



Abby Green

The Virgin's
DEBT TO PAY

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Аннотация

Indebted to the billionaire... And he will collect! Nessa must appeal to notorious tycoon Luc's better nature to exonerate her brother of theft. But Luc is the most merciless man Nessa's ever met—and the most sinfully attractive! Until the debt is settled he'll hold her as his captive. And when undeniable attraction overwhelms them both, it becomes clear that Nessa's innocence is the real price to pay...!

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Irish author ABBY GREEN threw in a very glamorous career in film and TV—which really consisted of a lot of standing in the rain outside actors' trailers—to pursue her love of romance. After she'd bombarded Mills & Boon with manuscripts they kindly accepted one, and an author was born. She lives in Dublin, Ireland, and loves any excuse for distraction. Visit abby-green.com or email abbygreenauthor@gmail.com.

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MILLS & BOON

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ISBN: 978-1-474-07203-8

THE VIRGIN'S DEBT TO PAY

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Published in Great Britain 2018

by Mills & Boon, an imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* 1
London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF

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I'd like to dedicate this story to my go-to Equestrian Experts, Peter Commene and Nemone Routh. Any inaccuracies are all my own fault! And I'd like to thank Heidi Rice, who gave me the moment of inspiration I needed while walking down Pall Mall in London. x

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CHAPTER ONE

NESSA O'SULLIVAN HAD never considered herself capable of petty crime, and yet here she was, just outside a private property, under the cover of moonlight, about to break and enter to steal something that didn't belong to her.

She grimaced. Well, to be accurate, she wasn't really going to be breaking and entering, because she had her brother's keys to his office in the Barbier stud farm offices. *Luc Barbier*. Just thinking of the owner of this stud and racing stables made a shiver of apprehension run through Nessa's slim frame. She was crouched under an overhanging branch, on the edge of a pristine

lawn in front of the main reception buildings. She'd left her battered Mini Cooper a short distance away from the gates and climbed over a low wall.

Nessa's own family home was not far away, and so she knew the land surrounding this stud farm very well. She'd played here as a child when it was under different ownership.

But any sense of familiarity fled when an owl hooted nearby, and she jumped, her heart slamming against her breastbone. She forced herself to suck in deep breaths to calm her nerves, and cursed her hot-headed older brother again for fleeing like he had. But then, could she really blame Paddy Junior for not standing up to Luc Barbier—the intimidating French *enfant terrible* of the thoroughbred racing world, about whom more was unknown than known?

His darkly forbidding good looks had rumours abounding...that he had been orphaned by gypsies, and that he'd lived on the streets, before becoming something of a legend in the racing world for his ability to train the most difficult of horses.

He'd progressed in a very short space of time to owning his own racing stables outside Paris, and now he owned this extensive stud farm in Ireland attached to another racing stables, where his impressive number of successful racehorses were trained by the best in the world, all under his eagle-eyed supervision.

People said his ability was some kind of sorcery, handed down by his mysterious ancestors.

Other rumours had it that he was simply a common criminal

who had grown up on the wrong side of the tracks, and had managed to climb out of the gutter to where he was now by using a fluke talent and ruthless ingenuity to get ahead.

The mystery of his origins only added to the feverish speculation surrounding him, because along with his racing concerns, he had invested in myriad other industries, tripling his fortune in a short space of time and securing his position as one of the world's wealthiest entrepreneurs. But racing and training remained his main concerns.

Paddy Jnr had talked about the man in hushed and awed tones for the last couple of years, since Barbier had employed Nessa's brother as Junior Stud Manager.

Nessa had seen him herself, once or twice, from a distance at the exclusive Irish horse sales—where there was a regular attendance of the most important names in racing from all over the world. Sheikhs and royalty and the seriously wealthy.

He'd stood out, head and shoulders above everyone around him. Inky black hair, thick and wild, touching his collar. A dark-skinned, hard-boned face and a stern expression, his eyes hidden by dark glasses. Thickly muscled arms were folded over his broad chest, and his head had followed the horses as they'd been paraded for the prospective buyers. He'd more resembled the taciturn security guards surrounding some of the sheikhs, or a mysterious movie star, than an owner.

He'd had no obvious security around him, but even now Nessa could recall the faint air of menace keeping people away. He

would be well capable of protecting himself.

The only reason she was even here tonight, indulging in this hare-brained exercise for her brother, was because he'd assured her that Luc Barbier was currently in France. She had no desire to come face to face with the man himself, because on those occasions when she had glimpsed him from a distance she'd felt a very disconcerting sensation in her belly—a kind of awareness that was totally alien to her, and very inappropriate to feel towards a complete stranger.

She took another deep breath and moved forward from under the tree, across the lawn to the buildings. A dog barked and Nessa halted, holding her breath. It stopped, and she continued moving forward. She reached the main building and went under the archway that led into a courtyard, around which the administrative offices were laid out.

She followed Paddy's directions and found the main office, and used the bigger key to unlock the door. Her heart was thumping but the door opened without a sound. There was no alarm. Nessa was too relieved to wonder why that might be.

It was dark inside, but she could just about make out the stairs. She climbed them to the upper floor, using the torch app on her phone and breathed a sigh of relief when she found his office. She opened the door with the other key, stepping inside as quietly as she could, before shutting it again. She leant against it for a second, her heart thumping. Sweat trickled down her back.

When she felt slightly calmer she moved further into the

office, using her phone to guide her to the desk Paddy had said was his. He'd told her that his laptop should be in the top drawer, but she pulled it open to find it empty. She opened the others but they were empty too. Feeling slightly panicky, she tried the other desks but there was no sign of the laptop. Paddy's frantic words reverberated in her head: *'That laptop is the only chance I have to prove my innocence, if I can just trace the emails back to the hacker...'*

Nessa stood in the centre of the office biting her lip, feeling frantic now herself.

There was no hint of warning or sound to indicate she wasn't alone, so when an internal door in the office opened and light suddenly flooded the room, Nessa only had time to whirl around and blink in shock at the massive figure filling the doorway.

It registered faintly in her head that the man filling the doorway was Luc Barbier. And that she was right to have been wary of coming face to face with him. He was simply the most astonishingly gorgeous and intimidating man she'd ever seen up close, and that was saying something when her brother-in-law was Sheikh Nadim Al-Sagr of Merkazad, as alpha male and masculine as they came.

