see him in court, charged with the murder of their children. The entire fucking nation needs to see that.”

No one speaks.

“Do you have the gun he used yesterday?” I ask Cal.

“Sure.” He produces the weapon from his own belt. “I took it from him when he arrived.”

“Clean your prints off it, and anyone else’s. And empty the barrel.”

Cal does as I ask, then wraps the gun in a bandana to keep it clean.

I take it from him, careful not to contaminate it, then toss it to Gino. “Catch.”

His hand snakes out to clutch the gun from the air. He brandishes it, as though he might even now try to shoot his way out of this.

“Right-handed,” I observe. “That’s your gun hand, yes?”

Gino throws the weapon to the concrete floor as though it burned him. I think he’s getting my drift.

I wander across the garage to a bench where a variety of tools have been laid out. I take my time, picking up a hacksaw first, then a pair of bolt cutters. Behind me, Gino wails piteously.

In the end, I select an axe. “Bring him over here and strap his arm down to the bench.”

There is no shortage of volunteers for the task. Justice has to be done and be seen to be done. Even in our world.

Especially in our world.

“I’m going to take his hand off,” I tell the men, not that any further explanation is really needed. “He’ll never fire a gun again. He can take it with him to the police, in a bag round his neck. With the murder weapon.”

Some of them wince. No one objects.

The large tattooed man who stood at the back, Rosco, has Gino in a headlock. The condemned man squirms, pleads, screams in terror, but none of it is going to do him any good. He is dragged to the end of the bench, then Rosco slaps his arm down across the scarred top.

Other men rush to assist, producing a length of rope and securing his forearm to the bench.

“Keep your hand still, or I’ll fucking nail it down,” I growl, but my warning fails to penetrate at all.

With no further ado, Rosco picks up a hammer and a four-inch nail, and calmly pins Gino’s hand in place.

The screams are ear-splitting. I’m grateful that the basement is soundproofed, but the sooner this sorry business is concluded, the better.

“Do you want me to do it, boss?” Rosco offers. He’s a bit too eager for my liking.

“No, thanks. I’m good.” I do my own dirty work. It goes with the territory.

Gino’s sleeve has been rolled back. I pick my spot, just above the wrist, and step away to get a decent swing. One stroke should be enough.

The whoosh of the axe is lost under Gino’s deafening screech. It lands with a thud. Blood spurts in every direction, a crimson fountain. Gino slumps into a dead faint, silent at last.

His hand is neatly severed, still nailed to the workbench, the fingers still twitching.

“Neat job, boss,” Rosco remarks, wiping spatters of blood from his denim jacket.

“Thanks. But we’re not done yet” I briefly contemplate waiting until Gino comes round before continuing, but decide to just get the shit out of the way. “He can still give the police any information they want, and as of now he has nothing to lose. I want his tongue taken out, and the fingers of his other hand removed. Toes too. That way he can’t tell them anything, or write it down.”

“I’ll see to that, boss,” Rosco offers, every bit as eager as before.

I don’t like to stifle enthusiasm so this time I decide to let him.

“Get on with it,” I order.

Cal produces pliers, a knife and a pair of bolt-cutters from somewhere, while Rosco sets to removing Gino’s shoes.

The man regains consciousness just as two of my soldiers force his jaws apart and Cal grasps his tongue with the pliers. His screams continue long after his tongue is dragged from his mouth and sliced off, to be followed by the removal of each of his digits.

I wait until the task is complete, then turn my back on the the gory vision and issue further instructions to no one in particular. “See to it that he’s kept alive long enough to see the inside of a police cell. Bag up the hand with the gun and the other bits, and get that sorry piece of shit out of here.”

My work here is done. I don’t look back as I stride across the basement to the door.

IT’S BEEN three days since I dealt with Gino in the basement of the apartment block. As I instructed, he was tipped out of the back of a truck on the steps of police headquarters a couple of hours later. His hand and the gun, along with his fingers, towers and tongue were in a plastic carrier bag next to him. One of our medics managed to stem most of the bleeding, and I’m reliably informed that the murderous little fuck is probably going to live, though I doubt if he’ll last long inside. His fears on that score are well founded.

The heat has died down as far as the harassment of my business interests is concerned. The police have their man. The pressure is off them, and consequently, off me. I have men out on the streets listening to the general chat and reporting back to me. My gesture had the desired effect. The message was received, loud and clear. Jed O'Neill doesn't approve of killing children. And neither does he approve of soldiers who go rogue. It was a clear and effective warning.

There hasn't been much comment in the wider organised crime network regarding my decision to hand Gino in. Other firms tend to keep out of my business, pretty much, and I return the compliment. It's a good system. More to the point, the likelihood of any backlash from the school shootings seems slight now.

I take the decision to move out of the vile safe apartment and back into my penthouse in Manhattan. It's not as large as the Dublin apartment but has a fantastic view over the New York skyline. I can see the Hudson River, the Empire State Building, and, if I crane my neck far enough, a corner of Times Square.

I step out onto my balcony and breathe in the vibrant city. The smells, the sounds, the frantic hum of money being made, it never fails to invigorate the senses. Dublin will always be home, but I do love the Big Apple.

My phone rings. It's a new one, a burner, just to tide me over until I can get all my old stuff back from Casey. I hit 'receive'.

"Jed?"

"Hi, *acushla*." I drop into one of the pair of rattan chairs on my balcony. "How's our little princess?"

"Sleeping like a baby. Mattie's watching her while I take a bath."

"I wish I was there."

"Me, too. When are you coming home?"

"The police still have my passport." That was one of the conditions for them letting me out, to prevent me from fleeing

the country. “George is working on it.”

“I miss you. So does Roisin.”

“I miss you, too. I wish Roisin was just a little bit older, then you could come out here. You’d love New York.”

“I *do* love New York. I’ve been there loads of times.”

I chuckle. Of course she has.

“Are Beth and Aaron still there?”

“No. They went back to Caraksay yesterday, after you said it was safe.”

“Ah, okay. I’m going to get in touch with Ethan about coming out here. He wants to meet the president of the New York Dragons.”

“I thought he was dead.”

“Salvatore Martelli is, yes.” He died in a pile-up on the freeway just after Christmas. “His successor has been chosen, though, and fortunately for your brother, he’s vaguely sane.”

“I never picked up on that. Who is he?”

I smile to myself. At last, something that the omniscient Casey doesn’t know. “Adam Ricci. He was Martelli’s second-in-command and was officially elected last week.”

I was one of the first gang leaders to congratulate him on his rise to power, and it wasn’t entirely political. I do actually quite like the man. He’s as violent and lawless as the rest of us, but intelligent, too. And articulate, a strategist rather than a thug. I intend to cultivate an alliance with him if he’s up for it, so given my links with the Savages, I need to see this thing between him and Ethan settled, without bloodshed preferably.

The high-pitched crying down the line tells me that Roisin has finished her nap.

“D’you hear that?” There’s the sound of splashing as she gets out of the bath. “I have to go.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll call you later.”

“You’d better. I love you.”

CHAPTER 15

C asey

MY MERCHANDISE IS READY. I took a call from my contact in Glasgow half an hour ago to tell me that the passport I ordered for Roisin has arrived. I arranged for him to send it over to me by courier. It should be here within the day.

Obviously, I'll apply for a passport through the official route when I have time, but I want to travel to the US now and I can't be waiting weeks for the government office to get its finger out. A damn good fake will have to do. I'm intending to accompany Ethan when he heads out there in a couple of days.

My brother took some persuading and only agreed to let me tag along when Megan assured him that it would be safe for Roisin to sail. I'd already consulted her, but Ethan wasn't taking my word for it. Jed, too, seems to think she's too fragile to make the trip, and I've given up trying to convince him. I'm just going to turn up.

He doesn't much like surprises, but I'm hoping he'll be so pleased to have our family together again that he'll soon get over that.

He has two choices.

JED.

I'VE JUST ARRIVED BACK at my apartment after an evening spent cruising around my various businesses in the city. One casino looks pretty much like another when you get to the fourth or fifth. Same goes for kink clubs and pole dancing bars, though there was one particularly supple girl in the last one I dropped in at who seemed to defy the laws of nature. I was impressed, but I'm a family man now so I didn't linger.

It's nearly five in the morning when I finally get back. I need to grab a few hours' sleep before heading to my offices downtown for a meeting with my accountant. I was away from New York longer than I intended, but obviously I wasn't about to leave Ireland until Roisin had been born. I like to think I have my priorities right, but clearly my prolonged absence has left some mess to be cleared up.

I shower quickly, then pad through into the bedroom in just a towel.

"Morning, Jed."

Jesus fucking Christ! I gape in a mix of astonishment and fury at the woman lounging across my bed wearing nothing but a seductive smile. "Maria! How the fuck did you get in here?"

She twirls a key on her finger. "I still had my passkey to the building, and you seem to have forgotten to change the code on your door."

"Get out." I snatch the key from her. "Get out of here and don't even fucking think about coming back." I'm changing that code right now.

"Is that any way to speak to an old friend?" She rolls across the duvet to lie on her stomach. "I need to talk to you, and you've not been taking my calls."

"I've been busy." I grab a pair of jeans from the wardrobe and drop the towel then drag them on. "For fuck's sake, get some clothes on."

"Ah well, if you insist. Pass me my dress, would you, darling?"

I spot the navy silk cocktail dress draped over a chair and fling it at her, then I storm out into the lounge area to wait.

Maria emerges a few minutes later, more or less decent, her glorious auburn mane tousled from my bed. She's clearly taken the time to touch up her makeup. She looks utterly delectable, but I'm not even vaguely interested.

"Your shoes and bag are over there." I gesture to the door. "Close it on your way out."

"Oh dear." She settles herself on one of the tall barstools by my kitchen counter. "It's not really that simple."

"Oh yes, it is."

"Do you have any coffee? Maybe a croissant...?"

"No."

She makes herself comfortable, one elegant leg crossed over the other. "I can't leave because I seem to have nowhere else to go at present. So, you see, I will need to impose on your hospitality a little longer."

I storm to the door and throw it open. "Out."

"But, darling..."

"Do I have to fling you out?" I snarl. My patience is in shreds. I'd have not a moment's hesitation in hauling her out onto the landing. This has gone on long enough.

She tips up her chin in a defiant, 'I dare you' gesture. "My father has taken a contract out on me. The moment I'm spotted on the street, I'm dead."

That revelation is enough to stop me picking her up and carrying her bodily to the door. "Why? What did you do?"

"I exist, and that seems to be enough."

"You've existed for twenty-odd years already, and he hasn't seen fit to murder you before."

"I told him I intend to make my claim to lead our family after he's gone."

"Ah. He didn't take kindly to that, then?"

“You could say. I know I have support. Well, some support. He knows it, too.”

“Still, it’s a bit extreme, even for old Luigi.”

“It’s a while since you last saw him. He’s lost it. He barely remembers who I am most of the time, but when he does, he hates me.”

There have been rumours for a few years now that Luigi Sorza is suffering from some sort of dementia. It sounds like it’s true, and if so, there’ll be no reasoning with him.

“Who’s he paying to carry out the hit?”

“My cousins. They’re the ones really behind this anyway. My father doesn’t know what day it is most of the time, let alone remember how to order a hit. They stand to gain if I’m out of the way because one of them would be able to take over and there’d be no rival candidate.”

I nod. It makes sense. But I still don’t understand why she’s seeking refuge here. Okay, I’m not about to shoot her in cold blood or hand her over to her cousins, but this really is not my business. I tell her that.

“We were friends, once. We could be again.”

I shake my head. “No, Maria. I have a fiancée. And a baby, for God’s sake. You and I are over. History.”

“I know that. I heard all about your new family.” She glances back at the bedroom door. “I thought it was worth a try, all the same. Sorry.”

I give an exasperated snort. “What do you want from me?”

“An agreement. A deal. Your support now, in exchange for mine in the future.”

I furrow my brow. “Go on.” I’m always willing to discuss a deal.

“As I’ve said, I’ve been taking soundings and I know some of the men would be loyal to me. The younger ones especially, the ones who live in this century. As for the rest, they obey my father because that’s what they’re used to doing, but no one

really respects him anymore. He's a crazy old man, a liability as the head of a Mafia."

I nod. I know that much. To all intents and purposes, the Sorzas are run by one Eduardo Sorza these days, the eldest of the cousins who are apparently out to kill the only legitimate heir. Eduardo is greedy and treacherous, and an idiot to boot. It's just a matter of time before he's taken out by one of his own men, another of the cousins most likely. They'll probably end up killing each other eventually in their determination to feather their own nests. It's a pity Luigi didn't make proper arrangements for his successor while he was still *compos mentis* and able to make decisions, instead of leaving them to fight it out among themselves. Still, it is what it is. They'll tear themselves to pieces eventually, and vultures like me will move in to pick over what's left. The Sorzas will just disappear as a force in this city.

I give it five years.

Maria has other ideas, it would seem. "I want you to help me. I need to eliminate Eduardo and the others. Once that's done, I can step in as head of the family."

"And Luigi? What of him?"

"Without the cousins, he's harmless. He won't even know what's happened, probably."

"You want me to assassinate them?"

"No. If it comes to it, I'll do that. If you did it, it would cause a war between our families whether you and I wanted it or not."

I'm glad she sees that, but then, Maria Sorza is a strategist. She always did have a firm grasp of the politics of our situation. It's one of the reasons she was born to lead. "What do you have in mind, then?"

"A meeting. You and Eduardo. Tell him that you're backing me as the next *donna*, but that you recognise his fine qualities and blah de blah, so you want to offer him a role in the new arrangements. Tell him he can be in charge of

corporate relations or something equally meaningless. But he has to stand aside peacefully and let me take over.”

“He’ll never agree to that.”

“He might. Ed’s basically a coward at heart, and a bully. He’ll be a lot less keen on standing up to you than he would to me. He sees me as weak and fair game. And he’s lazy. If he sees an opportunity for wealth and power but without the responsibility of actually running the Sorza Mafia, I think he’d like the look of that.”

Eduardo is clearly a man of exceptionally poor judgement. I can see why he’s sure to lose in the end. “What about the others?”

“If Ed backs down, they will, too. They’re like skittles.”

“And if he doesn’t back down?”

“My father’s not the only one with access to paid assassins. I’ll have them all taken out.”

“Jesus, Maria, you’re one hard-nosed lady.”

“You better believe it, darling. And I make a far better friend than an enemy.”

“Is that a threat?”

She smiles. “Just an observation. So, will you do it?”

“What do I get in return?”

“My gratitude.”

