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Written by Tara Moore

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RSVP

TARA MOORE



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Prologue

April 2008

New York

Coppelia Morrison lay sprawled on the satin sheets, her flawless skin almost copper against their whiteness, and her long hair, the colour of wet autumn leaves, fanned out across the pillow. Her almond eyes glowed in a shaft of sunlight as she stretched and purred.

Indolent, she turned to gaze at her sleeping companion, marvelling at the clean perfection of his jaw-line, the promise of strength in the face now so innocent and relaxed in sleep. Another ten years and Fintan Granville would be a man to reckon with, just like Carrick, his older brother, and others of the Granville clan. Now, at a mere nineteen, he was putty in her hands, a delightful toy to be picked up and played with when the mood took her. And the irony of it all was that Fin thought *he* was the one calling the shots, that she was just his version of Mrs Robinson, perfect for expanding his sexual repertoire. Little did he know that when someone had pointed him out to her in a nightclub one evening, it was the name – Granville – that had interested her, far more than his gorgeous youthful body (although *that* was a definite bonus). Like everything else that caught her eye, it was just a matter of time before he was hers for the taking.

Snuggling closer, she flicked her tongue gently over the lobe of his ear. 'Mm, that was fun, baby.' The words were a whisper of breath, barely a sigh. 'But tell me, what's it like sleeping with the enemy?'

Young Fintan Granville dreamt sweetly on and heard not a word.

Her own lids beginning to droop, Coppelia slid an arm round his hard young body and surrendered herself to delicious dreams of revenge.

Carrickross House, County Kerry, Ireland

Honoria Granville sat in her spacious drawing room, gazing through the large bay window at the splendid view of lake and mountain before her.

'Rajesh!' she called, gripping the ivory boar's head that topped her favourite walking stick and tapping the gleaming floorboards twice to summon her servant.

Sensing rather than hearing his quiet approach, she smiled a little grimly to herself. There was a time when her hearing was so acute she could hear the maids laughing in the kitchen, a time when she could hear Henry turn the pages of a book in the library two rooms away, the tiny secretive clink of the crystal glass as he poured yet another whiskey and the soft hiss as he added the soda. There had also come a time when, in the dark reaches of the night, she could hear the soft stealthy whisper of his feet padding across his bedroom floor and the oh-so-careful turning of the doorknob as lust led him out into the night and the soft welcoming arms of other women.

One woman in particular.

Her hand tightened on her stick, the skin over the knuckles stretched thin as rice-paper. All these years later, the memory still brought a bitter twist to her mouth, replaced almost immediately by an expression of satisfaction. Henry had paid the ultimate price for that piece of folly.

As Rajesh took up his habitual position, to the left of her chair but slightly behind it, she made no acknowledgement, knowing that when it became necessary he would move forward into her line of vision. Instead, she relaxed slightly against the back of the upright mahogany chair, where tigers prowled through an elaborately carved jungle.

Henry and the past faded and her gaze, penetrating as ever, fixed itself once more on the view outside her drawing-room window.

The daffodils had performed well this year, disporting themselves in a great and regal display – the baize-green lawn, as it swept between Scots pines and vivid rhododendron down to the water beyond, providing a splendid backdrop to the yellow gold. Across the lake, its shoulders forested, Nead an Iolair mountain – the Eagle's Nest – reared its brooding head over the scene.

At last Honoria spoke, her voice vibrating with its characteristically harsh timbre. 'They should be receiving their invitations soon.'

She could sense his smile, no doubt matching hers in grimness.

After a pause she spoke again, with a dry chuckle. 'What do you think they will make of them, Rajesh?'

The question demanded no reply. He laid a reassuring hand on the shoulder of her heavily embroidered silk kameez.

'Ah, yes, we've set the cat among the pigeons,' she said gloatingly, and, with a sudden surge of energy, rose to her feet and stepped forward between the heavily fringed curtains, into the great bay window. When she spoke it was as if she addressed the mountain looming across the lake.

'Come, Coppelia! Come and do your worst!'

As she swung about to face him, her silver hair piled thickly on her head and her face alive with gleeful malice, the years fell away and Rajesh saw in her once more the young memsahib with whom he had fallen in love long years ago and for whom he would still willingly lay down his life. Honoria. His queen. His rani.

A shadow crossed her face. 'Rajesh,' she asked abruptly, 'do you think this will be the last game we play together, you and I?'

'I doubt that very much, Rani,' he replied, a wry smile curving his lips. If propriety hadn't dictated otherwise, he might have taken her in his arms.

Chapter 1

May

Dublin

Ashling Morrison gave a quick check around the studio, slung her favourite Nikon camera around her neck, grabbed the handle of her Vuitton trolley-case and trundled to the door.

'Is that it? Are you off?' Moira, her assistant, shoved her head out of the darkroom where she'd been developing a batch of prints for *Irish Crème*, a new high-society mag.