Luc Barbier was dressed all in black, jeans and a long-sleeved top, which only seemed to enhance his brooding energy. His eyes were deep-set and so dark they looked like fathomless pools. Totally unreadable.

He held up a slim silver laptop and Nessa looked at it stupidly.

‘I take it this is what you came here for?’

His voice was low and gravelly and sexily accented, and that finally sent reality slamming back into Nessa like a shot of adrenalin to her heart. She did the only thing she could do—she pivoted on her feet and ran back to the door she’d just come through and pulled it open, only to find a huge burly security guard standing on the other side with a sour expression on his face.

The voice came from behind her again, this time with an unmistakable thread of steel. ‘Close the door. You’re not going anywhere.’

When she didn’t move, the security guard reached past her to pull the door closed, effectively shutting her in with Luc Barbier. Who patently wasn’t in France.

With the utmost reluctance she turned around to face him, very aware of the fact that she was wearing black tracksuit bottoms and a close-fitting black fleece with her hair tucked up under a dark baseball cap. She must look as guilty as sin.

Luc Barbier had closed the other door. The laptop was on a desk near him and he was just standing there, arms folded across his chest, legs spread wide as if to be ready for when she bolted again.

He asked, ‘So, who are you?’

Nessa’s heart thwacked hard. She kept her mouth firmly closed and her gaze somewhere around his impeccably shod feet, hoping the cap would hide her face.

He sighed audibly. ‘We can do this the hard way, or the harder way. I can have the police here within ten minutes and you can tell them who you are and why you’re trespassing on my property...but we both know it’s to get this, don’t we?’ He tapped the laptop with long fingers where it sat on the desk. ‘You’re obviously working for Paddy O’Sullivan.’

Nessa barely heard the last phrase. Totally ridiculously, all she could seem to focus on were his beautiful hands. Big and masculine but graceful. Capable hands. *Sexy hands*. The quiver in her belly became something far more disturbing.

Silence lengthened between them again and suddenly Barbier issued a low, violent-sounding curse in French and picked up the laptop, moving towards the door. He was almost there before Nessa realised that involving the Irish Gardaí would be even more of a disaster. The fact that Barbier hadn’t called them yet left a sliver of hope that something of this situation could be salvaged.

‘Wait!’ Her voice sounded very high in the silence.

He stopped at the door, his back to her. It was almost as intimidating as his front. He slowly turned around. ‘What did you say?’

Nessa tried to calm her thundering heart. She was afraid to look up too much, using the lip of her cap to keep herself hidden as much as possible.

‘I said wait. Please.’ She winced. As if a nicety like *please* would go over well in this situation.

There was more silence and then an incredulous-sounding, ‘You’re a *girl*?’

That struck Nessa somewhere very vulnerable. She knew she was dressed head to toe in black and wore a hat, but was she really so androgynous? She was well aware of her lack of feminine wiles, having spent much of her life knee deep in muck and wellies. She hitched up her chin and glared at him now, too angry to remember to try and stay hidden. ‘I’m twenty-four, hardly a girl.’

He looked sceptical. ‘Crawling through undergrowth to trespass on private property is hardly the activity of a grown woman.’

The thought of the kind of women a man like this would know—a world away from Nessa—made her skin prickle with self-consciousness and her vulnerability turned into defensiveness. ‘You’re meant to be in France.’

Luc Barbier was shocked. And he was not a man who was easily shocked. But this slip of a girl—*woman*?—was talking back to him as if she hadn’t just flagrantly invaded his private property with clearly criminal intentions.

‘I was in France, and now I’m not.’

He allowed his gaze to inspect her more closely, and as he did he felt something infuse his blood...*interest*. Because he could see it now. Yes, she was a woman. Albeit slim and petite to the point of boyishness. But he could see her breasts, small and perfectly formed, pushing against the form-fitting fleece of her black top.

He could make out a jaw too delicate to be a man's, and wondered how he hadn't noticed it before. He also saw a very soft lower lip, which was currently caught between white teeth. He felt a very unwelcome stirring of desire and a need to see more.

'Take off your cap,' he heard himself demand before he'd even registered the impulse.

The small chin came up and that soft lip was freed from white teeth. He saw the tension in her. There was a taut moment when he wasn't sure what she would do. Then, as if realising she had no choice, she raised a small hand and pulled the cap from her head.

For a moment Luc could only stare stupidly as a coil of long, dark red hair fell over her shoulder from where it had been stuffed under the cap.

And then he took in the rest of her face and felt even more foolish. He'd seen countless beautiful women, some of whom were considered to be the most beautiful in the world, but right now they were all an indistinct blur in his memory.

She was stunning. High cheekbones. Flawless creamy pale skin. A straight nose. Huge hazel eyes—flashing green and gold, with long dark lashes. And that mouth, lush and wide.

His body hardened, and the shock of such a reaction to this whippet of a girl made Luc reject the rogue reaction. He did not react to women unless it was on his terms. He was reacting because she was unexpected.

His voice was harsh. 'Now, tell me who you are, or I call the police.'

Nessa burned inwardly from the thorough once-over Barbier had just given her. She felt very exposed without her cap. Exposed to the full impact of him up close. And she couldn't look away. It was as if she were mesmerised by the sun. He was simply...beautiful, in a very raw, masculine way, all hard angles and sharp lines. But his mouth was provocatively sensual—the only softness in that face. It was distracting.

‘I’m waiting.’

Nessa flushed, caught out. She diverted her gaze, focusing on a picture of a famous racehorse on the wall behind him. She knew she really didn't have a choice but to give him the information. The alternative was to give it to the Gardaí and, coming from such a small, close-knit community, she knew that word would go around within minutes as to what she had been doing. There was no such thing as privacy or anonymity here.

‘My name is Nessa...’ She hesitated and then said in a rush, ‘O’Sullivan.’ She snuck a glance back at Barbier and saw that he was frowning.

‘O’Sullivan? You’re related to Paddy?’

Nessa nodded miserably at what a disaster this evening’s escapade had become. ‘I’m his younger sister.’

Barbier took a moment to digest this and then he said, with a curl to his lip, ‘He’s sending his baby sister to do his dirty work?’

Nessa instantly rose to her brother’s defence. ‘Paddy is innocent!’

Luc Barbier looked unimpressed by her impassioned outburst.

‘He’s made a bad situation worse by disappearing, and the facts haven’t changed: he facilitated the purchase of a horse from Gio Corretti’s Sicilian stud. We received the horse a week ago and the one million euros duly left my account but never reached Corretti’s. It’s clear that your brother diverted the funds into his own pocket.’