“Naturally. And, as well as that?”

“Once I’m in charge, we’ll carve up the city between us. You can have the disputed areas in Queens and The Bronx to run your drugs lines, and the Sorzas will stay out of gambling in this state, leaving the field clear for you.”

It’s a generous offer. That’s not to say I couldn’t acquire the territory without Maria’s cooperation, but it’s always easier to take by negotiation than by force. Rivalries with other gangs cost lives, and money. I prefer not to squander either. Added to that, I’d much rather see Maria heading up the Sorzas and not

Eduardo or any of his fuckwitted brothers. She's level-headed, sensible, a businesswoman. Maria would make a piss-poor wife, but she'll be a solid ally. I could do worse than back her now.

My mind is made up.

“Okay. I'll set up the meet with Eduardo. Meanwhile, you can stay here. In the spare room. Keep your head down and don't let anyone else know you're still in the city. I don't want hitmen breaking my door down to get at you.”

She stands and offers me her hand. “Thank you, Jed. You won't regret this.”

CASEY

ROISIN IS a perfect angel on the voyage across the Atlantic. To be fair, she's asleep for most of the journey, and when she's awake she's content to monopolise her uncle's time and attention.

Ethan loves babies. Who would have thought it? And he's a natural, he speaks fluent babble.

A week at sea gives me a chance to catch up on Jed's commercial and other operations. I want to be able to give him a full report when I see him. I've enjoyed being so closely involved in his business and I'm hoping he'll see no reason not to let me continue

“The captain says we'll be dropping anchor in about forty minutes,” the cabin attendant informs us early in the afternoon on the seventh day. We've been skirting the east coast of America for several hours. “You can go ashore by motor launch whenever you like after that.”

“Thank you,” Ethan replies. “Could you ask him to radio ahead and ensure there's a car waiting. We'll be going straight to Manhattan.”

“Of course, sir.”

I ALWAYS FIND CROSSING time zones totally disorienting. We step ashore on the jetty of a sleepy harbour village a few miles south of New York at around two in the afternoon. I was unable to sleep that last night on board and I've already been up and about for the best part of twenty-four hours. Ethan, on the other hand, manages to seem fresh as a daisy as we troop along the rickety planks onto the harbour side.

Due to our less than orthodox arrival in the US we manage to evade the normal formalities of immigration and customs, and I wonder if I wasted my money on Roisin's fake passport. Still, best not to take silly risks. We stand on the quayside trailed by two cabin staff hauling our luggage. Ethan spots the waiting car, a long, sleek limousine, and takes Roisin from my arms to hurry across to the vehicle.

"Welcome to America, sir. Ma'am." The uniformed driver greets us politely, though he clearly was not expecting to pick up a woman from this remote spot, even less a baby. Still, he's far too professional and polite to comment. He opens the rear doors and gestures for us to get in.

"Mr O'Neill has asked that you join him in his offices in Manhattan, sir."

I groan. I just want to get to Jed's apartment, grab some sleep, and get Roisin settled in. I lean forward to speak to the driver. "Could you drop me off at the corner of First and East One Hundred and Second, please?" That's close enough to Jed's building. I can easily walk from there.

"Of course, ma'am." The limousine pulls away into the traffic.

I'm reasonably familiar with the layout of the streets in Manhattan. I've visited Bloomingdales countless times, and seen in the New Year in Times Square, though that was before lockdown, obviously. Still, I remember the area well enough. On impulse, as we pass Central Park, I lean forward again. "Drop me here, please."

"Are you sure, ma'am?"

“Yes.” It’s a fine day, crisp and clear. Despite the marine equivalent of jet lag, I’m sure the walk will do me good. I grab the bag with Roisin’s essentials in and leave the rest of my luggage for Ethan to drop off later.

I wave Ethan off and check the map on my phone to get my bearings, then I start my brisk stroll through the park.

It’s early spring, so there isn’t much in bloom. Well, nothing really, apart from a few determined crocuses and snowdrops. I make my way to one of my favourite features, The Mall, with the literary Walk at the bottom. The wide, straight path is flanked by huge American elm trees, naked at this time of year, with statues of famous literary figures at the far end.

Another day, when we have more time and I’m not quite so exhausted, I’ll come back and show Roisin the zoo, but I cut away and head north, past the huge lake to the exit closest to East One Hundred and Second. I consider hailing a cab, but in the end I don’t bother. I walk the few blocks east until I come to the apartment block where I know Jed has his New York penthouse.

The concierge peers at me with suspicion when I explain who I am. He consults his notes.

“Mr O’Neill doesn’t appear to be expecting visitors, ma’am. Are you sure you have the correct address?”

I give him my most winning smile. “Perhaps you could text him to check. I’ll wait over there.”

“Of course, ma’am. Can I offer you some refreshment?”

“I’m fine, thank you.” I take a seat at the other end of the foyer, with my back to the desk, then dig in my pocket to retrieve the phone I’ve set up with Jed’s data. Moments later, the text pings in. I type in my reply, telling the concierge to let me into the private elevator.

From there, it’s ridiculously easy. The doorman even offers me the code to get into the apartment itself, but I don’t need that. It was on Jed’s phone.

I unlock the door and step inside.

“Wow, Roisin. Look at this. This is where Daddy lives when he’s not at home with us. We’re going to live here, too, for a while at least.” I drop the bag on the floor and carry her over to the doors leading out onto the balcony. I don’t open them, it’s a bit chilly out there, but we press our faces up to the glass. “We can see for miles, can’t we, sweetie?”

Roisin gurgles her appreciation. Or maybe she’s just hungry. I turn away from the New York skyline, to be confronted by an entirely different view.

An impossibly tall and eerily beautiful woman is standing across the lounge from me. Green eyes glinting, her hand is rock steady as she points a semi-automatic handgun at me. A point twenty-two Beretta, if I’m not mistaken.

I stand motionless, clutching my baby to my chest. My every instinct is to protect her. “Please...” I start to edge towards the door. “I don’t know who you are, but—”

“Don’t fucking move,” she hisses. “How did you find me?”

“Find you? I didn’t find you. I’m not looking for you...”

“What’s that?” She tips her chin at Roisin, who chooses that moment to let out a wail.

“A baby. She’s only a baby, please...”

The woman frowns, shakes her head as though to clear it. “What sort of a fucking assassin brings a baby on a hit?”

Good question. I sense a misunderstanding here.

“I’m not an assassin. I was expecting to find Jed. Jed O’Neill. This is his apartment. Isn’t it?” *Dear Christ, don’t say I’ve somehow wandered into the wrong penthouse.*

“Jed? He sent you?”

I shake my head. “He doesn’t know I’m here. I was intending to surprise him.”

She glares at me. “You’re English.”

“Scottish,” I correct her.

Her eyes widen. She nods. “You’re her. The fiancée.”

“Yes. Casey. Casey Savage.”

She lowers the gun, slowly. “He mentioned you. And the baby. He isn’t here.”

I’d already worked that much out. “He never mentioned you to me. Should he have?”

She shrugs. “We are... business associates.”

“I’ve met some of his associates. None of them look like you.”

Now, she smiles. “I daresay not. I don’t know when he will be back.”

She’s no longer waving a gun at me, so I dare to hope that the immediate danger might be over. I lower myself onto the closest sofa. Roisin is wailing loudly now, perhaps sensing the tension in the air. I have two options as I see it. I can either make a run for it and, assuming I make it out, head for Jed’s office downtown, or I can try to defuse things here.

I don’t give much for my chances of getting out, with Roisin, if this weird woman grabs that weapon again. So, I opt for the latter course.

“Do you mind if I feed her?”

The woman shakes her head. “Go ahead.”

I busy myself locating a sterilised bottle from my bag and assembling the formula and warm water I poured into a vacuum flask before we came ashore, then I shove the rubber teat between Roisin’s lips. The woman watches me in silence but makes no threatening moves. My initial fear has subsided, and now I’m beginning to be intrigued. I decide to chance a bit more conversation.

“Who are you?”

“Maria Sorza.”

I know the name. Well, Sorza anyway. They are one of the old Mafia families here in New York. Their don is Luigi Sorza, who must be ninety if he’s a day.

“You’re related to Luigi?” I ask.

“My father.”

“Ah.” A Mafia princess, then. She certainly looks the part.

“And you are one of the Savages, from Scotland. I believe I fucked your cousin once.”

My eyebrows shoot up of their own accord. “My brother, probably. Ethan or Aaron?”

“Yes. Ethan Savage. He married one of the Bivals, from Moldova.”

“That’s right. Cristina.” Marisa Sorza is as well versed in the ‘who’s who?’ of organised crime as I am, apparently. “I wonder, Maria, could I ask what you’re doing here in Jed’s apartment?”

I daresay she has an explanation. For Jed’s sake, I hope it’s good.

CHAPTER 16

Jed

“WHAT? *WHAT?*” I’m on my feet, pacing. “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?”

Ethan shrugs. “Casey did say you don’t much like surprises, but I suppose she thought you’d make an exception for this.”

I rake my fingers through my hair. “Let me get this right. Casey flew over with you, and she went straight to my apartment?”

“Yup.” Ethan appears utterly unconcerned. “She was tired, a bit jet-lagged probably. She just wanted to get settled in. We dropped her and Roisin off at Central Park, and she was going to walk from there.”

“Roisin is with her? Christ! Fuck! When? When did you drop her off?” I’m doing a quick mental calculation. How long would it take her to get to my block? Maybe she took her time in the park. With luck, there might still be a chance to head her off.

Ethan consults his watch. “Half an hour ago. Forty minutes, maybe.”

Fuck. She’ll be there by now. Surely...

“Why didn’t you tell me straight away?” I dig in my pocket for the burner phone I’ve been using. Dear God, anything could be happening...

Ethan's brow furrows. "What's the problem, Jed? Anyone would think you weren't pleased to see my sister and your daughter."

Jesus! I stab at the keypad, dialling Casey's number. "The problem is, Maria Sorza is at my apartment. And she won't be expecting visitors."

Ethan's expression hardens. "O'Neill, what the fuck are you playing at?"

"It's not what you think..." The dial tone drones on. *Pick up, acushla. Pick up...*

My companion continues, oblivious to the real danger here. "What I think is the least of your worries. Well, nearly. What Casey makes of it is what matters. From what I remember of Maria, she can be pretty... obvious."

I abandon the call to Casey and try Maria's number next.

"You know her?"

"O'Neill, everyone knows Maria Sorza, most of them in the Biblical sense."

"I like to think she's become a bit more discerning these days." I hang up. "I need to get round there. Now." With the threat of a contract hanging over her, I can imagine Maria's likely to shoot first and ask questions later.

"I wouldn't bother. You've been fucking around with Maria Sorza, and Casey's walked in on it. She's going to kick your sorry arse into the Hudson River, and you bloody deserve it. Christ, to think I actually believed you might be good for her."

"Are you coming, or are you going to just sit there moralising?" I'm already at the door. "We need to get there before Maria does something stupid."

"What are you talking about?" He may be bewildered, but he is at least grasping the apparent urgency. Ethan is on his feet and sprinting after me.

My phone rings as I hit the foyer. It's Casey.

“Casey! Thank God. Are you all right?”

“Jed. How kind of you to be concerned for me.” Her tone is sugary.

I don’t like it at all.

“What happened? Where are you?”

“We’re at your penthouse. Nice place, by the way.”

“And Roisin? Is she okay?”

“Absolutely fine. She’s made a new friend.”

“New friend?”

“Yes. We met your... roommate.”

“Casey, she’s not my roommate. She doesn’t live there. She’s just staying for a day or two, until...”

“Until what, Jed?”

“There’s a problem, a situation that needs resolving. Maria just needed a safe place to hide out.”

“Ah. So, she chose you to protect her. How sweet.”

“Casey...”

Her laughter explodes in my ear. “For Christ’s sake, Jed, calm down. It’s all good. Maria and I had a nice chat. She explained her current... dilemma.”

“She did?”

“Yes. We’re going to be helping her to deal with these cousins of hers.”

“We?” Am I hearing this right?

“We’re a team? Agreed?”

“Casey, you don’t need to be involved. It’s not your fight.”

“Fuck that. Anyway, you’ll need me.”

“Oh?” I know better than to dismiss a statement like that. “Care to tell me why?”

“We changed the plan. I made some suggestions to Maria, and she likes them. When will you be back? We need to explain it all to you and make some plans.”

“I was just on my way. Ethan’s with me.”

“We’ll talk when you get here. Ethan, too. Maria says she’s looking forward to seeing him again. Apparently, they were friends at one time.”

“So I gather.” I meet Ethan’s bemused gaze. “Ten minutes.”

“SO, HAVE I GOT THIS STRAIGHT?” Ethan leans forward, steepling his fingers in front of him, his elbows on his thighs. “You mean to close down the Sorza businesses.”

Casey nods. “Disrupt would be a better description. But they’ll think they’re being closed down, if they can fathom it out at all. I was sort of inspired by taking care of things for you these last few days. I realised how easy it would be to create mayhem. The plan is, I’ll hack into their bank accounts, their contact lists, their schedules, the lot. If it’s online, I’ll take it over and start controlling everything. I’ll cancel deals, set up bogus ones, change meetings, shift money about. Well, I’ll hide their money, actually, so they won’t be able to access it. They’ll be totally confused and blame each other with any luck. With Maria to help me, I won’t even have to dig around to find where the bodies are buried. It’ll be simple, and they won’t have a clue how it’s all going so wrong and what to do about any of it.”

“Some of the men are loyal to me already,” Maria puts in. “The rest will come over soon enough, once it starts to appear as though the Sorza ship is going down, and once the wages stop being paid by my cousin. By the time you meet with Eduardo to offer a deal, he will be desperate to get the failing business off his hands. The men will have turned against him, his power will be slipping away. He won’t be able to get out fast enough.”

I grin. Trust Casey to come up with this. It really is a cracking plan. Clever, and fiendishly wicked. My only regret is that I didn't think of it.

“Once the cousins have been sidelined, I can restore everything and Maria can take over.” Casey beams at us all, rocking our sleeping baby in her arms. “It’s foolproof. Best of all, we can do it all from an arm’s-length away. No one needs to get hurt.”

Maria snorts. I’m not at all convinced that a bloodless arm’s-length coup was what she had in mind, but ultimately, she just wants her birthright.

IT’S AN UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP. Casey and Maria couldn’t be more different in just about every way, but they get along like a house on fire.