'I am, God help me.' Slightly wild-eyed, Ashling fired off the usual last-minute volley of instructions. 'Now don't forget – email me those test shots on her ladyship asap.' 'Her ladyship' was an accurate nickname for Tempest O'Leary, an ageing supermodel whose unreasonable demands were legendary. 'And don't forget to lock up properly. You've got my contact numbers in case of emergency, and I've left both Rossa's number and the number for Carrickross pinned on the noticeboard. Oh, and tell anyone who asks that it'll be business as usual come Monday. I'm not in a position yet where I can afford to turn down work.'

Moira flapped an impatient hand. 'Ah, would you get out of here, for God's sake! I'm not a complete eejit, you know. And, Ashling,' she called just before the door closed, 'remember, you're one lucky cow! I wouldn't turn down a ride on Rossa Granville's trike meself!'

Ashling grinned, letting the door slam behind her. Cheeky madam! But Moira was right. She was lucky, luckier than she'd ever dared to imagine. The great solitaire diamond shimmering on her left hand was proof of that – a Granville family heirloom. She checked her watch, her excitement rising as she thought of

her fiancé who at that very moment would be battling the heavy Dublin traffic from the airport on his way to meet her. The thought made her spirits soar as she bumped her suitcase all the way downstairs from her studio, In Focus, set right at the top of an old four-storey Georgian building in Exchequer Street. Although she appreciated its classic design and history, this was one of those times when she would have sold her soul for the modern convenience of an elevator. Several flights of uneven creaky stairs were certainly not the ideal, but the central location was second to none and, with rents as exorbitant as they were in this part of Dublin, she felt blessed to have secured it.

Down she went past the firm of chartered accountants on the third floor, the kooky hypnotherapist's on the second and finally on down to the ground floor, which had been given over to a famous chocolatier. But there was no time today to stop and drool over the coffee pralines or strawberry liqueurs and she set off at a half-trot, dragging the suitcase behind her, swinging right at the junction of Exchequer Street and Grafton Street and heading up the glamorous pedestrianised thoroughfare towards St Stephen's Green. She had arranged to meet Rossa on the far side, where he had some hope of finding a parking space. Determinedly, she elbowed her way past the crowd of shoppers and tourists thronging the famous old street with its wealth of designer boutiques and eclectic book and art shops, past Bewley's, the world-famous coffee shop, from which issued the most beguiling of aromas. When time permitted, there was nothing she loved more than to linger, her photographer's eye constantly assessing the tide of humanity flowing past, marvelling at the change wrought in the demographics over the last few years. Today, foreign faces and voices were as much in evidence as Irish ones. Poles, Romanians, Somalians, Chinese, all in search of the Promised Land – an ironic turnaround from the days when it was the Irish who packed their bags and set sail for foreign climes.

Refusing to be distracted, Ashling pressed on, skilfully avoiding the crush, coming to a halt only when forced to at a pedestrian

crossing opposite St Stephen's Green. She wasn't exactly late, but Rossa wasn't renowned for his patience and in her mind's eye she pictured him drumming impatiently on the steering-wheel of his silver Aston Martin.

When the lights changed she scurried across, passing beneath Fusiliers' Arch at the entrance to the park, and on past the duck pond where a rather appealing tableau was being enacted: a mother and toddler feeding the ducks. Normally such a scene would have had her diving for her camera, but now she gathered pace, finally emerging, puffing and triumphant, on the far side of the Green.

Pausing to catch her breath, she gazed excitedly around and there, illegally parked in a busy traffic lane and intent on charming a hefty-looking female traffic warden, stood Rossa. Gorgeous, sexy Rossa Granville.

Abandoning her suitcase, she rushed to him and laughingly flung her arms around his neck.

'Whoa, steady on there!' He staggered playfully under her weight and winked at the traffic warden. 'That's the great thing about going away – guarantees an enthusiastic reception when you get back. Must go more often!'

'Don't even say that!' With a mock pout, Ashling went to pull away, but he held her tight around the waist, treating her to the full force of his mega-watt smile. She grinned and relaxed against him. 'I was so relieved when you phoned from the airport this morning. I was worried that something might have come up to keep you in Thailand and I'd end up rattling round Carrickross on my own. Oh, baby, I've missed you so much!'

'Missed you more,' came Rossa's muffled voice against the top of her head.

She pulled back again. 'Did you really?'

'Hey, what do you think?' He grinned like a naughty little boy. 'I can't tell you how boring it is being out there on my own!'

'Oh yes, Hua Hin is such a shit-hole.' Her tone was playful but a little dry. 'All that gorgeous sun, sea and sensuous dusky

maidens! Cocktails on the beach, picture-postcard sunsets and midnight dips! Real penance, I should imagine!' She tried hard not to be jealous of Rossa's glittering career as a pilot with Thai-Orient, but, God, she wouldn't be human if she didn't sometimes resent the way it kept him from her for weeks at a time.

With a mischievous grin, Rossa picked up her case and stowed it in the boot of his car. 'Come on, love of my life! Let's get this show on the road. I'm hoping to make it onto the dual carriageway before the worst of the traffic hits. That way, we should be in Kerry well before Grandmother sends out the dogs.'

With total disregard for the motorists who glared at him as they changed lanes to get past the Aston Martin, he sauntered round and opened the passenger door for her.