Nessa blanched at the massive amount of money, but she forced herself to stay strong, for Paddy. ‘He didn’t divert funds. It wasn’t his fault. He was hacked—they somehow impersonated the stud manager in Sicily and Paddy sent the money through fully believing it was going to the right place.’

The lines in Barbier’s face were as hard as granite. ‘If that is the case then why isn’t he here to defend himself?’

Nessa refused to let herself crumble in the face of this man’s seriously intimidating stance. ‘You told him he would be prosecuted and liable for the full amount. He felt as if he had no choice.’

Paddy’s frantic voice came back into her head.

‘Ness, you don’t know what this guy is capable of. He fired one of the grooms on the spot the other day. There’s no such thing as innocent till proven guilty in Barbier’s world. He’ll chew me up and spit me out! I’ll never work in the industry again...’

Barbier’s mouth thinned. ‘The fact that he fled after that phone conversation only makes him look even guiltier.’

More words of defence sprang to Nessa’s lips but she swallowed them back. Trying to explain to this man that her

brother had been entangled with the law when he'd gone through a rebellious teenage phase was hardly likely to make him sound less guilty. Paddy had worked long and hard to turn over a new leaf, but he'd been told that if he was ever caught breaking the law again he'd serve time and have a criminal record. *That* was why he'd panicked and run.

Luc Barbier regarded the woman in front of him. The fact that he was still indulging in any kind of dialogue with her was outrageous. And yet her vehemence and clear desire to protect her brother at all costs—even at her own expense—intrigued him. In his experience loyalty was a myth. Everyone was out for their own gain.

Something occurred to him then and he cursed himself for not suspecting it sooner. He'd been too distracted by a fall of thick red hair and a slender frame. It was galling.

'Maybe you're in on it? And you were trying to retrieve the laptop to ensure that any evidence was taken care of?'

Nessa's limbs turned to jelly. 'Of course I'm not in on anything. I just came here because Paddy—' She stopped herself, not wanting to incriminate him further.

'Because Paddy...what?' Barbier asked. 'Was too much of a coward? Or because he's no longer in the country?'

Nessa bit her lip. Paddy had fled to America, to hide out with her twin brother, Eoin. She'd entreated him to come back, tried to assure him that his boss couldn't be such an ogre. Paddy's words floated back.

'No one messes with Barbier. I wouldn't be surprised if he's got criminal links...'

For a moment Nessa had a sickening sensation. What if Barbier really *was* linked to—? She quickly shut that thought down, telling herself she was being melodramatic. But then a sliver of doubt entered her mind—what if Paddy *was* guilty?

As soon as that registered she lambasted herself, aghast that she could have thought it for a second. This man was making her doubt herself, and her brother, who she knew would never do something so wrong, no matter what his transgressions had been in the past.

Nessa's jaw was tight. 'Look. Paddy is innocent. I agree with you that he shouldn't have run, but he has.' She hesitated for a second, and then mentally apologised to her brother before saying, 'He has a habit of running away when difficult things happen—he ran away for a week after our mother's funeral.'

Barbier looked utterly remote and then he said, 'I've heard the Irish have a gift for talking their way out of situations, but it won't work with me, Miss O'Sullivan.'

Anger spiked again. 'I'm not trying to get out of anything.' She forced herself to calm down. 'I was just trying to help by retrieving his laptop. He said that he could prove his innocence with it.'

Barbier picked up the slim silver laptop and held it up. 'We've looked at the laptop extensively and there is no evidence to support your brother's innocence. You've done your brother

no favours. He now looks even guiltier and you've possibly implicated yourself.'

Luc watched as colour washed in and out of the woman's expressive face. That in itself was intriguing, when so many people he encountered kept their masks firmly in place. He couldn't recall the last time he'd felt free enough, if ever, to allow his real emotions to be seen.

Still, he wouldn't believe this award-worthy display of innocence. He'd be a fool if he did and her brother had already taken him for a fool.

Nessa sensed any sliver of hope dwindling. Barbier was about as immovable as a rock. He put the laptop down and folded his arms again, settling his hips back against the desk behind him, legs stretched out, for all the world as if they were having a civil chat. There was nothing civil about this man. Danger oozed from every pore: Nessa just wasn't sure what *kind* of danger. She felt no risk to her personal safety, in spite of Paddy's lurid claims or the security man outside the door. It was a much more personal danger, to the place that throbbed with awareness deep inside her. An awareness that had been dormant all her life, until now.

Barbier's tone was mocking. 'So you really expect me to believe that you're here purely out of love for your poor innocent brother?'

Fiercely she said, 'I would do anything for my family.'
'Why?'

Barbier's simple question took her by surprise and Nessa

blinked. She hadn't even questioned Paddy when he'd called for help. She'd immediately felt every protective instinct kick into place even though she was younger than him.

Their family was a unit who had come through tough times and become stronger in the process.

Their older sister Iseult had kept them all in one piece—pretty much—after the tragic death of their mother, while their father had descended into the mire of alcoholism. She had shielded Nessa and her two brothers from their father's worst excesses, and had slowly helped him to recovery even as their stud farm and stables had fallen apart around them.

But Iseult wasn't here now. She had a much deserved happy life far away from here. It was up to Nessa to shoulder this burden for the sake of her brother, and her family.

She looked at Barbier. 'I would do anything because we love each other and we protect each other.'

Barbier was silent for a long moment. Then he said, 'So now you're admitting that you'd go so far as to collude in a crime.'

Nessa shivered under the thin covering of her fleece. She felt very alone at that moment. She knew she could contact Sheikh Nadim of Merkazad, Iseult's husband and one of the richest men in the world. He could sort this whole thing out within hours, if he knew. But she and Paddy had agreed they wouldn't involve Iseult or Nadim. They were expecting a baby in a few weeks and did not need to be drawn into this mess.

She squared her shoulders and stared at Luc Barbier, hating

his cool nonchalance. 'Don't you understand the concept of family and doing anything for them? Wouldn't you do that for your own family?'

Barbier suddenly looked stony. 'I have no family, so, no, I'm not familiar with the concept.'

A pang of emotion made Nessa's chest tighten. No family. What on earth did that mean? She couldn't fathom the lack of a family. That sense of protection.

Then he said, 'If your family are so close then I will go to whoever *is* capable of returning either your brother or my money.'