As for me, I’ve spent the last two weeks taking Roisin pretty much everywhere with me in order to leave the women alone to get on with their bit of business. At just two months old, my baby daughter is frequenting boardrooms and boxing gyms, casinos and clubs, and she’s a hit wherever she goes. It’s not the usual look for a gang boss, but I don’t give a shit. I’m enjoying spending time with Roisin, and at some time in the future my business will be hers, so she might as well get used to it early on. She seems content with our arrangement, for now at least.

This morning, though, I’m going to have to leave her behind. The president of the New York Dragons has agreed to a meet.

And, it isn’t Salvatore Martelli. I can’t say I was sorry to learn of the unfortunate demise of the previous president, in a pileup on the freeway. His successor, Adam Ricci, was the vice president and is generally thought to be a more reasonable individual, though the bar may not be especially high.

But because it’s Adam rather than Salvatore, I’ve decided to risk accepting an invitation to meet on his turf. Ethan and I, and Cal, will be heading out to his compound a few miles

outside the city. I think we'll be safe, but it's one thing taking Roisin to premises I control, quite another to risk her getting caught up in some brawl among drug-crazed or alcohol-fuelled bikers. Best she stays with her mother today.

"That's no problem," Casey tells me. "We've done enough for now in any case."

It's no secret among the underground networks that things are seriously amiss in the Sorza ranks. Eduardo has accused all three of his brothers of embezzling funds as he can't work out how else his accounts could have been emptied. The word around the city is that they are reneging on deals and not paying their debts — deals and debts that poor Eduardo didn't even know about. His genuine business interests are in chaos, and he's at a point where he doesn't know what's real and what isn't. No one else will do business with him, and his men are actively seeking other employment.

And all of this within two weeks. It just shows how fragile this house of cards really is. Most of us spend years building trust, nurturing a reputation, forging alliances. The Sorzas were as solid, as safe as the next Mafia family, just to see it all crumble in a matter of days. When I think of the blood and violence expended on battles between rival families, the lives lost or ruined, and all it really takes is a geek with grudge and a computer.

Who knew?

"We're taking the day off," Casey tells me. "Maria suggested we take Roisin out, maybe get a spot of lunch."

"I'm not sure about that. Maria's cousins are still out to eliminate her, as far as we know. I don't want you caught in the crossfire."

"They're too busy chasing their tails and fighting among themselves to carry out a hit. Anyway, we'll keep a low profile. And no one knows our plans so they can't ambush us anywhere."

"Hmm. All the same, I want you to have protection any time you set foot outside this apartment." I produce my phone

and dial Cal's number. "Hey, can you locate Rosco and send him up to my penthouse? I have a job for him."

Rosco's hardly the inconspicuous type, but he's a man I trust with this sort of job. Loyal and lethal, the perfect combination in a bodyguard.

"Your security will be here soon. Make sure you stay with him." I kiss her on the forehead, then on the mouth. "Enjoy your lunch. Giuseppe's Yard down in Greenwich Village is good."

"We'll bear that in mind. Take care yourself, and look after that brother of mine."

THE DRIVE OUT to Ricci's compound takes us over two hours, most of that time spent just getting out of the city. I love New York, but I'll never get used to the traffic. It's insane. I swear, I can get right across Ireland in the time it takes to get from one side of the city to the other.

We reach New Jersey and head for Morristown, then take a left just outside the town. We pass a range of industrial buildings, many of them derelict, before coming to a halt in front of a set of huge metal gates.

Cal is at the wheel. He sounds the horn.

"Are you sure this is the place?" Ethan appears doubtful, and I can't say I blame him.

"This is it, all right. See, there's a welcoming committee."

One of the gates slides open, just enough to allow five bikers on their hogs to pass through and form a line in front of our car. They make no attempt to welcome us, or even ask who we are and why we're here. The first move needs to come from us, so I open my door and step out.

I raise my hands to show I'm not armed. Well, I'm not actually holding a gun anyway. "We're here to see Adam Ricci. He's expecting us."

The biker closest to me squints in the low, still-wintery sunlight. "That right?" He takes a roll-up from between his

lips and drops it onto the ground. "Leave the car there."

With that, he wheels around and leads the procession of bikers back inside. Cal and Ethan exit the car, and the three of us follow them on foot.

Once we pass through the gate it clangs shut behind us. We're in a large enclosure, maybe half a mile square. The edges are ringed with sheds and huts, most made of corrugated iron and erected in no discernible formation. It seems that they were just thrown up wherever there happened to be a space. The compound has the appearance of one of those prisoner of war camps you see in the movies, even down to the armed guards patrolling the perimeter.

And it's crowded. Really, really crowded. Men, women, and even a few children are milling everywhere. They all wear the same sort of clothing, heavy on denim and leather, and pretty much everyone sports ink of some sort. They view us with varying degrees of suspicion, but no one makes a move towards us.

The man who spoke to us outside gestures for us to follow him. He dismounts his bike and leads us across the compound, weaving between huts until we arrive at the far end, and outside a structure which seems a bit bigger and better constructed than the rest. It's made of brick, two storeys, and the door is painted a vivid shade of red.

That's the clubhouse," I inform Ethan. "A sort of headquarters. The rest of the buildings are workshops for the bikes, stores, and a place to doss down."

"They all live here?" he asks.

"Mostly, yes. It's a tight community, and they don't have a lot to do with outsiders."

"I can believe that," he mutters.

"He's in there." Our guide spits on the ground, sends one final scowl our way, then marches off to be lost in the general swarm of leather jackets.

"Nice talking to you, too," I call after him. "Well, shall we?"

Ethan opens the red door, and we troop inside.

The place is nicer than I remember from the one time I visited before, when Salvatore was in charge. It's clean, for a start, and fresh smelling, with a bar at one end. Several tables are scattered about, each surrounded by three or four wooden chairs. Four men are seated at one of the tables. They all turn in our direction when we enter, and one of them gets to his feet.

"Mr O'Neill?" He advances, hand outstretched.

"Jed," I reply, shaking the offered hand. "And you would be Adam Ricci?"

He inclines his head, then turns to my companions, one eyebrow raised.

I oblige with more introductions. "This is Ethan Savage, from the UK. And this is Cal Paterson, my underboss."

"It's good to meet you, gentlemen." Ricci's smile appears genial enough. "You'd like a drink, I'm sure, after your journey."

"Beer, if you have it," Ethan replies.

"Yeah, man. We got beer." Ricci disappears behind the bar to get the drinks himself.

It gives me a few moments to study the new MC president.

I'd say he's maybe thirty years old. His hair is a dark brown, thick and wavy, and curls around the collar of his black T-shirt. He works out, that's clear by the solid biceps and defined pecs. Slate-grey eyes glint with intelligence and something else, which just might be humour, his jaw is square and lends a determined look to his features. I sense he'd make a formidable enemy. Adam Ricci is a man not to be fucked with.

Still, neither am I. Nor Ethan Savage.

This will be interesting.

He hands me a foaming beer. "Thanks," I say. "And congratulations again on your election."

He nods his acknowledgement and finishes serving the beers. "Please, take a seat, gentlemen." He gestures to an empty table, waits until we are all settled, then pulls up another chair and straddles it. "So, what can I do for you?"

Friendly, polite until he has reason not to be, and straight to the point. I like that.

"Mr Savage believes you may have information that would be useful to him. Or access to such information."

"Is that right?" Adam turns to regard Ethan. "What information would that be?"

I note that he doesn't respond by naming his price or demanding to know why he should help us. I suspect that's not lost on Ethan either.

"I have numerous business interests in the UK, Mr Ricci," Ethan begins.

"I know about your activities, Mr Savage. You are a famous man. I am honoured, in fact, and more than a little intrigued as to why you would be here seeking my help."

He's done his homework. Another good sign.

"In that case," Ethan continues, "you may be aware that one of my storage facilities was robbed last year. Valuable merchandise was stolen, including a quantity of guns."

"I heard rumours to that effect."

"Your predecessor purchased some of my stolen guns. I would like to know who he bought them from."

"And would you be seeking to recover this stolen merchandise, Mr Savage?" Ricci's blue eyes harden.

"No," Ethan replies, "though I would appreciate your assurance that they won't be used to harm members of the public."

Ricci considers that for several moments, then, "It's impossible to give a cast-iron guarantee. The nature of our business is somewhat uncertain, I'm sure you will understand. Your circumstances will be the same, and accidents do happen."

But I can assure you we have no desire to involve others unnecessarily and would not deliberately set out to injure bystanders.”

Ethan inclines his chin. “Thank you for that, Mr Ricci.”

“Adam, please.”

“Ethan.”

“So, you will understand that we buy weapons regularly. I may not be able to identify the precise merchandise you are interested in, though I will make enquiries. In fact...” He turns to the men he was seated with when we entered, who are still drinking and chatting a few tables away. “Donny.”

One of the men turns. “Yeah?”

“Join us.”

The man, Donny, gets to his feet and drags his chair over to our table. He sits and waits for further instructions.

“Donny handles most of our arms acquisitions. He probably bought the guns you’re interested in. Give him the details.”

Ethan rattles off the technical specifications and the approximate date of the purchase. He mentions Psycho, too, the one known link between the robbers at the warehouse and the import of the stolen guns into the US. It’s that that clinches it.

“Psycho? Not seen him around for a while.”

Ethan doesn’t mention the untimely demise of the small-time arms trader, which is probably wise. “Do you remember buying guns from him? Or from someone else who also sold guns from the same shipment to Psycho?”

“That’d be the Russian woman.”

“Can you narrow that down a bit?” Adam suggests dryly.

“Don’t know her name. Just calls herself the Widow. Definitely Russian, though. Hard-nosed bitch, she was, charged an arm and a leg and wouldn’t negotiate on the price.”

Ethan shoots a glance my way. Adam notices.

“You know that name?”

“It has come up before,” I acknowledge. “Is there anything else you can tell us?”

Adam addresses his man. “How was the sale set up?”

“There was an ad on the dark web.”

“And the payment?”

“Cash.”

“How was the money transferred?”

“Through Psycho. He was the go-between.”

Ethan smiles. “Thank you, Adam. You’ve been very helpful. What do I owe you?”

The MC president scratches his chin. “I’ll settle for five grand. And a generous discount on any future merchandise you might want to shift on this side of the pond.”

Ethan reaches into this inside jacket pocket and produces an envelope stuffed with hundred-dollar bills. He peels off fifty of them and hands the cash over. “Nice doing business with you, Adam.”

“My pleasure.” Our host gets to his feet. “I’ll have someone show you to the gate.”

“I can do that,” a female voice with a very British accent echoes from behind the bar. A girl emerges, cropped, dark hair and ebony eyes. She approaches us with a smile to stand beside Adam.

He wraps an arm around her shoulders and drops a kiss on the top of her head. “Thank you, honey. Gentlemen, I’ll bid you goodbye, and a safe journey back.”

We cross the compound in silence, the girl leading the way. At the gate, she steps back to let us pass. I pause, take a good look at her.

“What’s your name?” I ask softly.

“Lisa,” she replies. “Lisa Ricci.”

“Adam’s sister?”

“His wife,” she corrects me.

Cal and Ethan are almost at the car. I hurry after them and hop into the passenger seat.”

“That went well enough,” Ethan observes, belting himself into the rear seat.

“It did, but there’s one more question now that we need answering.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“I’d dearly like to know what Rosie Darke is doing in that compound, posing as Adam Ricci’s wife.”

CHAPTER 17

C asey

“THEY SUIT YOU. BUY THEM.”

I do a twirl. The jeans are great, and they fit like a glove. But the price tag makes me gasp. Over seven hundred dollars seems like a lot for one pair of jeans, however ‘designer’ they might be.

Maria is seated on a plush chair at the entrance to the fitting room, Roisin on her lap. She tilts her head to the side, appraising my new chic vibe.

“I’m not sure,” I begin. “They’re a bit dear...”

“Jed’s good for it. He gave you his credit card, didn’t he?”

“That’s not the point. It’s my money, I buy my own clothes.”

Maria says something in Italian which I’m sure is not entirely suitable for Roisin’s ears.

I take another look in the mirror and make up my mind. “I’ll take them.”

“Excellent. And the bag, too?” Maria is trying to get me to buy a rather pretty little red leather satchel. The practical side of me rebels. Jeans that fit like they were painted on are one thing, but I have no use for a bag that costs almost as much as a small car and won’t fit a nappy or a baby’s bottle inside.

“No. No bag.” I dive back into the fitting room to change back into my old jeans before she can go to work on me again.

Maria Sorza is a determined woman, but I can be pretty steely, too.

I like her. Really like her, in a way that’s rare for me. I can count on one hand the number of other women I get on well with. It’s a select group of five. Beth, Cristina, Megan, Magda, and now Maria.

I admire Maria’s strength of purpose and her ruthlessness. What she wants, she gets. Or she dies trying. And she’s beautiful in that classical movie-star way that only Italian women seem to be able to carry off. If I didn’t find her so much fun to be around, I’d be jealous.

This shopping trip has been something of a first for me. I’m not normally interested in clothes shopping or makeup or any of that stuff. Give me a nice mall full of tech any day. But this morning has been fun. We hit Bloomingdales, then took a cab to Madison Avenue where we must have explored pretty much every boutique and shoe shop. Maria’s passion is shoes. She tells me she owns over a thousand pairs, and I believe her.

I hand over my credit card at the till. We saunter outside, Rosco trailing dutifully behind us. The poor man is laden with bags sporting the names of various high-end stores.

“Time for lunch,” I plead. “My feet are killing me.”

Maria laughs, her own four-inch stilettos clicking on the pavement. “Lightweight. Very well. How about that place?” She points to a classy Italian trattoria on the other side of the road.

My mouth waters. I can taste the lasagne already. “Great. Let’s head over there then.”

Maria leads the way, using her stunning good looks to stop the traffic for us to cross. We settle ourselves at a very pleasant window table and order drinks while we peruse the menu.

Rosco leaves us to make our selections while he prowls around the perimeter of the restaurant, checking out the rear

exit. It seems like a load of fuss over nothing to me, but he insists it's his job, and who am I to get in his way?

"I think I'll just have the Caesar salad," Maria says.

I settle for the seafood pasta and request some warm water for Roisin's bottle. She's still sleeping, so I balance her on my lap while I lean down to rummage in the bag by my feet which contains her stuff. Small babies do not travel light. I grasp one of the empty, sterilised bottles, just as the air explodes around me.

There's an earth-shattering crash, and we're showered in broken glass. The room erupts into screams. I'm thrown to the floor, Roisin underneath me.

What the...?