' "Dinner will be at eight prompt!" ' He did a perfect impersonation of his grandmother's cut-glass diction, slightly nasal, über grand. ' "Dress formal! No farting, burping or shagging in the hayloft!" '

'Rossa, don't!' Ashling giggled at such irreverence. Something of a throwback to the British Raj, Honoria Granville managed to really intimidate her, despite the fact that she had given the engagement her full approval.

As Rossa climbed in beside her, she laid a proprietary hand on his thigh, feeling the muscles contract as he slipped the car into gear and screeched away across two lanes of traffic, waving an airy two-fingered salute out the window to the fuming motorists. Ashling held on tight and prepared for a bumpy ride. But that was Rossa: a law unto himself. Like all of the Granvilles, Ashling reflected, still bemused by how her life had changed in just a few short months, and all thanks to a totally unexpected commission from Honoria Granville to do some formal family portraits at their magnificent country estate in Kerry. In truth, the prospect had taken her aback. Although she had lately been touted as Ireland's answer to her all-time heroine, the American photographer Annie Leibovitz, and was becoming a 'name' in the cut-throat world of society photographers, she had thought her

methods a little avant garde for such a grand old family. But, wow! What an experience it had turned out to be – what a family!

Never one to turn down a challenge, Ashling had excelled herself and the result had been a collection of arresting and stylish portraits. Those of the twins, Indigo and Sapphire, were particularly remarkable. But then the subjects had been pretty remarkable in their own right: two beautiful beings, almost scarily perfect – blonde, blue-eyed, angelic – but with a hint of something disturbing behind their smiles.

Two significant members of the family were away on the day of the shoot. Carrick Granville, Rossa's elder brother, was in Japan on business and his Uncle Jaspar, by all accounts a colourful character, lived in Kenya. Ashling thought it strange that Honoria had arranged the photographic session in their absence. Disappointing, too. She had especially wanted to meet Carrick, who was much lauded by the press for his innovative architecture and 'green' credentials. But then it didn't take a genius to figure out that Honoria Granville marched to her own drum and perhaps Ashling shouldn't have been too surprised to find that whilst two key members of the family were absent, Rajesh, her Indian servant, was included in the family pictures.

As for Rossa, well, she had noticed him straight away. One look in those deep-set turquoise eyes and she had practically been down to her underwear. And he had been so kind and attentive, making sure she was well supplied with coffee and sandwiches, to keep her strength up, as he put it. When he invited her to dinner on the second evening at an amazing local fish restaurant – the first evening she had dined en famille – she didn't even pretend reluctance. So beguiled was she that she could have eaten sawdust for all the attention she paid to the food. And, over coffee, when he had bashfully admitted to an interest in photography and asked her if she wouldn't mind having a look at his collection, she agreed without hesitation, although usually the prospect of looking at other people's holiday snaps sent her running for the hills. The snaps were good, not brilliant, but certainly better than average –

land- and seascapes capturing the exotic beauty of Hua Hin where he had his base. There were pictures of the locals, too, and she couldn't help but notice that one bewitching young woman with waist-length hair and bold laughing eyes appeared several times. His girlfriend perhaps? She was surprised to feel a surge of jealousy.

But she needn't have worried. By the time she returned to Dublin, Rossa had made it plain that his interest lay not only in photography but in one particular photographer – her – and she found herself caught up in a whirlwind romance that would transform her life. Two months later they were engaged – and to Ashling's great surprise the severe Honoria unhesitatingly gave them her blessing.

Now here they were en route to where it all began to discuss arrangements for the Midsummer Ball, at which Honoria intended to formally announce the engagement.

'Penny for your thoughts?' Rossa took his hand off the gearstick for a moment and lightly squeezed her fingers.

'I was just thinking ahead to the Midsummer Ball and your grandmother's plans.' Ashling allowed herself a small, good-humoured grimace. 'We've spoken a few times on the phone recently and let's just say consulting with you and me appears to be something of a formality.'

The sun, already beginning its descent, slanted through the windscreen and Rossa pulled a pair of Ray-Bans from his top pocket and slipped them on. 'Oh dear, taking over the whole show, is she? I'm afraid old habits die hard.'

'You could say that! She seems to have covered all the bases, everything from a champagne fountain to a chocolate one – the last being Sapphire's suggestion, I believe. But I don't want to sound as if I'm moaning because, in fairness, she seems determined to make the event "appealing to the young folk".' She hooked her fingers around the expression.

Rossa laughed incredulously. 'Well, I'll be damned, a chocolate fountain. I've heard it all now! Trust Cousin Sapph to come up

with a hare-brained idea like that. Still, what Sapph wants Sapph gets. Grandmother has forever been trying to make up to her for something or other. I've never been exactly sure what.' Rossa gestured to the glove compartment. 'I think I need a ciggie. Will you do the honours?'

While she didn't approve of smoking, Ashling had to admit she did enjoy *watching* Rossa smoke. It was utterly sexy, conjuring up visions of Bogie and Bacall. She opened the compartment and pulled out a leather-covered cigarette case on which his initials had been embossed along with the insignia of his airline. There was a gold Dunhill lighter resting there too. Rossa had expensive tastes – but then he was a Granville. She lit the cigarette, drew tentatively on it, and when she was sure it was alight passed it to him, her eyes fastening on his strong brown wrist with its smattering of strawberry-blond hair. New watch too? Porsche, by the look of it. She'd photographed a display of them recently for one of the glossies and knew the genuine article would have set him back a cool four grand or so.