Panic eclipsed Nessa's spurt of emotion. 'This just involves me and Paddy.'

Barbier raised a brow. 'I will involve whoever and whatever it takes to get my money back and ensure no adverse press results from this.'

Nessa's hands clenched to fists at her sides as she tried to contain her temper and appeal to any sense of decency he might have. 'Look, not that it's any business of yours, but my sister is going to have a baby very soon. My father is helping her and her husband and they don't have anything to do with this. I'm taking responsibility for my brother.'

I'm taking responsibility for my brother.

There had been a tight ball of emotion in Luc's chest ever since she'd asked if he understood the concept of family. Of course he didn't. How could he when his Algerian father had disappeared

before he was born, and his feckless, unstable mother had died of a drugs overdose when he was just sixteen?

The closest he'd ever come to family was the old man next door—a man broken by life, and yet who had been the one to show Luc a way out.

Luc forced his mind away from the memories. He was beyond incredulous that this sprite of a girl—*woman*—was insisting on standing up to him. And that she wasn't using her beauty to try and distract him, especially when he couldn't be sure that he'd hidden his reaction to her. He hated to admit it, even to himself, but he felt a twinge of respect.

She was defiant, even in the face of possible prosecution. If she was calling his bluff she was doing it very, very well. He could still have the police here within minutes and she would be hauled off in handcuffs with the full weight of his legal team raining down on her narrow shoulders before she knew what was happening.

But it wasn't as if the police were ever first on Luc's list of people to turn to in this kind of situation. Not because he had more nefarious routes to keeping the law—he knew about the rumours surrounding him, and as much as they amused him, they also disgusted him—but because of his experiences growing up in the gritty outskirts of Paris. Surviving each day had been a test of endurance. The police had never been there when he'd needed them, so to say he didn't trust them was an understatement.

He liked to take care of things his own way. Hence the

rumours. Added on top of more rumours. Until he was more myth than man.

He forced his mind back to the task at hand. And the woman. ‘Where do we go from here, then, Miss O’Sullivan? If you’re prepared to take responsibility for your brother, then perhaps you could be so kind as to write me a cheque for one million euros?’

Nessa blanched. One million euros was more money than she was ever likely to see in her lifetime, unless her career as a jockey took off and people started giving her a chance to ride in big races and build her reputation.

She said, as firmly as she could, ‘We don’t have that kind of money.’

‘Well then,’ Barbier said silkily, ‘that gets us precisely no further along in this situation. And in fact it gets worse. Thanks to your brother’s actions, I will now have to hand over another one million euros to Gio Corretti to ensure that he doesn’t ask questions about why he hasn’t received the money yet.’

Nessa felt sick. She hadn’t considered that. ‘Maybe you could talk to him? Explain what happened?’

Barbier laughed but it was curt and unamused. ‘I don’t need to fuel the gossip mill with stories that I’m now claiming fraud to renege on payments.’

Nessa wanted to sit down. Her legs were wobbly again and she felt light-headed.

‘Are you all right?’ Barbier’s sharp question was like a slap to her face. She sucked in a deep breath. He’d taken a step towards

her and suddenly the room felt even smaller. He was massive. And so dark. Possibly the most intimidating person she'd ever met.

She couldn't fight this man. He was too rich, too successful. Too gorgeous. She swallowed. 'I wish I could hand you over your money right now, Mr Barbier, believe me. But I can't. I know my brother is innocent no matter what his actions look like.'

Nessa wracked her brains as to what she could do to appease Barbier so he wouldn't go after Paddy. At least until Paddy had a chance to try and prove his innocence. But what could she offer this man? And then something struck her. 'Look, all I can do is offer my services in his absence. If you have *me*, then can't you accept that I'm willing to do all I can to prove his innocence?'

For a moment, Nessa's words hung in the air and she almost fancied that she might have got through to him. But then he straightened from the desk and the expression on his face darkened. He spat out, 'I should have known that veneer of innocence was too good to be true.'

That unnervingly black gaze raked her up and down, disdain etched all over his face. 'I must admit, I might have felt differently if you'd come via the front door dressed in something a little more enticing, Miss O'Sullivan, but even then I can't say that you'd be my type.'

Nessa struggled to understand—he couldn't possibly mean...but then she registered what she'd said and how it might have sounded. And, she registered that he was looking at her with

disgust, not disdain. Her gut curdled as a wave of mortification rushed through her whole body, along with hurt, which made it even worse. She burned with humiliation and fury.

‘You know I did not mean *that*.’

He raised an imperious brow. ‘What did you mean, Miss O’Sullivan?’

Nessa had started to pace in her agitation and she stopped and faced him. ‘Please stop calling me that—my name is Nessa.’

His voice was hard. ‘*Nessa*.’

The way he said her name impacted her physically, like a punch to her gut. She instantly regretted opening her mouth but *Miss O’Sullivan* was beginning to get under her skin. This man. This...*meeting*...was veering so far off course that she wasn’t even sure what they were talking about any more, or what was at stake.

She tried to force herself to stay focused, and calm. ‘What I meant, Mr Barbier, is that I will do everything in my power to convince you that my brother is innocent.’

CHAPTER TWO

LUC STARED AT Nessa O’Sullivan.

I will do everything in my power to convince you that my brother is innocent.

What kind of an empty suggestion was that? And why had it given him such an illicit thrill to see her act so shocked when he’d called her bluff? She’d blatantly offered herself to him—and then pretended that she hadn’t!

He wanted to laugh out loud. As if she were an innocent. There

was no innocence in this world. Perhaps only in babies, before they grew up to be twisted and manipulated by their environment.

His conscience smarted to think of how he'd told her she wasn't his type. He couldn't deny the pounding of his blood right now. He told himself it was anger. Adrenalin. Anything but helpless desire.

Luc knew he should have walked away long ago and left her at the mercy of the authorities, no matter what he thought of them. He had enough evidence now to damn her, and her brother. But he knew that wasn't necessarily the best option. Not for *him*.

She was staring at him, as if bracing herself for whatever he was going to say. She was throwing up more questions than answers and it had been a long time since anyone had piqued Luc's interest like this.

What did he have to lose if he contained this himself? It wasn't as if the local law enforcement could do any better than the private security company he'd already hired to investigate the matter and track down Paddy O'Sullivan.