I check my baby. Her startled little face crumples, and she's wailing, too, her cries high and shrill over the general chaos. I start to push myself up off the floor, then freeze, horrified at the vision before me. Maria is lying in the broken glass, blood pumping from a gaping wound in her shoulder.

My confusion clears. In that moment, our predicament is bindingly clear. Someone took a shot at us. Several shots, in fact. Through the window of the restaurant.

Someone tried to kill us.

I roll over and, careful not to raise my head more than a fraction, peer out through the shattered window.

The assassin is still there. Two of the bastards, actually, on a huge, powerful motorbike. The one at the front is balancing the bike, the rear passenger standing upright on the footrests with his semi-automatic machine gun still braced against his shoulder. He has it trained on the window above me, scanning back and forth, as though waiting for his next target.

Fuck that. My rage is blinding. This bastard tried to kill me, or my baby, or both of us. He shot my friend, and he's not done yet.

I don't carry a gun, and Rosco is nowhere in sight. Still messing about with back entrances, no doubt. But Maria has a

weapon. The Beretta is in her bag, I saw her pack it before we left.

I squirm across the carpet of broken glass, heedless of the danger, and reach for her kidskin tote. The gun is there. I wrap my fingers around the handle, then slowly rise onto my knees.

The motorbike hasn't moved. It's as though time is standing still, that weird distortion of reality when every moment might well be your last.

I'm not fond of guns, avoid them like the plague as a rule. But that doesn't mean I can't handle one. My father saw to that, and his words come back to me now. *Steady hand, girl. Pick your spot. If you're going to shoot, mean it.*

And I do mean it. I take careful aim and I shoot to kill.

The gun roars in my hands. The man on the rear of the bike flies backward to land in a heap of motionless black leather on the pavement. Startled passersby, stunned by the first volley of shots, now dive for cover, and the wail of a siren rises above the rest of the din. The other assassin doesn't even stop to see if his friend is dead or not. He revs the bike and screeches away, the front wheel rearing up from the road in his haste to escape.

I'm not done yet, though. Fuelled by pure adrenaline, I leap to my feet and step through the shattered glass onto the pavement outside. I raise the gun at arm's-length and track him down the road.

Don't overthink it, lass. Use your instinct. My father's words are there again, his wise counsel ringing in my ears as I pick my spot, a fraction ahead of the motorcycle to allow for the motion, and I pull the trigger a second time.

The bike spins out of the rider's grasp to slide across the road, into the path of oncoming traffic. The rider bounces along behind it, rolling over the tarmac until he eventually comes to a stop about twenty metres further down. He, too, lies still.

"Miss. Miss Savage, you need to come with me."

“What?” The urgency in the tone rouses me from my momentary paralysis.

Rosco is there, right behind me. Roisin is in his arms, but he thrusts her at me.

“Take the baby. Come on, we need to get out of here before the police arrive.”

“But, we—”

Rosco isn't listening. He crouches beside Maria and lifts her in his arms. “This way. The car's outside.” He takes off at a sprint, pausing briefly to check I'm behind him.

Instinct takes over. I run after him, Roisin in my arms. We burst through the kitchens, past the white, stunned faces of the kitchen staff, and out into the back yard.

Rosco kicks open the gate and charges out into the street where our car does, indeed, await.

Rosco shoves Maria into the rear seat, and I scramble in after her. He runs around to the front and starts the engine. Moments later, we're hurtling through the backstreets, to emerge suddenly in the shadow of the Empire State Building.

“Call Mr O'Neill,” Rosco yells over his shoulder. “Tell him we're headed to East Fifty-Seventh.”

“What? Where...?”

“He'll know. East Fifty-Seventh.”

I left the bag with Roisin's stuff on the floor of the restaurant and I rarely carry a purse, but luckily my phone is in my jacket pocket. I somehow manage to ignore my baby's continuous wailing and dial the number. Jed answers quickly.

“Hi, *acushla*...”

“Jed,” I scream. “We were shot at.”

“Fuck! What?”

“We were shot at. Maria's been hit.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No. And Roisin’s okay, too. But Maria’s bad.” I chance a good look at her. She’s alive, her breathing shallow and laboured. She’s not regained consciousness, and maybe that’s for the best.

“Where are you?”

“In the car, with Rosco. He said to tell you we’re going to East Fifty-Seventh.”

“Good. That’s good. I’ll see you there. We’re about an hour away.”

“Hurry,” I sob. “Please, Jed, hurry.”

EAST FIFTY-SEVENTH TURNS OUT TO be the block that houses the exclusive and very private clinic which specialises in dealing with just this sort of emergency. Rosco carries Maria through the plate-glass doors at a dead run, and it’s obvious we’re expected. Jed must have phoned ahead. A medical team is standing by. They scoop Maria away into a treatment room.

Rosco, me, and Roisin are directed to a waiting room, where a nurse bustles about checking that there are no other injuries. I told Jed I was okay, but on closer inspection there are numerous cuts and gashes on my knees from crawling about on the floor among the shattered glass. Nothing needs stitching, but she insists on applying copious amounts of antiseptic and bandages.

Rosco was several yards away when the hail of bullets shattered the window, so he’s unhurt, and mercifully, Roisin was nicely protected from the flying glass by the blanket she was wrapped in. Maria seems to have taken the brunt of it, and I’m desperately worried about her.

“Do you think...?”

Rosco shakes his head. “They’re good here. They’ll do all they can.”

“Thank goodness you got us here so quickly. Who were those men?”

“I don’t know, ma’am, but I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough.”

“Do you... Do you think I killed them?”

“The first one, yes. You hit him between the eyes. Nice shooting. Not sure about the other.”

“Oh God.” I drop my head into my hands, thinking of Maria’s ashen face, her shallow, laboured breathing. And the blood. There was so much blood. “Oh, dear God, please let her be all right.”

JED AND ETHAN burst into the waiting area fifteen minutes later. Both look frantic. Jed snatches me into his arms and kisses me, then Roisin.

“Thank God you’re okay,” he murmurs. “I don’t know what I’d have done if... if...”

Ethan elbows him aside and hugs me, too. I just cling on to him, sobbing.

“I hear you did some good shooting, *acushla*,” Jed observes, gathering his composure.

I nod. “I was so mad, I just... I just wanted him dead. Both of them.”

“Well, you managed that,” he tells me.

“Oh.” I peer up at him. “I wasn’t sure...”

“One died at the scene, the other a few minutes later in the ambulance.”

“I see.” He clearly has a hotline to the authorities. “Who do you think it could have been?”

“I know who it was. Two of the Sorza cousins, Eduardo’s younger brothers.”

“Oh. The hit was meant for Maria, then. They somehow managed to track her.”

“Maybe.” He doesn’t seem convinced.

As my panic ebbs away and I start thinking more clearly about what just happened, neither am I.

How did they know where Maria would be? They can't have followed us from the penthouse because they had no idea she was hiding at Jed's apartment. And we didn't plan the trip, so they couldn't have had advance notice.

"I need my laptop," I announce.

"What for?" Ethan asks.

"They knew where we were. They planned this somehow. They must have. I want to see what their phones can tell us."

Rosco appears somewhat confused, but Jed and Ethan both nod.

"Good thinking. Do you want to go home, or shall I have your kit brought here?" Jed offers.

"I want to stay here, at least until we know about Maria."

"Fair enough. Cal, could you...?"

I hadn't noticed Cal Paterson hovering by the door. He agrees to go to our apartment and fetch my laptop. Jed tosses him the keys, and he heads off at a run.

MARIA IS in surgery for the best part of three hours, and none of us feel inclined to do anything other than pace the floor and consume caffeine until we know the outcome. Jed summons one of his men and sends him on a shopping errand to obtain supplies for Roisin.

Rosco doesn't have much to say, once he's answered Jed's questions. In fairness, he saw little of what happened, and there was nothing he could have done to prevent the attack. But he was brilliant in the aftermath, getting all of us away from the scene so efficiently and bringing Maria straight here. I'm glad Jed sees fit to tell him so.

"I was supposed to protect them," he mutters. "I'm sorry, boss."

Jed pats his huge shoulder. “If Ms Sorza lives, it will be because of you, my friend. You did well.”

Rosco just slumps in a chair and hangs his head. He’ll take some convincing.

Eventually, the surgeon comes to find us. Still in surgical scrubs, he informs us that Maria lost a lot of blood, and there was major damage to her muscle tissue, but mercifully, none of the bullets hit her major organs. In all, they dug five bullets out of her shoulder and neck. She’s still heavily sedated but stable and in no immediate danger.

I almost faint with relief. Jed thanks the doctor and asks if we can see her.

“For a few minutes,” the surgeon concedes, “but she’s asleep, so don’t expect any sense out of her for a while yet.”

Ethan and Cal wait in the waiting area with Roisin while Jed and I go to sit beside her bed for a short while. I take her cold hand, careful not to dislodge the spaghetti of wires and tubes attached to various parts of her.

“You’re going to be okay,” I whisper, the words as much for my own comfort as hers. “You just need to rest and get well.”

There’s no response, but the nurse attending her assures us that all the signs are good.

“Give it an hour or two,” she advises. “Just until the sedatives start to wear off.”

Jed squeezes my shoulder. “We have work to do,” he tells me in a low voice. “It’s what Maria would want right now.”

I nod. “Let’s find a quiet corner.”

IT DOESN’T TAKE me long to hack into the mobile phone records for all four of the Sorza brothers. I was already monitoring their conversations as part of our strategy to disrupt their businesses, so I just need to dip in again to find the more recent messaging.

It's extremely illuminating.

"Here's Eduardo texting someone called Paulo," I say.

"Paulo is one of the brothers on the bike," Jed replies. "The one you shot first. The other was Giulio. There's one more, the youngest, Vittore, but the last I heard he was planning to go into the church."

"His name hasn't come up in any of the conversations I've been monitoring," I say. "Maybe he's not involved in the family business."

Jed snorts. "He'll be there, somewhere.

"Well, Eduardo's telling Paulo to keep the premises under surveillance."

"What premises?"

"He doesn't say specifically, but I'm guessing your penthouse."

"If you're right, that means they did know where Maria was," he murmurs. "How did they..."

"No!" I do a double-take, just to be sure. "No, it wasn't Maria they were watching. Look at this."

He leans over my shoulder to read the transcripts of the text conversation.

Paulo: *O'Neill and the bitch's brother have gone off somewhere.*

Eduardo: *Where?*

Paulo: *Don't know. Shall we follow?*

Eduardo: *No, stay with the target. If she leaves, tail her.*

Paulo: *What about the brat?*

Eduardo: *If a chance comes to snatch the kid, do it. Good bargaining power.*

Horrified, I stare up at Jed. "They were planning to take Roisin, hold her as a hostage."

Jed's jaw tics. His eyes darken; his expression is nothing short of murderous. Too bad I beat him to it. Any regrets I might have had about killing both men evaporate.

There's a gap of perhaps an hour and a half before the next message.

Paulo: *Madison Avenue. And she's with Maria.*

Eduardo: *I knew it. Get pics and keep them in sight.*

Paulo: *Will do.*

Paulo: *They're in a café, window seat.*

Eduardo: *Clear shot?*

Paulo: *Affirmative. Which one?*

Eduardo: *Both. Once targets are down, get the kid and return.*

Paulo: *Affirmative.*

"That's the last message," I say. "It's timed at twelve-seventeen, just before the shooting began."

"So now we know. You were the target. Maria was a lucky bonus. And Eduardo ordered it."

Ethan has observed in silence. Now he steps forward. "You were planning to meet with him tomorrow. Is that still on?" Obviously, any meeting will not go as Eduardo expected.

Jed shakes his head. "I have a different type of rendezvous in mind. You with me?"

"Hell, yes."

"Cal, I need a message circulating among the Sorza men."

"Right, boss." Jed's second-in-command steps forward.

"Tell them what's happened, that Eduardo and his brothers have shot Maria. She's injured but alive. That should stir up the ones who are loyal to her. Tell them that he also tried to take out my wife and baby but failed. Make sure they know I'm coming for him. So are the Savages. He's finished. As good as dead."

Cal is nodding slowly. “You’re looking to get them to defect before the fun starts.”

“Right. Once he’s isolated, Eduardo can be taken out, along with the one remaining brother, Vittore. If we can avoid killing too many of their soldiers in the process, there’ll be more left for Maria to pick up once she’s on her feet again.”

Cal nods slowly, already dragging his phone out. “Sounds reasonable. I’ll get on it.”

“So,” Jed whispers, “let the fun begin.”

CHAPTER 18

J ed.

“I WANT TO BE THERE. It’s my right...”

I shake my head. “No, Maria. Not happening.”

She struggles to sit up straighter against the pillows and manages not to grimace at the the discomfort in her shoulder even though it must hurt like a bitch. I’ll hand it to Maria Sorza, she has guts. But guts alone won’t get this job done.

“You need me,” she points out. “I know where to find him.”

“Then you can tell me, along with any other useful intelligence. And make it quick. I mean to attack your brother tomorrow.”

“You’ll have to wait. I can—”

“No,” I say, leaning over the pristine hospital bed. “You can’t.” She would have argued further, but I forestall all of that.

“One,” I hold up my index finger to begin the count. “You’ll be in here for at least another two weeks.” It’s been three days since the shooting, and she has made remarkable progress, but the doctors have been absolutely clear that she risks permanent muscle damage if she tries to use her right arm again before the injuries are properly healed. No way is she going to be fit to take on her brother and any remaining soldiers anytime soon. And I’m not prepared to wait.

Retribution has to be brutal, and it has to be quick. That's how we do things.

"Two," I continue, "you're not trained for battle."

"I can shoot as well as any of your men," she points out, and she's probably right.

"Guns will only get us so far. It'll come down to hand-to-hand fighting, and you've never trained for that. Have you?"

"I could—"

"Have. You?"

"Well, not specifically."

"Not at all."

Maria was brought up to be a Mafia princess, to look beautiful and to grace tennis clubs or restaurants. Her father raised her to be a trophy bride for some fortunate don to parade around on his arm, not to roll about in the mud and the blood and the gore with the rest of us.

"You could learn, I grant you that, and you probably should if you're to be a credible Mafia donna. But not in the time we have and not until you're fully fit again."

I don't have the slightest doubt that Maria Sorza will be a lethal as she needs to be, in every way, but right now she's a work in progress. I can't allow our plans to be derailed by an inexperienced leader. That will get people killed who don't deserve it. And, worst of all outcomes, Eduardo and Vittore might wriggle out of my clutches. I can't let that happen.

"So," I gentle my tone. I've made my point, now she just has to accept it and cooperate. I sit beside her on the edge of the bed. "Tell me what I need to know."