He took a hungry drag, exhaling a moment later in a tinge of blue-tinted smoke. 'Manna!' Pressing a button on the console between them, he lowered the driver's window to allow the smoke to clear.

A delicious quiver of anticipation ran down Ashling's spine. She could hardly wait for tonight and the feel of his rock-hard body against her own. Happily she thought of the gorgeous scanties from Agent Provocateur nestling in her suitcase.

'So have you told your mother the news yet?'

'What?' The question jerked her out of her complacency and the quiver that ran down her spine this time was more trepidation than fantasy. 'Um . . . not yet. She's still in the States. I'd – em – prefer to tell her in person. It's only fair.'

'You're not ashamed of me, I hope?' His tone was teasing.

'As if! It's just – it's just, well, Mother is not like other women. She needs careful handling.'

Rossa had heard of Coppelia Morrison. You'd have to have

been living under a rock for the last umpteen years not to. Her photograph was forever splashed all over the newspapers detailing her exploits and the latest of her string of conquests, all stinking rich and many looking as though they were barely legal. He had been surprised that his grandmother hadn't balked at the connection. To Honoria's mind, Coppelia Morrison was the worst kind of woman – vulgar, social-climbing, walking fodder for the tabloids. One of her favourite sayings came to mind: *Lie down with dogs and you'll get up with fleas.* Yes, it was very odd that Honoria had remained uncharacteristically silent on the subject. She had to have known of Ashling's relationship to Coppelia even before she hired her for the photo-shoot.

'Anyway,' Ashling slipped into her Scarlett O'Hara impression, '*I don't want to think about that now. I'll think about it tomorrow.*'

'Fair enough. Let's have some music instead. Snow Patrol?'

'Perfect!' Ashling nestled back against the luxurious upholstery and a moment later found them both singing along to 'Chasing Cars'.

Ashling lurched awake as the car took a sharp bend to the right and started up a long side-road snaking beneath an enormous vaulted cathedral of larch trees.

'Almost there.' Rossa touched her thigh lightly as she blinked herself back to full consciousness and gazed out into the purple dusk.

Ashling gave an involuntary shudder. They were nearly at Carrickross and this time she would enter it as an almost-member of the family.

Rossa noticed the movement. 'Cold?' he asked, and began fiddling with the temperature regulator on the dashboard.

'A bit,' Ashling lied, unwilling to tell him how scared she was; that as an only child she was nervous about becoming part of such a large family, worried about being accepted by all the others, about fitting in and finding her own niche. Something of her thoughts must have transmitted themselves to him anyway,

because he reached across and squeezed her fingers reassuringly. Immediately she relaxed, covertly studying the strong lines of his face. She was with Rossa – Rossa Granville, the man of her dreams, soon to be her husband. Everything would be all right.

'I've phoned ahead to let them know we're nearly there,' said Rossa. 'Spoke to Noreen – you remember her – the cook?'

'Sure.' Ashling had grown fond of Noreen – and her cooking – on her last visit, short as it was.

As the car breasted and descended a final hill they found themselves skirting the old stone walls that surrounded the vast Carrickross estate. In the gathering gloom the iron gates rose up in monolithic splendour and Ashling's anxiety levels increased once more. They were not allayed by the sudden thundering of approaching hooves. In another moment, the headlights picked out the figure of Seán McCarthy, astride a magnificent Arabian stallion. Seán was the Carrickross groom, as well as gamekeeper-in-training, occasional chauffeur, odd-job man and jack-of-all-trades about the estate.

Jumping to the ground, he quickly tethered the horse to a nearby hitching post, then dragged the heavy gates open with a grating noise across the gravel. Greeting them both with a nod, he came and leaned on the window Rossa had slid open.

'Fuckin' great wheels, Rossa! Who did you have to shag for that?'

Rossa laughed, not at all put out by the familiarity. The pair had known each other since childhood. 'Wouldn't you like to know, me old son!' He gestured towards the horse, softly blowing streams of breath through its nostrils and crunching its hooves impatiently into the ground. 'How's The Sheikh? I must say, he looks in fine fettle!'

'Jesus, he's great,' Seán concurred. 'Not a bother on him. Carrick has a good eye for a horse.'

'Better than mine anyway,' Rossa agreed, ruefully referring to his well-known penchant for gambling.

Seán grinned, running a brazen eye over Ashling. 'Oh, I don't

know, Miss Ashling is a grand little filly. Although why she doesn't show you a clean pair of heels is beyond me.'

Pretending pique, Rossa revved the engine. 'Ah, would you feck off, Seán, you cheeky beggar, and go and do a bit of work for a change!' Throwing the car into gear, he sped away up the long twisting tree-lined drive, leaving a chuckling Seán to lock the gates for the night.

Breaking clear of the last covering of trees, a thick huddle of Scots pines, Ashling caught her breath as Carrickross was revealed in all its splendour. In the dark, and with artfully arranged floodlights playing over its tall-chimneyed, multi-turreted facade, it truly was the stuff of fairy tales.