One thing was clear. This woman wasn't going to be walking away from here. He didn't trust her. Not one inch of her petite form. Not after he'd seen how far she was prepared to go. And she wasn't going anywhere until he had his money returned and he knew there was no damage to his reputation. If she was involved in this crime, then keeping her close would surely lead him back to the thief.

He folded his arms and saw the way her body tensed, as if

to steel herself. In that moment she looked both defiant and vulnerable, and it caught at Luc somewhere he wasn't usually affected. More acting. It had to be. He would not allow her to make a fool of him.

* * *

'You say you want to convince me your brother is innocent?'

Nessa still felt sick to think that Barbier had taken her words to mean that she was offering herself up, like some kind of—She forced the thought out of her head. Of course this man would never look at someone like her in that way, but she didn't need to be humiliated.

She tipped up her chin. 'Yes.'

He was looking at her with unnerving intensity. She really couldn't read him at all. Her mouth felt dry and instinctively she licked her lips. His gaze dropped to them for a second and her insides flipped. She ignored it, telling herself her reaction to him was due to the heightened situation.

His eyes met hers again. 'Very well, then. You're not leaving my sight until your brother accounts for his actions and my money is returned.'

Nessa opened her mouth but nothing came out for a moment. Then she said, 'What do you mean, not leaving your sight?'

'Exactly that. You've offered your services in place of your brother, so until he or my money returns you're mine, Nessa O'Sullivan, and you will do exactly as I tell you.'

Nessa struggled to comprehend his words. 'So you're going to

hold me as some kind of...collateral? As a prisoner?’

He smiled but it was mirthless. ‘Oh, you’re quite free to walk out this door, but you won’t make it to your car before the police catch up with you. If you want me to believe that you have nothing to do with this, *and* that your brother is innocent, then you will stay here and do your utmost to make yourself useful.’

‘How do you know about my car?’ Nessa asked, distracted for a moment and not liking the way panic had her insides in a vice grip.

‘You were tracked as soon as you parked that heap of junk outside my perimeter wall.’

Fresh humiliation washed over Nessa to think of her stealthy progress being watched in some security room. ‘I didn’t hear any alarms.’

He dismissed that with a curl of his lip. ‘Security here is silent and state of the art. Flashing lights and sirens would unsettle the horses.’

Of course it would. Hadn’t Nadim insisted on installing a similarly high-tech system on their own farm? Nessa searched in vain for some way to avoid being forced to spend an unknown amount of time under this man’s punitive command, even though she’d all but asked for it. ‘I’m a jockey and I work at our family farm—I can’t just walk away from that.’

Barbier’s black gaze flicked dismissively over her body again before meeting her eyes. ‘A jockey? Then how have I never heard of you?’

Nessa flushed. 'I haven't run many races. Yet.' In recent years she'd gone to university and got a degree, so that had taken her out of the circuit for some time. Not that she was about to explain herself to Barbier.

He made a scathing sound. 'I'm sure. Being a jockey is gritty, hard work. You look as if a puff of wind would knock you over. Somehow I can't really see you rousing at dawn and putting in a long day of the back-breaking training and work that most jockeys endure. Your pretty hands would get far too dirty.'

Nessa bristled and instinctively hid her hands behind her back, conscious of how *unpretty* they were, but not wanting to show Barbier, even in her own defence. She still felt raw after his stinging remark, *I can't say that you'd be my type*.

The unfairness of his attack left her a little speechless. Her family had all worked hard at their farm for as long as she could remember, getting up at the crack of dawn every day of the week and in all kinds of weather. Her family had certainly never lived a gilded life of leisure. Not even when Nadim had bought them out and pumped money into their ailing business.

'Who do you ride for, then?'

She forced down the surge in emotion and answered as coolly as she could, 'My family stables, O'Sullivans. I'm well used to doing my share of the work, believe it or not, and I've been training to be a jockey since I was a teenager. Just because I'm a woman—'

He held up a hand stopping her. 'I have no issue with female

jockeys. What I do have an issue with are people who get a free pass on their family connections.'

If Nessa had bristled before, now she was positively apoplectic. She'd had to work twice as hard to prove herself to her own family, if not even more. But she was aware that to really prove herself she'd have to get work with another trainer. It was a sensitive point for her.

'I can assure you,' she said in a low voice full of emotion, 'that my being a jockey is not a vanity project. Far from it.'

She might have laughed if she were able to. Vanity—what was that? She couldn't remember the last time she'd worn make-up.

Barbier looked unimpressed. 'Well, I'm sure the family farm will cope without you.'

Nessa realised that she was damned if she walked out the door and damned if she didn't. But there was only one way of containing the situation and making sure that the rest of her family weren't dragged into it, and that was doing as Barbier said. She wished she could rewind the clock and be safe at home in bed...but even as she imagined that scenario something inside her rejected it. Rejected the possibility of never having had the opportunity to see this man up close. The shock of that revelation made her stop breathing for a second, its significance terrifying to contemplate.

But the fact was that Nessa's blood was throbbing through her veins in a way she'd never experienced before. Not even after an exhilarating win on a horse.

Shame bloomed deep inside her. How could she betray her own brother, her family, like this? By finding this man so...compelling? Telling herself that stress was making her crazy, she asked, 'What will I be doing here?' She tried to quash lurid images of herself, locked in a tower being fed only bread and water.

Barbier's eyes flicked up and down over her body as if gauging what she might be capable of. Nessa bristled all over, again.

'Oh, don't worry, we'll find something to keep you occupied, and of course any work you do will be in lieu of payment. Until your brother resurfaces, his debt is now yours.'

Barbier straightened up to his full intimidating height and Nessa's pulse jumped.

'I will have Armand escort you back to your home to retrieve what you need. You can give me your car keys.'

This was really happening. And there was nothing she could do about it. Nessa reluctantly reached into her pocket for her keys and took the car key off the main ring, all fingers and thumbs. Eventually she got it free, skin prickling under the laser-eyed scrutiny of Barbier.

She handed it over, a little devil inside her prompting her to say, 'It's a vintage Mini. I doubt you'll fit.' Even the thought of this man coiling his six-foot-plus frame into her tiny battered car was failing to spark any humour in the surreal moment. She really hadn't expected the night to turn out like this...and yet she could see now that she'd been supremely naive to assume it would be

so easy to infiltrate the Barbier stud.

He took the key. 'It won't be me retrieving your car.'

Of course. It would be a minion, despatched to take care of the belongings of the woman who was now effectively under house arrest for the foreseeable future.