She glares at me, but she sees the truth in my eyes. This is not negotiable, and she may not like it, but Maria is a realist. She knows I'm right.

"What time are you going for?" she asks.

"Early, while he's still at home."

“You’ll have to deal with the household staff.”

“Not if you can convince them to stay out of the way.” I don’t see why some poor unfortunate maid or gardener should get caught in the crossfire. “Will they listen to you?”

“Probably. Well, some of them at least. But what about if they tip him off?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ve already got the house under surveillance. He can’t get out and away without me knowing, and in any case, he’s more likely to try to rally his troops.”

“Try to?”

“Most have already defected.”

Cal’s campaign has gone well. I was right to assume that there was very little loyalty left among the Sorza ranks, and what scant pockets remained was pretty much wiped out by the attempt to kill Maria. Eduardo won’t be able to call on more than half dozen or so, and they will soon be eliminated once we strike. Poor deluded bastards.

“I can talk to Giovannia, the cook. She has a soft spot for me, and she’ll tell the rest.”

“Ideally, we want the place deserted but for the brothers and their loyal followers. Avoid collateral damage.”

“I can do that.”

“Do you think the cook would be able to get old Luigi out of there, too?” A lot of what’s happened could be laid at the ancient don’s door, but he’s old and sick. And he *is* Maria’s father.

“Yes, probably. He’ll be confused but he’ll do as he’s told. Unless Eduardo holds on to him as some sort of hostage or shield.”

I wouldn’t put it past Eduardo Sorza but don’t say that to Maria. If I know he’s still in the building when we hit, I’ll make every effort not to hurt him, but there can be no guarantees.

“What’s the layout of the building? Where will Eduardo most likely be?”

“If he gets wind that he’s about to be attacked, he’ll head for the safe room. That’s on the ground floor, an annex to his study. It locks from the inside, but there is an external code for emergencies.”

“Do you know it?”

“Naturally.” She reaches for a notepad on the bedside table and scrawls the numbers on it. “There. Save you having to blast your way in.”

I pocket the note. “What if he’s not in there?”

“Then either his bedroom or the dining room, depending on the time. He uses the master bedroom on the first floor, top of the stairs, first door to the right.”

So, the ambitious weasel turfed the old man out of his room, did he?

“The dining room is on the ground floor, I take it?”

“Yes. Opposite the main front entrance. But if there are no staff on the premises and no one to make his breakfast, Eduardo could be rampaging anywhere.”

“It’s a large house, but we’ll have it sealed off. He won’t get away. What about Vittore? Does he live there, too?”

“On and off. I can ask Giovannia if he’s in residence right now.”

“Do that. Where do they keep the weapons?”

“In the basement, but there will probably be guns in Eduardo’s bedroom, too. In fact, he’ll break out his weapons the moment he realises what’s coming.”

“How much firepower does he have?”

“A lot. Unless...” She grabs her phone and hits a number one her speed dial. A few moments later it’s answered.

“Giovannia? Hi, it’s me.”

I catch a string of rapid-fire Italian.

“No, I’m fine. Really. Doing well.”

More Italian, and it sounds far from polite. It’s an expressive language.

“I need your help.”

“*Si? Quello che vuoi.*”

I manage to catch that. ‘Anything you want.’

Maria switches to Italian and tells Giovannia what’s needed. I hear a series of ‘*si*’, ‘*certo*’, and ‘*bene*’ so that sounds promising.

Maria thanks the cook and hangs up. “Right, she’s going to give the kitchen staff and maids the night off and tell them not to come back until lunchtime tomorrow. That just leaves my father’s valet, who’s her nephew, so he’ll do as she says. They’ll help my father to get out and install him and themselves in a hotel overnight. Vittore stayed there last night, but she doesn’t know where he is right now. Best of all, the household provisions storerooms are in the basement as well as the weapons, so Giovannia has the keys. She’s on her way down to lock all the doors. The one at the top of the cellar steps is reinforced steel, so it’ll take Eduardo a while to break through, once he discovers what’s happened.”

I grin. “Maria, it’s a pleasure doing business with you.”

“Likewise, Mr O’Neill.”

I bend to kiss her forehead. “Casey will be round later, with Roisin. I’m leaving guards on the doors here, and in the entrance, just in case your brother tries one last time. Casey and Roisin will stay here until it’s over. I want to be sure you’re all together, and safe.”

“Stay safe yourself, my friend. I’ll phone you if I think of anything else you should know.”

ETHAN AND CAL are waiting for me in the lobby. Rosco is with them. He’s to take charge of the guard detail here. At my command, he summons the three men who are to accompany him upstairs and leaves us.

“So, how many men do we have?” My question is addressed to Cal.

“A hundred and seven.”

“We have eyes on the Sorza residence?”

“We do. Eduardo is there.”

“What about Vittore?”

“He left early.”

“But you have a tail on him?”

“Is the Pope a Catholic?”

“Not sure. Vittore definitely is.”

“Which is probably why he’s currently at St Patrick’s cathedral.”

“Don’t tell me he’s making his confession.”

Cal smirks. “I guess that’s between him and his Maker. Do you want us to take him out of there?”

My grandmother would spin in her grave at the very thought of desecrating a place of sanctuary. Sadly for Vittore, I have no such scruples. “Yes. Discreetly, of course. Then keep him secure somewhere until tomorrow morning. We can deal with both at the same time. Is everyone primed and ready?”

Cal nods.

“Okay. I just got the lowdown from Maria, house layout, that sort of thing. Here’s what we know.”

I outline the instructions from Maria, including the part to be played by the household staff. “With any luck, the place will be all but deserted and their weapons safely locked up and out of their reach. But no one gets complacent.”

“What do you need me to do?” Ethan asks.

“Can you lead the men going in from the back?”

“Fine. So I’ll cover the study and the safe room.”

“And I’ll take the ground floor, then the bedroom.”

“What time are we going in?”

“Meet at five, hit the house before six, while he’s still half asleep.”

“Excellent. Until five then.” He offers me a salute, then saunters off as though we just arranged nothing more exciting than a round of golf.

I’M AWAKE BY FOUR, sprawled across my bed. Alone.

Casey is at the hospital with Maria. Rosin, too. I wanted them out of the way, and for once Casey didn’t argue. It’s Roisin, she makes all the difference. We don’t take risks with our baby.

Cal is in the spare room. He emerges just as the coffee percolator finishes its gurgling. “I’ll take mine black.”

I pour him a mug, then one for myself. There’s not much by way of conversation. Nothing needs saying. We all know our jobs, understand our part, what we have to do. We have a plan, a good plan. It remains only to execute it.

Or execute Eduardo, depending on how you look at these things.

The Sorza residence is a townhouse on the edge of Greenwich Village. Nice neighbourhood, it’s where the old money lives. The flashy new kids like me tend to go for the high-rise apartments. It’s a good strategy. As well as the views, security is a lot easier. Traditionalists like the Sorzas think they’re above all that.

We’re out of the penthouse by four-thirty and at the rendezvous point just before five. Ethan pulls up moments after us and parks behind my four-by-four. He comes around to my window and bends to peer inside.

“Morning,” he drawls.

“You good to go?”

“Yup. Lead the way.”

He gets back in his rental car, and we set off in convoy. I come to a stop a couple of streets away from the target, and we cover the rest of the way on foot. I toss my keys to a homeless man slumped in a doorway. He's one of mine and he'll bring the vehicle round to pick us up for a clean exit.

The house is in darkness when we arrive. I take a few moments to scan the front facade, checking for any sign that the occupant knows what's about to happen. There's nothing to set my hackles on edge, no light from the front bedroom. My men have started to emerge from the shadows, all arriving on schedule, from different directions.

"Check the garage," I instruct one of them. I want to know if his car is inside.

The man is back a few minutes later. "The Rolls is in there, and a Maserati."

Ostentatious prick. But I'm satisfied my man is at home still.

"Right. Everyone to their stations." I check my watch. "I have five fifty-three. Agreed?"

I'm surrounded by men nodding.

"We move at five fifty-seven precisely." This is primarily for Ethan.

He smirks, draws his Glock, and sets off around the side of the house with three dozen men at his heels.

"Get that open." I tip my chin in the direction of the front door.

I want to keep all of this as quiet as possible. Our guns are fitted with silencers — this is a heavily populated area, and the last thing we want is concerned neighbours poking their noses in. Normally I'd have explosives to hand and blow the door off, but a more subtle approach is required. It takes a few minutes, but one of my men is an expert lock-picker and manages to deal with the security. Then another of my soldiers steps forward with a gas canister which he tosses through into the entrance hall. We give it a few moments for the noxious vapour to dissipate, then we charge inside.

The dining room is empty. I don't waste time there and instead dash for the stairs. I take them three at a time, then put my boot to the first door on the right.

Empty. The bed hasn't been slept in. "Check the other rooms," I yell. "And the floor above." It wouldn't surprise me to find him cowering in the attic.

I'm halfway back down the stairs when Ethan appears at the bottom. *How does the man always manage to look so fucking elegant?*

"He was in his safe room."

"You have him?"

"Safe and sound and eagerly anticipating seeing you."

I follow Ethan through to the study at the rear of the property. The gas didn't reach this far so the air is clear. I step over the body of one of the Sorza goons which is partly blocking the doorway. There's always someone who doesn't know when to give up.

Inside the study, I find two more such deluded souls, one of whom is Eduardo Sorza himself. He is kneeling on the floor, his hands bound behind him. Three of the men commanded by Ethan have their weapons trained on him. The man at Sorza's side is in a similar situation, but he's sporting what appears to be broken nose as well.

"Maria sends her regards," I inform him, settling one hip on the heavy oak desk in the centre of the room.

"Tracherous bitch." Her cousin spits the words at me. "If she thinks the men will follow her..."

I make a point of gazing around me. "Well, they certainly haven't followed you, have they?"

"Do you know who I am?" he demands.

I look to the men holding the guns. "Mr Sorza appears to be unsure of his identity. Can anyone assist?"

"Well," begins one, just as an enraged Sorza starts to get to his feet.

That plan meets a sudden and ignominious end when Ethan steps forward to kick his legs away at the knees. “No one said you could get up,” he growls. He meets my gaze. “If I’m not mistaken, this is the bottom-feeder who tried to kill my sister and kidnap my niece.”

“The very same,” I agree. “But he only succeeded in injuring his own cousin and getting his two brothers killed.”

“True,” Ethan concurs. “But it’s the thought that counts.”

“Ah, yes. And talking of brothers...”

There’s a commotion in the corridor outside, then another man, a few years younger than Eduardo and about twice as heavy, is bundled through the door. He’s still wearing his clerical robes and is screeching like a chicken about to be slaughtered. Which I suppose isn’t that far from the mark.

“Vittore,” I croon. “Please, join us.”

“Let me go,” he splutters. “I am a man of God. You’ll burn in Hell for this.”

“Really? I expect to burn in Hell for a lot more than just this, Father.”

“I was abducted from the house of God,” he protests. “This is an outrage. Blasphemy.”

“He was in the coffee shop across the street when we caught up with him,” one of the guards who brought him in informs me. “Ordering a latte and groping the waitress.”

“Father Vittore...” I shake my head, tutting. “Such ungodly conduct. Still, you’ll have ample chance to beg forgiveness where you’re going. Or perhaps not. I won’t be the only one burning in Hell, probably.”

The guards force him to his knees beside his brother and the hapless guard. I straighten and take my time walking around the trio on the floor.

“So, let me explain how this is going to be.” I come to a stop behind them, forcing them to crane the necks to keep me in sight, should they wish to. “You tried to murder my fiancée. His sister.” I jerk my thumb in Ethan’s direction. “And abduct

my daughter, his niece. We're both really pissed off at you. So, there's only one way to settle this matter. You need to die."

"No!" Vittore wails. "I had nothing to do with it. I never even knew."

It may be true, but I doubt it. Not that it matters. I'm taking no risks. This is my family we're talking about here. But for the fact that she ducked to get something from her bag, Casey would probably be dead now, my baby in the hands of the monsters. I feel sick, thinking of it.

I shove my revulsion aside. I have a job to do here. "The thing that still puzzles me, though, is why."

"Go fuck yourself," Eduardo advises me.

I itch to just shoot him and be done with it. The facts are what they are, do the whys and wherefores really matter?

Yes, I decide. They do.

I ask him again. "Why Sorza? Why pick this fight with me?"

"You picked a fight with me, asshole."

"How do you arrive at that conclusion?"

"You backed that bit of pussy. This is a Mafia, not a bloody beauty salon. How could a woman run it?"

"Ah, right. The deal I was going to offer you."

"Call that a deal? And you got that bitch of yours to screw up my business. To pry and meddle in my affairs."

Shit. I'd thought Casey was being discreet, covering her tracks. Did I put her in harm's way by allowing her scheme to proceed?

"You knew, then?"

"I guessed. I couldn't prove it, but everyone knows the Savage whore messes with computers. Who else could it have been?"

Ethan flinches at hearing his sister called a whore. Me, too, but I'll be getting my satisfaction soon enough. Fair's fair. I

stand back to let Ethan take the swing he wants to.

Eduardo crumples to the floor, and Ethan plants his boot between his ribs for good measure.

“Perhaps that’ll teach you some manners,” he growls.

“Not that it much matters,” I add, bending to haul the murderous little fuck back onto his knees. “He’s not going to get much chance to practice them.”

“Let me go,” Vittore mewls. “It was him, I swear. All of it. They were in it together.”

They say there’s no honour among thieves, which I know not to be true. You wouldn’t think that, though, listening to Vittore accusing his brothers of all sorts, just to try and save his own miserable neck.

“Shut the fuck up,” I snarl.

“But I—”

I’ve heard enough. I place the muzzle of my Glock at the back of his head and pull the trigger. His skull explodes. He slumps facedown onto the floor, twitching.

“Right. Where were we?”

Eduardo gapes at his brother, horrified. The guard starts weeping.

“Now I have your attention, there’s no need to draw this out. You’ll be dying in the next few minutes, both of you. The only question is, how.”

“There’s no need for this,” Eduardo begins, “I have money, I can—”

“Maria has money, I think you’ll find. You have nothing anymore apart from your worthless life. Are you about to piss even that away with snivelling and grovelling, begging me not to kill you?”

“I... I...” he babbles.

“I’ll give you the chance to die well, with courage, dignity. Is that what you want, Eduardo?” I pause, waiting for an

answer.

None is forthcoming.

I stroll around to stand in front of him. Eduardo merely opens and closes his mouth, dribbling. For once, it seems, he has nothing to say.