Rossa pulled up to allow her to drink in the view.

'Well, Ash, is it as good as you remember?' he asked with a note of pride in his voice.

'Amazing!' Ashling was overawed. She hadn't remembered it being quite so . . . overwhelming. But then, the first and only time she'd been here before had been on business and though she had admired it in the way one admires a beautiful hotel or civic building, her main focus had been on poses, angles and lighting meters – and, most of all, on people. Now she was regarding it in a completely different way. Now, it was personal. Slowly her eyes ranged over the pale limestone facade – quarried locally, added to and altered by generations of Granvilles over hundreds of years. In daylight, she knew, an experienced eye could see the joins, the tell-tale colour variation where firstly the west wing was added and later, in another century altogether, the east, the pair reaching forward from the main building like arms, ready to embrace.

Rossa started the engine again and swept up the drive, swerving to a stop at the foot of the flight of steps that led to the main doorway. Ashling gazed around her, remembering it all. The drive circled round an oval of lawn which, with the clever placing of box hedging, had been fashioned to form a miniature maze. A sundial, the copper verdigris with age, sat directly in the centre on a base of granite inset with the Granville coat of arms. Satsuma-coloured

light spilled in diamond facets from behind the many mullioned windows. The marble steps leading up to the door were bordered on each side by ornately carved balustrades, the newels of which were topped off by great ornamental urns out of which spilled a profusion of trailing ivy and lobelia in nursery pinks and blues.

Suddenly the great doors were thrown open and a figure trotted down the steps: Noreen McCarthy, the cook-cum-housekeeper and mother of Seán.

'Lord Almighty, you poor little thing, sure you must be exhausted! Leave the luggage – I'll have it brought in and taken upstairs for you.'

Grabbing Ashling by the arm Noreen helped her out and bustled her up the steps, leaving Rossa to fend for himself. She threw a disgusted look back over her shoulder at the Aston Martin.

'Them sports cars are all very well and good, pet, if you ask me, but if it's comfort you want, you're barking up the wrong tree. Come on in now and you can have a little freshen-up in the ladies' room off the hall before seeing the mistress. She's waiting for you in Little India.'

'Little India?' Ashling wasn't sure she'd heard right.

Noreen chuckled. 'Aye, Little India. It's what we call the main drawing room on account of it being stuffed with all sorts of heathen objects picked up by the mistress on her travels there. The small drawing room in the east wing is Little China – did you not see it last time you were here?' She rattled on without waiting for an answer as she led Ashling into the entrance hall. 'All Chinese lacquer furniture, silk carpets and great big ugly dragon ornaments that I, personally, wouldn't give you thanks for. But then, what do I know? Then, there's Little Africa – that's where Jaspar stays on his very occasional trips home from Kenya. The savage-looking things in there would give you nightmares. Big ugly masks and spears and the likes. Even a shrunken head or two.' Noreen shot her a mischievous look. 'And guess what we call the twins' suite?

Little Bedlam!' She threw back her head and laughed heartily. 'Your own Rossa came up with that one. Didn't you, darlin'?'

Rossa smiled as he caught up with them and dropped a kiss on her cheek. 'I hope you're not filling my beautiful fiancée's ears with tales of horror, Noreen?'

Noreen laughed. 'I'm just giving her the lie of the land, that's all.'

'Ready to beard the dragon, sweetheart?' Rossa steered Ashling towards the drawing room. 'Best get it over with!'

Noreen slapped his hand away sharply. 'For heaven's sake, would you give the poor girl a chance to freshen up, Rossa!' She rolled her eyes at Ashling. 'Men! They haven't a clue!'

Ashling laughed. 'You can say that again! Especially Rossa.' She flipped him an airy wave. 'You go on ahead. I won't be long.'

'Well, be it at your own risk. Grandmother may have reduced me to a heap of ashes by that time!' Rossa made a mock-grimace and set off, walking as though on his way to the gallows.

Unsympathetic, Ashling blew him a kiss. 'I doubt it. Anyway, aren't dragons supposed to be extinct?'

'Not this one. This one is very much alive and full of fire.'

Honoria had been standing discreetly by the window as Rossa's car pulled up in front of the house. Her lips had quirked slightly, then clamped together in satisfaction. How fortunate that Ashling had turned out to be so pleasing to the eye and Rossa so malleable! Her grandson, much as she loved him, had always been somewhat shallow – a magpie attracted by bright shiny objects and tireless in his pursuit to make them his own.

'I, Rajesh, am a puppeteer,' Honoria announced grandly, turning from the window and levering herself somewhat stiffly into her favourite chair. 'The strings may not always be visible, but they are there nevertheless and now the curtain is set to rise on the greatest show of all.'

'Indeed, Rani.' Rajesh bowed from the waist and handed her a glass of ruby port, the facets of the crystal catching the light and shearing off along the walls like broken diamonds.

'She is beautiful, is she not – Ashling? Intelligent and principled too, the kind of girl any grandmother would wish for her grandson.' A tremor ran through her hand. The glass wobbled dangerously. 'All that *and* the daughter of my greatest enemy. Do not let me weaken, Rajesh. Remind me always. No mercy.'