Not usually given to dramatics, Nessa tried to quell her nerves. She was within five kilometres of her own home, for crying out loud. What was the worst this man could do to her? A small sly voice answered that the worst he could do had nothing to do with punishment for Paddy's sins, and everything to do with how he made her feel in his presence. As if she were on a roller coaster hurtling towards a great swooping dip.

Barbier turned away and opened the office door to reveal the huge burly man still standing outside. They spoke in French so rapid that it was beyond Nessa's basic grasp of the language to try and understand what they were saying.

Barbier turned back to her, switching to English. 'Armand will escort you home to collect your things and bring you back here.'

'Can't I just return in the morning?'

He shook his head, looking even more stern now, and indicated for her to precede him. Mutely, Nessa stepped over the threshold and followed the thick-set security man back out the way she'd come. In the courtyard there was a sleek four-by-four car waiting. Armand opened a car door for her.

For a second Nessa hesitated. She saw the entrance to the courtyard and a glimpse of freedom, if she moved fast. From

behind her she heard a deep voice. ‘Don’t even think about it.’

She turned around. Barbier was right behind her and looked even more intimidating in the dark. Taller, more austere. His face was all hard bones and slashing angles. Not even the softness of that provocative mouth visible.

Nessa put her hand on the car door, needing something to hold onto. ‘What happens when I come back?’

‘You’ll be informed when you do.’

Panic made her blurt out, ‘What if I refuse?’

She saw the gallic shrug. ‘It’s up to you but you’ve made it clear you don’t want to involve your family. If you refuse to return I can guarantee that *that* will be the least of your worries. You would be an accessory to a crime.’

Nessa shivered again in the cool, night-time air. She had no choice, and he knew it. Defeated, she turned and stepped up into the vehicle, and the door closed behind her.

The windows were tinted and Nessa was enclosed in blackness as the bodyguard came around the front of the vehicle and got into the driver’s seat. Barbier strode away from them towards the main building and she felt suddenly bereft, which was ridiculous when the man was holding her to ransom for her brother. *You put yourself up for that ransom*, a voice reminded her.

As they approached the main gates Nessa reluctantly gave Armand directions to her own home. They passed her lonely-looking car on the side of the road and she sucked in a deep breath, telling herself that if she could endeavour to persuade

Paddy to return to prove his innocence, and prevent anyone else from getting involved, then this—hopefully!—brief punishment at the hands of Barbier would be worth it.

Nessa tried to call up her usually positive disposition. Surely if Barbier saw how far she was willing to go to prove her brother's innocence, he'd be forced to reconsider and give Paddy a chance to explain, wouldn't he?

But why was it that that seemed to hold less appeal than the thought of seeing Luc Barbier again? Nessa scowled at herself in the reflection of the tinted window of the car, glad she wasn't under that black-eyed gaze when her face got hot with humiliation.

* * *

When Nessa returned a short while later the stud was in darkness and quiet. Armand handed her over to a middle-aged man with a nice face who looked as if he'd just been woken up, and he was not all that welcoming. He introduced himself as Pascal Blanc, Barbier's stud and racing stables manager, his right-hand man, and Paddy's one-time immediate boss.

He said nothing at first, showing her to a small spartan room above the stables. Clearly this was where the most menial staff slept. But still, it was clean and comfortable, when Nessa had almost expected a corner of the stables.

After giving her the basics of the Barbier stud schedule and informing her that, naturally, she would be assigned to mucking out the yard and stables, and to expect a five a.m. wake-up call,

he stopped at her door. ‘For what it’s worth, I would have given Paddy the benefit of the doubt based on what I thought I knew of him. We might have been able to get to the bottom of this whole nasty incident. But he ran, and now there’s nothing I can do except hope for his sake and yours that he either returns himself or returns the money. Soon.’

Nessa couldn’t say anything.

Pascal’s mouth compressed. ‘Luc... Mr Barbier...does not take kindly to those who betray him. He comes from a world where the rule of law didn’t exist and he doesn’t suffer fools, Miss O’Sullivan. If your brother *is* guilty, then Luc won’t be gentle with him. Or you.’

Somehow these words coming from this infinitely less intimidating man made everything even bleaker. But all Nessa could find herself doing was asking, ‘You’ve known Mr Barbier for long?’

Pascal nodded. ‘Ever since he started to work with Leo Fouret, the first time he came into contact with a horse.’

Nessa was impressed. Leo Fouret was one of the most respected trainers in racing, with hundreds of impressive race wins to his name.

‘Luc didn’t grow up in a kind world, Miss O’Sullivan. But he is fair. Unfortunately your brother never gave him that chance.’

Luc didn’t grow up in a kind world... The words reverberated in Nessa’s head for a long time after she’d been left alone in the room. She eventually fell into a fitful sleep and had dreams

of riding a horse, trying to go faster and faster—not to get to the finish line but to escape from some terrifying and unnamed danger behind her.

* * *

What on earth did she have to laugh about? Luc was distinctly irritated by the faint lyrical sound emanating from his stableyard, which was usually a place of hushed industry in deference to the valuable livestock. It could only be coming from one person, the newest addition to his staff: Nessa O’Sullivan.

Her brother had stolen from him and now she laughed. It sent the very insidious thought into Luc’s head that he’d been a total fool. Of course she was in on it with her brother and now she was inside the camp. It made him think of the Trojan Horse and he didn’t find it amusing.

He cursed and threw down his pen and stood up from his desk, stalking over to the window that looked down over the stables. He couldn’t see her and that irritated him even more when he’d deliberately avoided meeting her since her arrival, not wanting to give her the idea that their extended dialogue the other night would ever be repeated. Now he was distracted. When he couldn’t afford to be distracted.

He’d only just managed to convince Gio Corretti that the slight delay in money arriving to his account was due to a banking glitch.

Luc’s reputation amongst the exclusive thoroughbred racing fraternity had been on trial since he’d exploded onto the scene

with a rogue three-year-old who had raced to glory in four consecutive Group One races.

Success didn't mean respect though. He was an anomaly; he had no lineage to speak of and he'd had the temerity to invest wisely with his winnings and make himself a fortune in the process.

Everyone believed his horses were better bred than he was, and they weren't far wrong. The rumours about his background merely added colour to every other misconception and untruth heaped against his name.

But, as much as he loved ruffling the elite's feathers by making no apology for who he was, he *did* want their respect. He wanted them to respect him for what he had achieved with nothing but an innate talent, hard work and determination.