“Look at me,” I tell him.

He raises his gaze to meet mine.

“Open your mouth. Wide.”

He does.

I put the tip of the silencer between his lips, his teeth. “When you’re ready, just close your eyes.”

He shakes his head.

I raise my eyebrows. I can wait.

So can he, or so he seems to think. Wide-eyed, he stares up at me, trying not to blink. There’s only ever going to be one winner in this contest, and the longer he holds out, the longer he has in which to contemplate what’s coming.

Seconds tick by, stretch into minutes. One, then two. His eyes are streaming. His chest heaves with the effort to breathe through the snot and the spittle. I smile, and I wait.

His eyelids give up the struggle long before his brain does. Grey matter explodes, spraying six feet across the study when I pull the trigger.

I gaze dispassionately at the mess. I’ll have to send in a team to clean the place up. It’s really not fair to leave it all for Maria.

I swing around to the one remaining man. Resigned to his fate, he stares up at me with considerably more composure than either of his slimeball bosses managed to muster.

“You. Fuck off,” I say. “It’s your lucky day.”

I spin on my heel and walk out of there.

CHAPTER 19

C asey

I SNATCH the phone from the table beside Maria's hospital bed before the first ring finishes.

“Jed?”

“*Acushla.*”

“It's done?” I ask, holding my breath.

“All done, sweetheart.”

Maria is watching me, her features tight with anxiety. I smile and give her a thumbs-up sign.

Is it right to be so pleased to hear about the deaths of others? I shake off any misgivings. *It could so easily have been me. Or Roisin.*

“Maria says ‘congratulations’.”

Jed chuckles down the phone. He can hear the celebrations as my companion whoops with relief and joy. And I daresay, triumph. She has what she wanted, including the blood-letting. It's what she knows she deserves. I suppose that's a lot more than most of us can say.

“Was anyone hurt?” I ask.

“Not on our side.”

“Both brothers?”

“Gone.”

“Anyone else?” Maria whispers.

I pass on the question.

“Just one guard,” Jed replies.

“Where are you now?”

“On my way to you. I’ll be five minutes.”

“And Ethan?”

“Headed back to his yacht.”

“So soon? I wanted to see him off.”

“You’ll see him soon enough, and the rest of your clan. I’ve finished what I needed to do here, and George finally got me my passport back, so we’ll be going home to Ireland in a few days.”

“Oh, just when I was starting to enjoy New York.”

“Meet me in the lobby in a few minutes. I know a great way to help you enjoy New York.”

“I’m on my way down.”

“Give Maria a hug from me.”

BACK AT THE PENTHOUSE, Jed takes Roisin from me and lays her in the little cot he had delivered just a couple of days ago. I’m blessed with a baby who could sleep for England. I wonder how long that will last.

At least for another hour or so, with any luck.

Jed regards me across the bedroom. “I need to shower.”

“No, you don’t.” This will be the first time we’ve fucked since Roisin was born. We were so busy and preoccupied until now, what with having a new baby, then Jed rushing off to America, I never gave the matter much thought. Now, I can think of nothing else. And I’m not prepared to wait another minute.

He points to the spatters of blood on his shirt. “I need to clean up.”

“Take it off,” I say. “And get over here.”

“Have I unleashed a dominatrix?” He advances, smiling, unbuttoning his shirt as he crosses the room. “You’re really very sexy when you get all bossy.”

“You’re just sexy, full stop.” I coil my arms around his naked shoulders, shoving the shirt right off. “Do you know anyone who might appreciate having his cock sucked?”

“Might be able to think of a name or two.”

“Just one will be fine.” My fingers are at his belt. I unbuckle it, then deal with the button on his jeans. I slide the zip down to release his cock, then wrap my fist around it.

I take a moment to admire it. Jed truly does have a beautiful cock, thick and solid in my hand, the bulbous crown already glistening. I run the pad of my thumb through the gathering moisture, spreading it across the head.

Kneeling beside me, he closes his eyes and groans. “Jesus, *acushla*...”

“You like this?” I slowly draw my hand the full length of his erection, squeezing slightly. My fingers barely encircle his girth.

“Christ, yes.” The words are ground out between clenched teeth.

“What about this?” I use my other hand to cup his balls then roll them between my fingers.

His head drops back, and his reply is directed towards the ceiling. I’m glad Roisin is asleep because the words he chooses to use are not suitable for her delicate ears.

Warming to my task, I wriggle onto my knees then plant my hand in the middle of his chest to shove him back onto the bed. He flops down onto the mattress, then regards me through half-closed eyes.

“Did you mention cock-sucking just now?”

“I don’t recall. Did I?”

“Acushla...” he growls. “Would your memory improve with a spanking?”

My mouth curls in a grin. My pussy clenches. Domestic discipline has never really been our kink, but I’m open to suggestions. “Maybe. Shall we try it later?”

His lip quirks. “Baby, I knew you and I would get along.”

Enough chat. I fist his cock, draw my hand down to the base, pulling back the foreskin, then bend over to lick the freshly leaked droplets from the crown.

His response is a long, low moan. He thrusts up, jerking his hips, at the same time wrapping a hank of my hair around his fingers. I let him guide my head lower, thrust harder into my mouth. I widen my jaw to take as much as I can, as deep as I can.

We find a rhythm together, his hips driving forward, my head bobbing in tandem. I angle my face slightly to direct his cock into the pocket of my inner cheek, and allow my teeth to scrape the delicate, sensitive skin below the rim. I apply a little experimental suction, then more when his fist tightens in my hair and he jerks violently.

The salty tang of precum rolls across my tongue. I swallow then go back for more. My hands find his balls again. I tug, squeeze, knead them in my palms, then draw my fingertip along the smooth skin behind to find his rear hole.

Should I? Would he like me to...?

My fingertip finds the place, and I press gently.

Jed goes wild. Bucking, thrusting, fucking my mouth mercilessly, he has both hands tangled in my hair, holding me in position.

He’s close. I know it. I suck harder, open wider, apply just a little more pressure until the tip of my finger penetrates him.

Cum fills my mouth. Hot, smooth, cloying. I work to swallow, to clear my airway, but more comes. Jets of semen, spurting, one after the other, almost faster than I can get down.

A few drops escape to dribble down my chin, but I manage to hang on to most of it, my throat working frantically.

There's a moment, just one, fleeting instant, when I start to panic. I can't breathe, can't swallow quickly enough to keep up. He knows. Somehow, he knows and releases his grip to let me retreat, gasp in precious oxygen, then return to my task.

At last, he settles against the pillows, his breathing slows, his heart rate subsides. I peer up at him, my lips still stretched around his cock. He looks at me, his eyes hooded, and strokes my hair back from my face.

"Thank you," he mouths.

You're welcome, I want to reply, but I can't fashion the words around his erection. So, I wait. I savour the musky saltiness, enjoy the silky texture of his flesh in my mouth, softening, relaxing.

He eases my face away from him, then wriggles down the bed to kiss me, before pointing out that I still appear to be fully dressed.

"I need you to get naked, girl." His tone is like gravel.

"Of course, sir." I roll over and sit up, then begin to peel off my clothes.

"Leave the underwear," he instructs me. "I'll remove them myself when I spank you."

My pussy clenches on nothing. I feel empty, needy. Eager.

I'd kicked off my shoes when I clambered onto the bed. So did he, but that was about it. I'm working fast now. My jeans and hoodie are on the floor next to his shirt, and his jeans soon follow. He grabs me from behind, and we roll across the huge bed in a sweaty tangle of lust and anticipation.

We come to rest, somehow, with him propped against the pillows, and me sprawling across his lap, my face in the duvet. His heavy palm is in the small of my back, holding me in place. I suppose he'd let me get up if I really wanted to, but it's a deliberate reminder.

To emphasise the point, he slides his other hand down the back of my knickers to palm my buttocks.

“You still with me, *acushla*?”

“Yes,” I rasp, my breath hitching.

The first spank is barely anything at all, more a caress. I writhe against him, wondering what all the fuss was about.

The next is heavier, but not painful. The third slap makes me squeal.

Jed pauses to slowly draw my knickers down to my knees, then palms my buttocks. He slips the side of his hand between my butt cheeks, then inserts a finger into my rear hole. Where I was timid and uncertain, he is nothing of the sort.

“You thought you’d tease me, did you? Well, shall we see how you like it?” He drives his middle finger into my pussy, collects my wetness from there, and uses the lubrication to ease his passage into my rear hole. Right in, the full length of his finger. In, out, in out, he finger-fucks my arse until I’m squirming with near ecstasy. Then, when I’m on the point of coming, he stops.

Just. Fucking. Stops.

“Jed...” I moan, then I yelp in surprise when the next spank lands. Full across both cheeks, it hurts. Really hurts.

“Jesus,” I squeal. “Not so hard.”

“I decide how hard, sweetheart.”

“I thought we were just playing,” I protest, trying to roll away from him.

He holds me still, effortlessly. “We are playing, but you want to play hard, surely.”

“I—”

Do I? Is that what I want? What I need?

Jed waits, simply holding me until I make up my mind.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Let’s play hard.”

“Try not to make a lot of noise and wake Roisin, then.”

I nod and clamp my lips together.

Somehow, I manage not to let out more than the occasional gasp or squeak, even as he drops spank after spank onto my heated, blazing flesh. The heat builds, from pleasantly warm to scorching sizzle, and I manage, somehow, to absorb all of it. The harder he spanks me, the more it hurts, the more my pussy clenches and convulses. When he eventually commands me to spread my legs, I do it.

“Aaaah!” I can’t contain my cries of pained ecstasy when he lands a direct hit on my swollen pussy lips. Shock waves ricochet through my body. I shake, tremble, convulse in helpless pleasure. My orgasm seems to last for eternity. I lose track of time, lose my hold on reality for a few moments. Pain and pleasure become indistinguishable. I don’t know where one ends and the other begins. I care even less.

All I want, or need, is to feel.

I close my eyes, and maybe black out for a few moments. The next thing I’m sure of, I’m lying on my back, my thighs spread, gazing up at Jed. He brushes his lips over mine, then moves down to take my nipple between his teeth. His gentle bite sends a crackling spasm straight to my core.

“Ah, so I have your attention again.” He nuzzles my nose with his. “Ready to go on?”

“Go on?” I murmur, confused. “Go on where?”

“You look like a woman who badly needs to be fucked.”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” My confusion scatters. I am blindingly clear on what I need next. “Fuck me, Jed. Please.”

He lifts each of my knees, opening me even more. Then his cock, rock-hard again, is at my entrance. He fills me with one swift driving thrust, and I forget not to scream.

He holds still. “Shhhh,” he hushes me. “The baby is sleeping.”

I nod and bite my bottom lip.

Mustn’t wake Roisin, mustn’t wake Roisin... I chant the mantra to myself as he pounds into me, despite his

admonishment showing not a jot of concern for our slumbering daughter. I'm still chanting when I soar again, spinning, weightless. I'm dimly conscious of his shout of delight, the growled expletives, then the panting, breathless silence when we lie spent and exhausted among the crumpled bedclothes.

Minutes later, or maybe it's hours, the thin, shrill whine alerts us to Roisin's presence and the fact that she needs attention.

"I think she's probably hungry," I croak. I try to recall where I dumped her bag of necessities.

"I'll go," Jed tells me, pausing only to drop a quick kiss on my shoulder.

He slides naked from the bed, scoops up his jeans, and steps into them, then he pads over to the cot. Roisin stops crying as soon as she catches sight of him. He bends to pick her up, holding her against his shoulder. "*A stóirín,*" he murmurs, "what is it you need?"

She is silent, content just for now to be held, her tiny rosebud mouth working against the bare flesh of her daddy's shoulder. He returns to the bed and lays her on the mattress between us. "Ah, life is good, *acushla*. Do you not think so?"

I nod. "Very good. Very good indeed."

DUBLIN,

June 2021

"FANCY A TRIP OUT?"

"Hmm?" I look up from the screen. My crypto portfolio continues to earn me a nice return, but it requires watching, adjusting according to the fluctuations in the markets. It can be unpredictable, so it doesn't do to lose sight of it.

Jed is in the doorway of my office, Roisin perched on his hip. At almost five months old, she's become a real daddy's girl and hates to be separated from him.

"Where are we going?" I reach for the mouse to close down my laptop.

"There's someone I want you to meet."

"Who?"

"I'll tell you when we get there." He picks up my jacket from the back of my chair and hands it to me. "I thought maybe we'd pay a little visit, then do some shopping on the way home."

"We don't need to shop."

I think of our freezer, bursting at the seams, and in any case, we order in what we want. All the same, I follow him down to the underground garage, and we pile into the four-by-four. Jed secures Roisin in her seat in the back, the bright pattern of unicorns and moonlight glowing against her almost translucent complexion. Our baby is, truly, the prettiest little thing there ever was. She's so cute, she stops traffic, but maybe I am biased.

Jed hops into the driver's seat and starts the engine.

"How far is it?" I ask, fishing for information in a different way.

"About half an hour," is the reply, not especially helpful.

I think I know who we're going to meet but don't say so. Since he let me loose on his phone, and by extension on pretty much every other aspect of his life, I've tended to stay on top of what's happening in his many and various business affairs. It suits Jed to let me handle the details, that's my superpower while his is strategy and making deals. We discuss a lot of things, though not everything necessarily, but I always know. Just as I always knew whatever my brothers were up to. Very little gets past me, but unless something directly concerns me, or worries me, I stay in the background.

It's a good system. It suits us. And because of it, I'm fairly certain we're on our way to meet Iain Praed. Mr Praed is head of security at the Four Seasons international hotel chain. They are one of the finest in the world, with luxury hotels in various cities, including Paris, London, and Marrakesh. They are looking to establish one in Dublin, and Mr Praed has been sent to represent the owners in the negotiations. Jed is part financing the venture, and there have been a lot of discussions in recent weeks to iron out the details. Unusually for us, it's a largely legitimate enterprise but promises to be lucrative even so.

Jed takes a right where I would have expected a left. We're not heading into the city centre after all. A few minutes later, when we're surrounded by open fields, I ask again.

"Where are we going?" I peer out the windows at leafy woodland and rolling meadows. We pass a field of contented-looking cows gathered around a babbling brook. It's all quite idyllic.

"Just along here," Jed answers. He turns the vehicle and heads through a gate.

We seem to be on a track leading towards a cluster of farm buildings. Jed pulls up in front of a squat little cottage and stops the engine.

"Is this it?" I squint through the windscreen. "Don't tell me we're buying a farm."

"Nope. But you might need your wellies."