'No mercy,' Rajesh repeated softly. 'Keep your enemies close and your enemy's daughter closer.'

Honoria smiled. 'Exactly so. You have always understood me so well.' She leaned back, sipped her drink and waited for the knock on the door that would announce the presence of her grandson and his fiancée.

She didn't have long to wait. Rossa erupted through the door and, sinking to his knees beside her chair, took her hand in both of his and kissed it. It was a typical over-the-top Rossa entrance, but Honoria lapped it up.

'Grandmother, how lovely to see you!'

'Silly boy!' She gestured for him to get up and looked over his shoulder. 'And where is the lovely Ashling?'

'Just gone to freshen up. She won't be long.'

'Such a wearying trip,' Honoria sympathised. 'One can see why Carrick keeps a helicopter.'

Any mention of Carrick's wealth, so much greater than his own, always brought out Rossa's petulant side. 'We've only come from Dublin, a mere four-hour drive. Anyway, it's not as though Ashling is some wishy-washy milksop. She might look fragile, but she's tough as old boots, really. Every bit as tough as you were when you sailed up the Ganges or climbed the Himalayas or led the Charge of the Light Brigade in your youth!'

'Led the Charge of the Light Brigade! What nonsense! Do you suppose I am two hundred years old? Besides, that was in the Crimea, you ignorant boy!' Honoria gave a loud sniff and her mouth pruned, but Rossa could see she was pleased with his sly flattery. 'Ah, and here is the delightful Ashling, just in time to save me from any more of your nonsense!' Honoria smiled and held her hand out graciously as Ashling approached. 'Welcome

back to Carrickross, my dear. Please excuse me if I don't get up. Old bones, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, not too painful, I hope?' Ashling took the proffered hand and wondered if she should kiss Honoria. As she hesitated, Honoria solved the problem by drawing her down to sit in the armchair beside her.

'Some wine for the children, please, Rajesh! Despite your protestations, Rossa, I'm sure Ashling, at least, must be fatigued from the long drive.' She scanned her from head to foot with her penetrating gaze. 'Well, child, how lovely you look tonight! Rossa, I trust you know how lucky you are.'

Ashling smiled, pleased that she had chosen to wear her favourite Orla Kiely knee-length cashmere sweater dress. It never failed to make her feel confident and glamorous and the soft lavender colour really suited her complexion. She had added a bejewelled Christian Lacroix pendant with matching earrings. It was undoubtedly a statement piece of jewellery but what better evening to make a statement? Her shoes were Louboutin, not killer-heels, but high enough to show her slender legs to their best advantage. She had pulled her hair up in a soft wispy up-do and kept her make-up light. As her stepmother, Coppelia, was fond of saying, the only real adornment a girl needed was her youth. Pleased with her appearance, Ashling had nevertheless enlisted Noreen's opinion when she'd emerged from the cloakroom.

'Do you look all right?' Disbelievingly, Noreen had raked her head to toe. 'What do you mean do you look all right? Sure you look amazin', like one of them big filum stars from Hollywood. I don't know whether to bow or to ask for your autograph.'

Now Ashling smiled as Rajesh presented her with a glass of wine, his peculiarly intent eyes fixed on her face. A sudden bout of nerves made the stem of the glass shake slightly in her hand. She took a sip, feeling slightly better as the liquid warmed her blood.

Rossa, of course, was experiencing no such qualms. Perching himself on the arm of Honoria's armchair, he continued both to

charm and to annoy her in the way that came as natural to him as breathing.

'So, Grandmother, I hear you've been having a merry old time sorting out all this engagement stuff.'

Ashling's head came up, not too sure she liked their engagement being referred to in such casual terms, but Honoria seemed not in the least fazed.

'Engagements take a lot of organisation, young man,' she admonished him lightly. 'Things must be done properly and must be seen to be done properly. People look to the Granvilles for the lead in these matters and we must not let the side down.'

Ashling flinched inwardly, thinking of her stepmother, who considered nobody's side but her own. She imagined the scene when these two formidable women came face to face for the very first time. Clash of the Titans? The flinch became a full-grown shudder but, luckily, the older woman was gesturing for Rajesh to bring her something from her writing bureau on the far side of the room and didn't notice.

'Thank you, Rajesh.' She took a cream vellum envelope from him and eased out a heavily embossed formal invitation which she waved under their noses. 'The invitation, my dears! I know you won't mind that I took the liberty of having these printed, knowing how busy you are, Rossa, flying round the world, and you, Ashling, pursuing your own, no doubt estimable career. Still, that can get quite in the way of important matters.' The last was said with something of a hard look at Ashling. Honoria tapped the invitation against her palm. 'In any case, you will be pleased to know that they are, as we speak, winging their way all round the world. So important to give sufficient notice, especially to those who have chosen to squirrel themselves away abroad.'