The last thing he needed was for more rumours to get around, especially one suggesting that Luc Barbier couldn't control his own staff. That he'd been stupid enough to let one million euros disappear from his account.

Even now he still felt the burn of recrimination for finding Paddy O'Sullivan's open expression and infectious enthusiasm somehow quaint. He should have spotted a thief a mile away. After all, he'd grown up with them.

Luc tensed when he heard the faint sound of laughing again. Adrenalin mixed with something far more ambiguous and hotter flooded his veins. Nessa O'Sullivan was here under sufferance for her brother—and that was all. The sooner she remembered

her place and what was at stake, the better.

* * *

‘Who were you talking to?’

Nessa immediately tensed when she heard the deep voice behind her. She turned around reluctantly, steeling herself to see Barbier for the first time since that night. And she blinked.

The skies were blue and the air was mild but, in that uniquely Irish way, there seemed to be a mist falling from the sky and tiny droplets clung to Barbier’s black hair and shoulders, making him look as if he were...sparkling.

His hands were placed on lean hips. Dark worn jeans clung to powerful thighs and long legs. He was wearing a dark polo shirt. The muscles of his biceps pushed against the short sleeves, and the musculature of his impressive chest was visible under the thin material.

He couldn’t look more virile or vitally masculine if he tried. Nessa’s body hummed in helpless reaction to that very earthy and basic fact.

‘Well?’

Nessa was aghast at how she’d just lost it there for a second, hypnotised by his sheer presence.

She swallowed. ‘I was just talking to one of the grooms.’

‘You do realise you’re not here to socialise, don’t you, O’Sullivan?’

Tendrils of Nessa’s hair escaped the hasty bun she’d piled on her head earlier, and whipped around her face in the breeze. Her

skin prickled at her reaction to him and irritation made her voice sharp. ‘It’s hard to forget when I’ve been assigned little more than a cell to sleep in and a pre-dawn wake-up call every day.’

She was very conscious of the unsubtle stench of horse manure clinging to her. And of her worn T-shirt tucked into even more worn jeans. Ancient knee-high boots. She couldn’t be any less his *type* right now.

A calculating glint turned his eyes to dark pewter. ‘You assured me you were accustomed to hard work and you did offer your services in the place of your brother—if this is too much for you...’ He put out a hand to encompass the yard around them.

Nessa stiffened at the obvious jibe. He was clearly expecting her to flounce out of here in a fit of pique. And yes, the work was menial but it was nothing she hadn’t done since she’d started walking and could hold a broom. That, and riding horses. Not that he’d believe her.

She squared her shoulders and stared him down. ‘If you don’t mind, the yard has to be cleaned by lunchtime.’

Barbier looked at the heavy platinum watch encircling his wrist, and then back to her. ‘You’d better keep going then, and next time don’t distract my employees from their own work. Flirting and gossiping won’t help your brother out of his predicament or make things any easier for you here.’

Flirting? For a second Nessa’s mind was blank with indignation when she thought of the groom she’d been talking to—a man in his sixties. But before she could think of anything

to say in her own defence, Barbier had turned his back and was walking away.

In spite of her indignation, Nessa couldn't stop her gaze following his broad back, seeing how it tapered down to those slim hips and a taut behind, lovingly outlined by the soft worn material of his jeans. He disappeared around a corner and Nessa deflated like a balloon. She turned around in disgust at herself for being so easily distracted, and riled.

Feeling thoroughly prickly and with her nerves still jangling, Nessa turned the power-hose machine back on and imagined Barbier's too-beautiful and smug face in every scrap of dirt she blasted into the drains.

* * *

'She's totally over-qualified, Luc. She's putting my own staff to shame, doing longer hours. I shouldn't even be saying this but the yard and stables have never been so clean.' Luc's head groom laughed but soon stopped when Luc fixed him with a dark look.

'No, you shouldn't. Maybe you need new staff.'

Simon Corrigan swallowed and changed the subject. 'Can I ask why we're not paying her? It seems—'

'No, you can't.' Luc cut him off, not liking the way his conscience was stinging. He was many things, but no one had ever faulted him on his sense of fairness and equality. But only he and Pascal Blanc knew what was behind Paddy O'Sullivan's sudden disappearance, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Nessa had been working at his stables for a week now. She

hadn't turned tail and run or had a tantrum as he'd expected. He could still see her in his mind's eye—standing in the yard the other day, her back as straight as a dancer, face flushed, amber-green eyes bright and alive. That soft lush mouth compressed. Long tendrils of dark red hair clinging to her hot cheeks as she'd obviously struggled to keep her temper in check.

Her T-shirt had been so worn he could make out the shape of her breasts—small, lush swells, high and firm.

He could also remember the feeling that had swept through him when he'd heard her carefree laugh. It hadn't been anger that she might be up to something. It had been something much hotter and ambiguous; a sense of possessiveness that had shocked him. It wasn't something he felt for anything much, except horses or business acquisitions.

'Where is she now?' Luc asked Corrigan abruptly.

'She's helping to bring the stallions in from the paddocks. Do you want me to give her a message?'

Luc shook his head. 'No, I'll do it.'

But when Luc got to the stallions' stables Nessa was nowhere to be seen and all the stallions had been settled for the evening. Feeling a mounting frustration, he went looking for her.

* * *

'You are a beautiful boy, aren't you? Yes, you are...and you know it too. Yes, there you go...' The three-year-old colt whinnied softly in appreciation as he took the raw carrot from Nessa's hand and she rubbed his nose.

She knew she shouldn't be here in the racing section of Barbier's stables, where the current thoroughbreds resided, but she hadn't been able to resist. She felt at peace for the first time in days, even as her body actually ached with the need to feel a horse underneath her with all that coiled power and strength and speed. But she wouldn't be riding again for a while.

'You were told to stay away from this area.'

And just like that Nessa's short-lived sense of peace vanished and was replaced by an all-too predictable jump in her heart-rate. She turned around to see Barbier standing a few feet away, arms folded. He was wearing a white shirt, and it made his skin look even darker. His hair touched the collar, curling slightly.

'I'm on a break,' she responded defensively, wondering if he was this autocratic with all his employees. But she had to admit that, so far, everyone seemed pretty content to be working here. She'd found out that the employee who'd been fired on the spot had been smoking weed and she'd had to concede that he would have suffered a similar fate on their own stud farm. Barbier had also enrolled the employee on an addiction course. It was disconcerting to realise that perhaps he wasn't as ruthless as she'd like to believe.