I start to explain that I didn't bring my wellington boots to Ireland, they are still on Caraksay, but Jed is already opening up the tailgate. He returns to my side of the vehicle with a pair of boots which he thrusts at me.

"Put these on. I'll get Roisin."

I do as I'm told and follow him around the side of the cottage in the direction of the barn tucked away behind, to be greeted by high-pitched yapping.

"You didn't!" I exclaim.

“A deal’s a deal,” is his response. “Ah, there they are.”

A middle-aged woman appears from inside the barn, a lad of about sixteen beside her. Both are dressed in clothes no self-respecting scarecrow would be seen dead in. Work trousers, grey perhaps, or maybe not, are tucked into mud-spattered wellingtons. The woman is swathed in an oversized donkey jacket, the whole ensemble topped off with a wide-brimmed felt hat. The lad is blessed with much the same sense of style, except that he wears a threadbare parka and a knitted bobble hat which I think could have started life as blue but now it’s anybody’s guess.

“Ye found us then,” the woman remarks, somewhat unnecessarily.

“Great directions, Jessie.” Jed is all smiles. “This is Casey, and our little Roisin.”

“Aye, well, she’s a pretty one, to be sure.” I expect the woman, Jessie, is referring to Roisin rather than me. “Ye’ll be wantin’ tae see the young ’uns, then.”

“Please.” Jed replies.

The lad, who hasn’t been introduced, turns and pulls open the barn door. The din from the within becomes louder, more piercing. We all troop inside to be met by pandemonium.

A wave of the tiniest dogs I’ve ever seen rushes at us.

“Careful where ye put yer feet,” Jessie warns.

I can only stare, wonderstruck. “They’re dachshunds,” I cry. “Oh, how gorgeous.”

I crouch among them, to be mobbed by the squirming, enthusiastic little creatures. They roll over each other in their rush to scramble onto my thighs, then try to climb up to lick any part of me they can reach. I count at least a dozen, in various shades of black, ginger, and brown.

“They’re all pedigrees,” Jessie assures us. “I have all the papers, from the Kennel Club. Parents are over there.” She points to a pen where four larger dachshunds, two black and

two ginger, watch us through the wooden slats, their whip-like tails wagging.

“Can we have one?” I gasp. “Really?”

“We can. You get to choose.” Jed kneels down as well, careful to keep Roisin just out of reach of the needle-sharp claws and over-joyous welcome.

“Ye need nae fret about the wee one, miss. They’re gentle as lambs, just overexcited tae have visitors. When ye get home an’ settled, it’ll be quieter.” Jessie scoops up one wriggling miniature black furball and dumps it in my hands. “This ’un’s a boy.”

The puppy licks my chin and tries to squirm inside my jacket. He’s adorable. I’m in love.

“An’ this ’ere’s a wee girl.” Jessie grabs another pup, ginger this time, with slightly longer, curlier fur. She hands that one to me as well.

They are so beautiful. I laugh out loud. Roisin, too, seems fascinated and is reaching for any puppy that comes within range. Jed selects one for her and holds it still for her to pet.

Jessie presses on with her sales patter. “They’re all wormed, microchipped, an’ registered. Guaranteed disease-free. I have vet’s certificates. Eight hundred apiece.”

I gasp. It’s a lot of money for something that fits in the palm of my hand.

“Like I said, pedigrees.” Jessie folds her arms across her chest. “Ye’ll not find better for the price.”

“Would you...?” I begin, intending to barter.

“Eight hundred is fine.” Jed gets to his feet. “Which one do you want, *mo cara*?”

I gaze at the two on my lap. It’ll be one of these, but how to choose?

Jed sees my dilemma. “Jessie, will you take fifteen hundred for both?”

Jessie scratches her nose, then smiles broadly. “Aye, that’s fair enough. Ye’ll be takin’ ’em with ye?”

“Oh yes, I think so,” Jed replies.

“Right, then. Come in the house an’ we’ll sort out the paperwork.”

THE PUPS SQUEAL and yap the entire way back to Dublin. Jessie placed them in a stout cardboard box for the journey, and we did indeed stop off at a pet superstore to do some shopping. We now have two little bowls, and a larger one for water, a bed big enough for both puppies, some puppy food, and a selection of toys. We even selected two tiny collars, one red, the other blue, and got identity tags engraved. I can’t stop grinning.

“You didn’t have to, you know.”

He grins across at me. “I promised. Not sure where we’ll put the husky, though. Three dogs in one apartment is a lot. Maybe we should think about buying that house you talked about, in the country, by the sea. With a garden.”

“But you love that penthouse.”

“I love you more. And that moppet of ours in the back. And now we have dogs. That’s real commitment. That calls for a house.”

“I love you, too. And, speaking of houses, and commitment...”

“Yes?”

“We should get married. If you still want to...”

He slams on the brakes, causing the puppies to yelp and Roisin to squall. “Sorry,” he calls out above the general din. He swivels in his seat to cradle my jaw in both his hands. “Say that again.”

“I said, we should get married. Especially if we’re getting a husky as well.”

“When?”

“Well, maybe we should let the dachshunds get settled first, but we can start checking out breeders...”

“Not the dog. When should we get married?”

“Oh.” I shrug. “Whenever. As soon as we can arrange it, I suppose.”

He plants a kiss on my mouth, then drags his phone from his pocket. He hits a few keys. There’s a tinny ringtone, then a voice answers.

“Father Michael, Saint Joseph’s Church. How can I help you?”

“Father? Jed O’Neill.”

“Mr O’Neill, how nice to hear from you. Such a rare pleasure.” The voice is cultured, the soft Irish lilt soothing.

“I want you to marry me.”

There’s a low chuckle. “The church has clear rules on that, Mr O’Neill.”

“I mean, I want you to marry me to someone else.”

“Ah, well, I can probably oblige you, then.”

“When? How soon can you do it?”

“Is there some urgency, Mr O’Neill?”

“Yes. How soon?”

“Three months.”

“That’s too long. Can’t you do it sooner?”

“Not if you want the marriage to be legal. I assume that was your intention?”

“Of course. But—”

I lay my hand on his wrist. “Three months is fine. Tell him we want a September wedding.”

He nods. “We want...”

“I heard, Mr O’Neill. How would the fifteenth be?”

Jed looks to me, and I nod.

“The fifteenth would work for us just fine.”

EPILOGUE

Dublin, June 2021

Jed

THE DOOR ENTRY SYSTEM BUZZES. I get up from the carpet where I was playing with Roisin and the two puppies and pick up the handset.

“It’s me, boss.”

“Come on up, Tom.” I buzz Tom Devlin, one of my most trusted lieutenants, into the lift then open the door to the apartment.

“I didn’t know we were expecting anyone.” Casey strolls through from the bedroom, her hair still wet from her shower. “Do you want me and Roisin to make ourselves scarce while you talk?”

I shake my head. “This concerns you, too.”

“Okay.” She settles herself on the rug beside our daughter.

We wait for Tom to get up here.

“So,” I begin, once he’s settled with the requisite morning coffee and toast. “I have a job I need you to do. Both of you, in fact.”

Casey’s brow furrows. Tom remains silent.

“Casey, you remember I mentioned seeing Rosie Darke, in the New York Dragons compound.” I told her about the unexpected encounter a couple of days after, having been completely distracted at the time by more urgent events. I had the little matter of an attempted assassination to see to.

Casey nods slowly. “I remember. We agreed to leave matters as they were.”

“True, but I’ve been giving it more thought. I expect you have, too.”

She doesn’t argue with me. Neither of us likes loose ends. More to the point, Nathan Darke would pay a small fortune to know what happened to his missing daughter.

Casey reads my mind. “We could just tell her father where she is and leave it to him,” she points out.

“We could,” I agree. “And he’d be out there like a shot.”

“Who could blame him?” she mutters. “You’d do the same.”

“This is not Nathan’s territory. Chances are he’d get himself killed, perhaps the girl, too. He’d have no idea what he was walking into.”

“Neither do we,” Casey chips in.

“Exactly, which is why I thought we might dig a bit more.”

“Boss?” Tom glances from me to Casey and back again. “You’ll need to fill me in.”

I give him a brief update on Rosie Darke’s disappearance, what Casey and I saw on the CCTV that night, and the subsequent surprise sighting of her an ocean away, apparently shackled up and happy with a motorcycle gang leader.

“Are you sure it was her?” he asks when I finish my account.

Casey said the same thing. I was sure then, and I’m still sure now. “It was her, or her exact double.”

“How did she get to America? And why would she be with the Dragons?”

“All good questions,” I agree. “Questions that I want you two to find the answers to.”

“You want me to go over there?” Tom asks.

“I do. There’s no one better at sniffing out information and analysing it.”

Tom’s my best numbers guy, as well as a lethal enforcer. But he also has charm, and the gift of the gab as we say here on the Emerald Isle. He can talk to anyone, fit in anywhere. There’s no one better suited to infiltrate Adam Ricci’s inner circle and find out what Rosie Darke, or Lisa Ricci if she prefers, is actually doing there. Backed up by Casey trawling through any digital footprints left behind, these two will get to the bottom of it.

“What do you want me to do about Rosie, once we’ve found out the answers?”

Another excellent question, and one I don’t have an answer to. Yet.

“Let’s settle for knowing what happened, then take it from there. How soon can you leave?”

“Is tomorrow soon enough?” He’s already preparing to be on his way.

“Perfect.”

SAVAGE PRINCE (BOOK TWO IN THE CARAKSAY BROTHERHOOD SERIES)

Chapter One

Edinburgh

January 2020

Aaron

I close my eyes, take two deep breaths, then a third for good measure. Inhale. Exhale. Rein in my temper — barely.

I need to get a grip.

I open my eyes to glare at the four men seated before me, two on each side of the battered table. The temptation to knock all of their heads together is almost too much.

“Gentlemen,” I snarl, through clenched teeth. “You have precisely ten seconds to come up with an alternative, acceptable proposal. Do I make myself clear?”

“But, Mr Savage,” begins the one closest, a weasly individual who I gather sees himself as the owner and managing director of the Blue Diamond, the most recent casino to open its doors in Edinburgh. His name is Reckitt, or Rickett, or something similar. “We’re happy to cooperate, obviously, but you need to understand—”

“Shut the fuck up, Reckitt.” I bring the flat of my hand down hard on the tabletop. “I want the money you owe us, not

more fucking excuses.”

“It’s Rickaby,” he corrects me. “Colin Rickaby, and—”

Fucking moron.

I give a nod to one of the men waiting beside the door. Micky Markham steps forward and delivers a not-even-remotely gentle slap to the back of the man’s head.

Colin Rickaby may technically own this property and all the gaming tables, roulette wheels and decks of marked cards housed within it, but the Savages own Edinburgh. And Glasgow, and the rest of fucking Scotland. If this fuckwit thinks he gets to trade here, on *our* turf, without paying his dues to us, he needs to think again. Maybe Micky’s attentions will bring that realisation to his thick skull.

Sadly, it seems not. Rickaby leaps to his feet and spins around, fists up. One punch from Micky puts him back in his chair, his nose bleeding.

“As I was saying,” I continue, ignoring his attempts to stem the flow of blood, “our rates are one thousand a night, plus twenty per cent of your bar takings. Unless you have a better offer for me.” I raise an expectant eyebrow, but no counterproposal is forthcoming. “Right, then. It’s settled. In return for our fee, we’ll provide you with security on your door, and a bar manager, just until you get up and running.”

It’s not such a bad deal, really. Our security will make sure no under-age punters slither in, and the bar manager will supervise that end of the operation. We’ll make sure there are a suitable supply of desirable and accommodating escorts on the premises to keep the punters amused when they’re not actually gaming, and a good time will be had by all. We get our cut, but the arrangement also means the police won’t be overly concerned about the new establishment. They know we’re efficient at keeping order and it saves them the bother.

Rickaby, it seems, still has other ideas. “But, Mr Savage,” he whines, “we already came to an agreement with those other men.”

I narrow my eyes. “What other fucking men?”

“I don’t know their names. They were here yesterday, three of them. They said we owed them for the right to open up here. We assumed they were from your... organisation.”

I look to Micky and Moses, the extra muscle I brought along to this meeting just in case additional persuasion might be required. Both shrug.

“These two are from my organisation,” I snarl, jerking my thumb at the men seated opposite Rickaby. “Why would we send anyone else?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think... They had Irish accents,” Rickaby adds, his belated attempt at being helpful. “They were very... determined, said they’d torch the place if I didn’t pay up. I handed over two grand, and they’re coming back for more next week. So you see, I can’t—”

“Shut the fuck up and listen. There’ll be no more payments to anyone else. My men will see to that. When you buy protection from us, that’s what you get. Fucking protection. Any more trouble, you come to us. Got that?”

Rickaby nods, and the sad sap looks almost grateful.

I turn my attention to the two men seated opposite Rickaby. “How come you didn’t tell me about these bloody Irish chancers?” Stevie and Ben are paid to run the protection side of our business. It’s their job to be all over this sort of shit.

“We didn’t know,” Stevie offers. “It’s the first we’ve heard of any Irish on our patch.”

“It’s your job to fucking know. You should have had his sorted. I don’t expect to be required to personally intervene in such matters. What are we paying you for?”

“Sir, it was just—”

I quell the protest with a glower, although even I know I’m not being entirely fair to our men. Stevie and Ben are accountants, not enforcers. Even so, they need to grow a pair between them and not be dragging me out here to lay the law down when some client gets uppity. And they need to keep

their ears to the ground. We won't stand for anyone thinking they can move onto our turf.

"The first payment was due last week, so that's eight thousand you owe us so far, plus the twenty percent. Shall we say a nice round fifteen. I'll take that now, in cash."

"What about the two grand we paid already?" Rickaby protests.

"Gone. Your bad."

"We don't have that sort of money lying about," he wails.

He's a fucking liar, but I note he's given up trying to convince me I'm being unreasonable. "Open the safe," I instruct him, tipping my chin in the direction of the strong box in the corner of the room.

"I don't... I mean, you can't..." Rickaby is stammering now, barely coherent.

His colleague, a man whose name I really don't recall at all, leaps to his feet and scuttles across the room, rummaging in the pocket of his suit. Mickey's Glock 22 is in his hand in an instant and trained on the man as he drops to his knees before the safe.

The casino co-owner produces a long key from his pocket. He unlocks the door, pulls it open, then shuffles back. It is only when he turns to face us again that he realises how close he came to having a bullet in his skull. He pales, his jaw slack as he gapes at the snub barrel of the handgun.