Rossa took the invitation from her, scanned it briefly, then handed it to Ashling. 'Oh, Grandmother, how lovely and how kind of you,' he said stiffly, 'but I think Ashling and I would have preferred—'

Honoria's hand scythed through the air. 'Tosh! These things

are better left in experienced hands. In any case, I did, indeed, send a sample to you in Thailand, Rossa, and to Ashling also, but as neither one of you responded I'm afraid I took your silence as acquiescence. I apologise unreservedly if you feel I took too much upon myself.' There was a sudden shine in her eyes and her hand trembled slightly in apparent distress.

Quickly, Ashling hurried to reassure her. 'Oh, no, it's fine. Honestly! It saves us the bother and I'm not surprised about the post. Mine goes astray all the time. Please don't be upset. We're both very grateful, aren't we, Rossa? Rossa?' She glanced at him as he made no reply, just sat looking suddenly pale and slightly sick.

He gave a slight jerk, suddenly recollecting himself. 'What? Oh, yes. Yes, of course we're grateful, Grandmother. I only wish . . .'

Honoria gazed at him stonily. 'What, Rossa? You wish what?'

His own gaze didn't meet hers and Ashling was aware of a strange undercurrent running between the pair.

'Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.' Rossa smiled unconvincingly.

'I'm pleased to hear it!' Honoria turned to Ashling. 'I did not, of course, forget your stepmother, Ashling, and I trust you will be pleased to hear that an invitation was sent to her suite at the New York Hilton.'

It was Ashling who looked pale and a little sick now, her eyes signalling Rossa's in a morse code of distress, as Honoria, having delivered this *coup de grâce*, rose stiffly to her feet.

'Now, if you two young people will excuse me, I shall leave you to dine alone. It has grown late and I find I am more weary than I expected to be. Age, sadly, must ever be one's master. Still, Noreen will take excellent care of you. There is trout, I believe, caught in our own river.'

Utterly dismayed, Ashling watched her exit the room, leaning heavily on her boar's-head walking stick, Rajesh, as ever, in attendance. Quickly, she put her glass down on a nearby table, but it fell to the floor and smashed in pieces.

'Jesus! Fucking hell, Rossa! My stepmother! She's told my

stepmother. Christ, she's going to go ballistic! I wanted to tell her myself.' She fell to her knees and began to clear up the glass, uncaring even when a small shard pierced her thumb. 'Oh, I know you're pissed off she stole our thunder but at least no one's going to be out for your blood. But my stepmother will never understand. Not in a month of Sundays.' A hysterical note entered her voice. 'Take a good long look and remember me as I am now, Rossa, because, as of the moment Coppelia Morrison receives that invite, I am officially Dead Woman Walking.'

Honoria sat at her dressing table pondering the success of the evening. She chuckled as she recalled the expression on her grandson's face as he struggled to bring his panic under control. Her face hardened. Nothing and no one must be allowed to jeopardise her plan and if its success depended on a little manipulation here or a little bending of the truth there, so be it. As for Ashling, Honoria had never sent the invitation to her. She couldn't risk the girl telephoning Rossa for his opinion, unwittingly putting him on the alert and in a position to stay on in Thailand and intercept the invitation on arrival there. That was not what Honoria had in mind. Not at all.

Ashling stared at her image in the bathroom mirror in Rossa's suite, although she had been given her own opulent rooms across from his, Honoria doubtless being of a generation who liked to pretend nice girls didn't. Or, perhaps, she really was that naive. She raised nervous fingers to soothe the frown from her brow and the tension from her lips. Rossa was waiting for her in the bedroom, in the luxurious four-poster bed, but all the pleasurable anticipation she had been feeling had fled and she could think only of that lethal invitation winging its way to New York like a little ticking bomb. Obviously it hadn't arrived yet. She would have heard the explosion had it found its mark.

She had suffered a profound shock and now a potent mix of nervous tension, anger and sheer panic was coursing through her

veins. Why in God's name had she neglected to tell her stepmother before now? There were reasons, yes – good solid rational ones like wanting to tell her face to face rather than over the phone – but all the reasons in the world were like feathers when weighed against this looming catastrophe. Besides, the real reason had been an instinctive one – she felt sure that her stepmother would pour scorn on this wonderful whirlwind romance, this fairy-tale engagement. But why should this frighten her so much? Did she feel that her newfound happiness was so fragile that one scathing look from Coppelia could shatter it?

Ashling resolutely shook her head to banish these thoughts. She picked up her hairbrush and vigorously began to brush her dark hair. Why did she always have to feel so insecure? She had come to think of her life as a jigsaw, of which many of the pieces had gone missing or didn't quite fit. Round pegs and square holes. She had been conscious of this even as a small child when her mother's remoteness had vaguely puzzled her. Eventually she had come to understand that the word 'stepmother' was the jigsaw piece that completed *that* part of the puzzle.

On the morning of her thirteenth birthday another jigsaw piece had awaited her, together with the solid gold charm bracelet from Tiffany's and an original black-and-white study by Annie Leibovitz. There had been an over-generous cheque, too, which, in her memory, seemed to hover unsupported over the silver serving dishes, her father's eyes the apprehensive backdrop. What had it been, that cheque? she had often wondered. Consolation prize, payoff, bribe? Whatever the intention, the knowledge that was served up with it had been a heavy burden to place on such young shoulders.