"Thank you," I say. "You see how easy this is once you get into the swing of it. Moses, will you do the honours, please?"

Moses Tremayne, the second enforcer I brought with me, leaves his station by the door. He nudges the man on the floor aside, then drops to his haunches to peer into the safe. Even from where I am, I can see the wads of notes piled high. Business must be very good indeed at the Blue Diamond. Maybe I was over-generous settling for just a thousand a night.

No, I decide. *A deal's a deal*. I watch Moses count out the fifteen grand I'm claiming as our due, then shove it into a

holdall.

“We’ll collect once a week, starting this Friday. Stevie, Ben, see to it. And you,” I wait until Rickaby raises his gaze to meet mine, “don’t make it necessary for me to come calling again. I can be quite tetchy if people waste my time. Pay up, every week, and we’ll all get along just dandy.”

I wait for a response, some indication that the message has been received loud and clear. Rickaby just glares at me and dabs at his abused nose.

I lean down until my face is millimetres from his. “Do I make myself clear?” I hiss.

He nods, and I decide to settle for that.

“If you renege on our agreement, you’ll get another visit, the price will go up, and I’ll break all your fingers. If I have to come back a third time, I’ll start taking fingers away with me.” I pause to let that sink in. “Any questions?”

“No,” comes the response. Rickaby’s hands are tucked safely under the table. “No questions, Mr Savage.”

I smile. “Enjoy the rest of your day, gentlemen.”

“That went well,” Micky observes as we stroll from the back offices out onto the casino floor. “Nice place, this. It’d be a pity to have to wreck it.”

I’m forced to agree. The faint odour of fresh paint still lingers, and Rickaby has clearly not stinted on the decor or equipment. He might be an idiot, but his taste in interior design is impeccable. Pale blue sofas are arranged at regular but intimate intervals, thick pearl grey carpeting muffles the sound of our footsteps, and artful lighting creates just the right ambience. Even during the day when the casino is deserted this place oozes class. During opening hours it should really hum.

“What are we going to do about the Irish?” Moses asks.

“They can be our next stop,” I reply. I’ve already decided I need to have a word with Jed O’Neill, who heads up organised crime on the other side of the Irish Sea, as well as extensive business interests in the U.S. Based most of the time in Dublin, he has a house outside Glasgow, though I doubt if he’s there right now. We would have heard.

I get out my phone and scroll through my speed dial numbers until I find him. I press ‘call’.

Best to try to head this bit of nonsense off at the pass. The O’Neills and the Savages have co-existed in relative harmony for generations, our respective terrains separated by the Irish Sea. We stay out of Ireland, they keep off the British mainland. That’s the deal, and I want to know why Jed has suddenly decided to break our truce and try his luck in Edinburgh.

I need to tread carefully, though.

My brother, Ethan Savage, heads up our organisation. He won’t want a war with the O’Neills if we can avoid it, but it’s vital to put up a show of strength. Our stand-off is based on the knowledge that we would tear each other to shreds if we let hostilities break out, and ultimately no one will be the winner. Jed O’Neill knows that too, so what the fuck is he playing at?

The ring tone sounds as we march toward the exit, but Jed doesn’t pick up. We’re halfway across the expanse of midnight blue shagpile and heading for the main doors when a loud clanging sound rings out from somewhere over to my right, behind the bar. Obviously, the place is not quite deserted, then. We all pause to look round.

A diminutive figure in bright green overalls is crouching to retrieve a spanner from the tiled floor. He shoves the tool back in his hessian rucksack and turns away from us, clearly intent upon whatever task he’s here for.

“Seems the renovations aren’t quite finished,” Micky observes.

I offer a non-committal grunt. As long as the casino is bright and shiny, ready for the punters, the practical details are

none of my concern. We're done here, and I have more pressing business to deal with. I end the failed call. Maybe I will pay a house call on Jed O'Neill after all.

"We're being followed." Moses is driving. He takes another quick glance in the mirror then checks over his right shoulder. "White van, two cars back."

I turn to look out the rear windscreen and straight away spot the vehicle in question. "Are you sure?" The rather battered Ford transit doesn't look exactly menacing.

"Been behind us since we left the Blue Diamond. I took a detour round the back of that trading estate back there, and it followed."

"Take the next left," I instruct, then swear when the van stays right on our tail. "Looks like you're right. Do a U-turn. Now."

Moses slams on the brakes then hauls the steering wheel around to the right. The car executes the manoeuvre with a squeal of tyres, and the van behind is forced to swerve to avoid crashing right into us. I'm watching through our back window when it comes to a shuddering halt halfway across the pavement.

"Right. Let's see what this is about." I'm out of the car, my Glock drawn, and sprinting back along the road. Luckily, Moses chose a nice, quiet side street so there should be no awkward questions from passers-by. Moses and Micky are right behind me when I reach the van and wrench the driver's door open.

And find myself looking into a pair of vivid blue eyes, set in one of the loveliest faces I have ever seen. It's a face I'm sure I've seen before, but I can't place the woman. Which baffles me. I would not have forgotten, surely.

"Get out," I command, my gun still trained on her. I scan the passenger side, but she's alone. "Micky, check the back."

Micky strolls round to the rear doors, his handgun at the ready.

She just stares at me. Her lips are working but no words emerge.

“Two choices,” I snarl, my gun trained on her temple. “Get out of the fucking van, or I shoot you where you are.” I lean in to switch off the engine and pocket the keys.

The threat seems to work. She unclips her seatbelt and turns to get out. I step back to give her space. Once she’s standing in front of me, I realise how small she is. And the sense that we’ve met before is growing stronger with every second.

“Just tools in the back, boss. And a fuckload of piping.” Micky slams the rear doors shut again.

“Do I know you?” I narrow my eyes and scrutinise the heart-shaped face with care. Those blue eyes are her most distinctive feature, but the long, blonde waves caught up in a messy ponytail are striking, too. A small nose, even features, and full lips complete the arresting picture, but I’m not a man to fall for a pretty face.

Correction, a fucking beautiful face.

“Why were you tailing us?” I demand. “Who do you work for?”

“Myself. I work for myself,” she blurts. “I’m a plumber. This is my van.”

“A plumber?” A less likely-looking plumber I’ve never seen, though she is wearing crumpled green overalls and steel toe-capped boots, now I come to look. I check the side of the van. No firm’s name or logo there.

It’s the overalls that do it. Realisation dawns.

“You were at the casino, working. You dropped your spanner.”

She nods. “Yes. That was me. I was startled, I didn’t expect to see you there.”

“What the fuck...?”

“Hello Aaron.” She makes an attempt at a smile. “It... it’s been a while.”

“You know my name?”

“Yes. We met nine years ago, in Newcastle. Obviously, you don’t remember me...”

I peer at her and cast my mind back. “Newcastle? I was there for a few weeks...”

“You stayed at my dad’s pub. The Dog and Rabbit.”

Then, it hits me. Right between the eyes. “Beth. Beth Sampson.”

“Yes. That’s me. Beth.”

“Fuck. Little Beth Sampson. All grown up now.”

She stiffens her spine and juts her chin at me, and I can’t believe I didn’t recognise her instantly. She always used to do that, exactly, that same expression of defiant determination. Apart from the overalls, she’s barely changed at all.

I holster my gun, reasonably certain that she poses no threat. But she does have questions to answer.

“Why were you following us,” I ask her again.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“You could have just said ‘Hi, Aaron, do you have a minute...’”

“I wanted to, but you were gone so fast. I ran out after you, in time to see you pulling away so I jumped in the van and followed.”

“What did you want to talk to me about?”

“I just... I wanted to ask...”

“Come on, Beth. What was so important?”

I’m conscious that I have other meetings to deal with today, and an extra visit I need to squeeze in with Jed O’Neill. I don’t have time to waste reminiscing about the good old

days, and nights, in the Dog and Rabbit, though it was certainly a pleasant enough interlude.

I was a horny young idiot back then, just twenty-one and running on pure testosterone. Beth Sampson, the landlord's daughter, was seventeen if I recall correctly, and a virgin when she finally succumbed to my ardent if somewhat cocky attempts at persuasion and let me into her room above the pub.

She was nervous, I remember that. Scared even, though that was more because she was worried her dad would catch us, not because of anything I did. She was willing. Very, very willing, and I took full advantage. She was hot, too, sweet and tight and utterly delightful. I suppose she was young, but so was I. And she was built like a goddess, or my idea of one back then. Curvy, firm flesh, breasts that filled my hands perfectly, and pretty little rosy-pink nipples. She was sex on a stick, and I was sort of obsessed, in that lust-driven, think-with-your-dick way that most men grow out of eventually.

I grew out of it pretty damn fast. A few weeks after Beth and I started screwing every chance we could, I had to leave Newcastle because my father was ill. I returned to Glasgow to help my older brother in the family business. My dad died shortly after. With almost no warning and barely any training for the job I found myself second-in command in a global organised crime empire. I had shit to do and I grew up fast.

I soon forgot about Beth Sampson, and I can't honestly say I've given her more than a passing thought occasionally since then. Looking at her now, I think I missed a trick.

"I'm listening." I deliberately soften my tone. "What do you want to ask me?"

"I..."

She gnaws on her lower lip, another mannerism I find oddly familiar. I suppose I should hurry her along, but my other business for the day seems slightly less pressing suddenly.

"Will you have dinner with me?" she blurts.

"Dinner?"

“Yes,” she says. “Please. I’ll pay.”

“You chased me halfway to Glasgow to ask me to dinner?”

“Well, yes. I didn’t have your phone number, so...”

“Okay. Where do you want to go.”

Her eyes widen. “You’ll come?”

“I like dinner.” And I think I could get to like Bath Sampson all over again. ‘Is tonight all right?’ I had been planning an exceptionally pleasurable evening at Heidi’s, a fetish club owned by our family, but I decide Beth’s offer might be more interesting.

“Tonight? Well...” She looks less eager suddenly.

“Tomorrow?” I suggest. Perhaps I’ll be able to fit Heidi’s in after all.

She nods. “Yes, tomorrow is better. I wonder, would you mind coming to Berwick. That’s where I live. There’s a really nice Italian bistro I know...”

“Berwick? You’re a long way from home.” Berwick is just over the border with England, over a hundred miles away from Edinburgh.

“I go where the work is. But it would really help me if you could come to Berwick. Unless...” Her features take on a stricken look. “You don’t have a wife, do you? I mean, I would never—”

“No. No wife. And Berwick is fine.” I have the use of our helicopter, so the distance is no real problem to me. “Do you want to text me the details for this bistro?”

“I don’t have your number, remember.”

“Right. Give me your phone.”

She hands over the device and I key in my own number. My phone buzzes in my pocket. I hang up. “There. I’m in your contacts.” And she’s in mine. “Will about seven thirty be okay for you?”

“Yes, that will be grand. I’ll be in touch.”

“Looking forward to it.”

In my peripheral vision I see Moses and Micky retreating to our car, having satisfied themselves that any danger is passed, and probably realising that this conversation has become personal. We Savages employ excellent men.

“Your van wasn’t damaged, was it?” I eye the crazy parking, half on, half off the pavement.

“No, I don’t think so, though my suspension won’t have been helped I suppose. You mean, I can go? You’re not going to shoot me?”

I grin. “Not this time, sweetheart.” I cup her chin in my palm and tip her face up. “You look good, Beth.”

“You too, Aaron.”

I wait for a few moments, give her an opportunity to retreat, to jerk her chin from my grasp. She does neither, just continues to hold my gaze. She doesn’t pull away, even when I lower my face to hers.

She gasps when my lips brush hers and lets out a small sigh. The years drop away. I’m back in that tiny attic bedroom again, Beth naked on her narrow bed, my jeans on the floor.

My cock lurches to attention, but I prefer to think with my head these days. I groan, then step back.

“See you tomorrow, Beth Sampson.”

“Yes,” she whispers. “Tomorrow.”

I help back up into her seat and hand her back her keys, then I wait until she clips on her seatbelt, before closing the door. I raise my hand in a salute as she pulls away down the road.

If my gait is slightly awkward as I saunter back to the car waiting for me, engine now running, well, that can’t be helped. And if either of them notices the tell-tale bulge under my trousers, Micky and Moses are far too polite to comment.

To carry on reading, just one-click [Savage Prince](#)

ALSO BY ASHE BARKER

SERIES AND BOX SETS

The Caraksay Brotherhood

[Savage King](#)

[Savage Prince](#)

[Savage Union](#)

The Elite Doms

[Capri Heat](#)

[Her Two Doms](#) (also in audiobook)

[A Dom is for Life](#)

[Tell Me](#)

[Collateral Damage](#)

[Her Diamond Dom](#)

The Black Combe Doms

[Dark Melodies](#)

[Sure Mastery](#)

[Hard Limits](#)

[Laid Bare](#)

[Black Combe Doms box set](#)

The Doms of Skye

[Highland Odyssey](#)

Above and Beyond

The Doms of Skye box set

Love. Honour. Conquer.

Right of Conquest

His Captive, His Conquest

A Laird's Conquest

Conquest in a Velvet Glove

viewbook.at/LoveHonourConquer

CONTEMPORARY

What Happens In Vegas

Innocent

Broken

Making The Rules

Faith

Spirit

Hardened

Chameleon

La Brat

HISTORICAL

Grace's Lover

Surrender to the Viking

Mightier Than The Sword

Deeds Not Words

The Laird and the Sassenach

Sassenach Bride

Seducing His Sassenach

Her Celtic Masters

Conquered by the Viking

Her Rogue Viking

Her Dark Viking

Her Celtic Captor

The Widow is Mine (The Conquered Brides collection)

A Scandalous Arrangement

The Highwayman's Lady

Her Noble Lords

SCI-FI

The Enforcer

Her Alien Commander

Theirs: Found and Claimed

PARANORMAL AND TIME TRAVEL

Resurrection

Shared by the Highlanders

Held In Custody

Under Viking Dominion

LGBT

Gideon

Bodywork

Hard Riders

SHORT STORIES, NOVELLAS AND ANTHOLOGIES

Lovers : A Duet of Erotic Older Woman / Younger Man Romances

Sense and Sensuality : A collection of steamy contemporary novellas

Viking Surrender (The Prologue), (also in audiobook)

Brandr (Viking Surrender, Book 1), (also in audiobook)

A Tale of Two Pirates

Brigands, Thieves and Lawless Ladies

Yes or No?

FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *Savage Union*.

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.

[Newsletter sign up](#)

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](#)

Better still, sign up for Ashe's newsletter to be the first to hear about new releases, competitions, giveaways and other fun stuff

[Newsletter sign-up](#)