Ashling's father, Edward, had delivered the blow, stumblingly and with embarrassed tenderness. He had obviously rehearsed the words, coated them with honey, but still they cut like a knife. She was *special.* She was *chosen*. She was . . . adopted. Adopted! The word clanged, reverberating in the air between them. She recalled a sudden whooshing noise in her ears and her father's voice,

echoey, seeming to come from a distance. Ashling had been adopted by him and his first wife, Margery, before her sudden decline and untimely death. Two years later, persuaded that the infant Ashling needed a mother, he had married Coppelia. He'd looked a little bewildered here and unhappy, as if he couldn't quite figure out how that had actually come to pass. They had agreed to keep the fact of her adoption a secret until she was old enough to understand.

Had Coppelia stage-managed the whole birthday revelation? Ashling couldn't help but wonder now with the benefit of hindsight. Coppelia always did wear the trousers in that relationship. They certainly made an unlikely pairing. Her adoptive father was a quiet bookish man, private, warm-hearted and old before his time – Coppelia, the antithesis, a social and exotic butterfly.

Ashling shrugged on the emerald-silk Agent Provocateur cami, enjoying the caress of the luxurious material against her skin. She stepped into the matching thong and stood back to view her reflection in the full-length mirror-tiled walls. Sexy, definitely sexy! She spritzed on some Eau d'Hadrien and ruthlessly pushed away the old memories and the future fears. The past was past. Her father, darling man, was dead and more than likely, especially after Honoria's little bombshell, she and her stepmother would now drift apart, living their separate lives. She must learn to live in the here and now – and *now* it was high time she was in Rossa Granville's arms.

But when she emerged from the bathroom, Rossa was already asleep, his chest rising and falling steadily, small puffs of air escaping from between his lips. Feeling slightly ridiculous, she caught sight of herself in the dressing-table mirror, marble pale in the scraps of emerald-green underwear. All undressed and nowhere to go! Disappointed, she turned off the light, climbed into bed and slipped her arm around Rossa's waist.

As her eyes closed, she was unaware that his had opened and were fixed unseeingly on the wall opposite.

*

In the morning Rossa was up and dressed before she was even awake. Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she watched him run a comb quickly through his hair, straighten the collar of his shirt and pat on some Bulgari cologne.

'Rossa?' She struggled up on her elbow. 'Where are you going?'

He spun quickly round, then strode over and dropped a kiss on her lips.

'Oh, you're awake. I'm sorry I woke you, darling. And I'm even sorrier to tell you I'm going to have to leave you. I have to go back to Thailand sooner than I imagined. There was a phone call earlier. Seems someone cocked up the schedules and I'm actually due to captain a flight to Australia in the next forty-eight hours, if you can believe that. Incompetent bastards!'

'Oh no, Rossa! You can't be serious. Shit, we've only just got here. And what about me, Rossa? What about your grandmother? All the arrangements she wanted to discuss. She'll be gutted. *I'm* gutted.'

Rossa sat down on the side of the bed, picked up her hand and dropped a kiss on the palm, lingering. It sent chills up her spine.

'No more than me. What can I do, though? I'm between a rock and a hard place. There's no way I can let the airline down. It is my bread and butter, after all. You know that, darling. Comes with the territory, I'm afraid.'

'But it's okay to let me down?' Fearing she might cry, Ashling bit her lip.

'That's not fair! This isn't my choice, Ashling. You know there's nowhere I'd rather be than with you. Please don't make this any harder than it needs to be. I'll be back as soon as I can, promise. I'll just do this flight and get them to rearrange the schedules. Cheer up! You'll hardly have time to miss me.'

Ashling made a valiant attempt at smiling. 'Oh well, I suppose I have no choice. Love you, love your job.'

Rossa's face cleared. 'Atta girl. Anyway, I'm going to have to get my skates on. So, do you want to stay here at Carrickross for a bit or would you prefer to decamp back to Dublin?'

'Drive back with you.' Ashling didn't miss a heartbeat, quailing at the thought of being at Carrickross without him. 'There's work I can be getting on with at the studio anyway.'

'Right! You get dressed while I go and break the bad news to Grandmother, although I'd sooner stick pins in my eyes!'

Rossa left a moment later, looking comically terrified.

And so, a little more than twelve hours after they arrived, a very disappointed Ashling found herself on her way back to Dublin and normal life. Really things hadn't turned out at all as she'd expected. She hoped it wasn't a bad omen.

Beside her, Rossa was altogether more stoical, humming some jolly little tune beneath his breath. She wasn't sure whether to admire this display of maturity or deplore the fact that he simply didn't appear to be quite as bothered as she was. As he dropped her off, causing a traffic snarl-up as usual, he took her face between her hands and kissed her soundly.

'Remember, I'll be back before you know it.'

'I hope so, Rossa!' She smiled a little sadly, then threw her arms around his neck. 'I do hope so.'

She stood watching as he drove away into the traffic.

In the car Rossa had hastily voice-activated his mobile phone.

'Hello, darling,' he cooed, as the handset was picked up at the far end. 'I've been to visit my grandmother like I told you. I'm leaving now – flying out this afternoon. I'll be with you before you know it.'