Barbier moved now and closed the distance between them before she could take another breath. He snatched the rest of the carrot out of her hand, frowning. 'What are you feeding Tempest?'

'It's just a carrot.' She pulled her hand back into her chest

disconcerted by the shock his fleeting touch had given her.

He glared at her, and he was far too close, but Nessa's back was against the stall door and the horse. She was trapped.

'No one is allowed to feed my horses unless they're supervised.'

Her mouth dropped open and then she sputtered, 'It's just a carrot!'

He was grim. 'A carrot that could contain poison or traces of steroids for all I know.'

Nessa went cold. 'You think I would harm your horses?'

His jaw was as hard as granite. 'I'm under enough scrutiny as it is. I don't need the possible accomplice of a thief messing around with my valuable livestock. I don't know what you're capable of. How did you know that this is the horse?'

Nessa struggled to keep up. '*What* horse?'

Now Barbier was impatient. 'The horse I bought from Gio Corretti.'

Nessa swallowed. 'I had no idea, I just came in for a visit. He seemed agitated.'

Barbier's gaze went from her to the horse behind her and she took the opportunity to slide sideways, putting some distance between them. He put out a hand and stroked the side of Tempest's neck, murmuring soft words in French. Nessa's gaze locked onto his big hand stroking the horse, and she had to struggle not to imagine how that hand might feel on her. She'd never in her life imagined a man stroking her—she must be losing

her mind.

The horse pushed his head into Barbier's hand and Nessa glanced at Barbier to see his features relax slightly. For a heady moment she imagined that there was no enmity between them and that he might not always look at her as if she'd just committed a crime. She wondered what he'd look like if he smiled and then she glanced away quickly, mortified at herself and afraid he would read her shameful thoughts on her face.

Barbier said, 'He's been agitated since he arrived, not settling in properly.'

Welcoming the diversion from her wayward imagination, Nessa replied, 'He's probably just pining for his mother.'

Barbier looked at her sharply, his hand dropping away. 'How would you know such a thing?'

Nessa flushed and kept avoiding his eye. How could she explain the weird affinity for horses that she shared with her sister and father? She shrugged. 'I just guessed.'

Barbier's voice was harsh. 'Gio Corretti told me and your brother that we might have issues settling the colt because he hadn't been separated from his mother until recently, which is unusual. That's how you know.'

Nessa looked at Barbier and saw the condemnation and distrust in his eyes. How could she defend a gut feeling? She shrugged and looked away. 'If you say so.'

Without realising it, Nessa's hand had instinctively lifted up to touch the horse again, until suddenly Barbier reached out

and took it. Nessa jumped at the weird electricity that sparked whenever they got too close. She tried to pull her hand back but his grip was too firm. And warm.

He was holding her palm facing upwards, and asked grimly, ‘What is this?’

She looked down and saw what he saw: her very *unpretty* hands, skin roughened from her training as a jockey and blistered from the last few days of hard work. Humiliated at the thought that he’d see this as proof she wasn’t used to work, she yanked her hand back and cradled it to her chest again. ‘It’s nothing.’

She backed away towards the entrance. ‘I should go—my break is over.’ She turned and forced herself to walk and not run away, not even sure what she was running from. But something about the way he’d just taken her hand and looked so disapproving to see the marks of her labour made her feel incredibly self-conscious and also a little emotional, which was truly bizarre.

Nessa couldn’t recall the last time anyone had focused attention on her like that. Her sister had done her best but she wasn’t their mother. Their father hadn’t been much use while he’d drowned his sorrows.

So they’d had to fend for themselves mostly. She hadn’t even realised until that moment how much another’s touch could pierce her right to the core. And for it to have been Luc Barbier was inconceivable and very disturbing. She didn’t have an emotional connection with that man—the very notion was

ridiculous.

* * *

Luc watched as Nessa walked quickly out of the stables and around the corner with an easy athletic grace that made him wonder what she'd be like on a horse. *Excellent*, his instincts told him, as much as he'd like to ignore them.

He was still astounded at the apparent ease with which she'd calmed Tempest, who was one of the most volatile horses Luc had ever bought. But also potentially one of the best, if his hunch about the colt's lineage was right. Certainly Gio Corretti had asked for top dollar, so he'd clearly suspected potential greatness too.

Luc turned back to the horse, who pushed his face into Luc's shoulder, nudging. Did Luc really believe Nessa would poison the horse? He held up the innocuous, gnarled carrot and eventually fed it to the horse with a sigh.

The answer came from his gut: no, she wouldn't poison his horse. She'd looked too shocked when he'd said it. But the fact was that, until her brother reappeared or the money did, the jury was out on Nessa O'Sullivan and he had to keep her under close scrutiny. He'd be a fool not to suspect that brother and sister were working in tandem.

Luc told himself it was for this reason, and *not* because her raw hands had twisted something inside his gut, that he was about to move her to where she could be kept under closer scrutiny.

CHAPTER THREE

‘I’M MOVING YOU out of the stables and into the house.’

Nessa looked at Luc Barbier where he stood behind his desk. She’d been summoned here a few minutes ago by the head groom, Simon Corrigan, and she’d tried not to let the understated luxury of the grand old Irish country house intimidate her.

This was where Barbier’s suite of private offices were based and now she stood on thick sumptuous carpet and was surrounded by dark oak panelling. Books filled floor-to-ceiling shelves. In contrast to the rather conservative decor, there was modern art on the walls that tickled at Nessa’s curiosity. And behind Barbier, a massive window where Nessa could see the training gallops in the distance. An amazing view and one that made her yearn to be on a horse.

But she dragged her attention back to what he’d said. ‘Excuse me?’

‘I said, I’m moving you into the house.’ He enunciated the words slowly, which only made his accent more noticeable. Nessa still couldn’t get over the raw, untameable energy that emanated from the man, in spite of the luxe surroundings.

She felt a bit dense. ‘Why?’

‘My housekeeper has lost one of her household assistants and so I told her you would fill in.’

‘Household assistant,’ Nessa said slowly as it sank in. ‘You mean a cleaner?’

Barbier grimaced faintly. ‘I think they prefer the term household assistant.’

A faint burn of humiliation washed up through her body. ‘This is because I went to see your racehorses.’

Barbier’s jaw tightened. ‘I’m not so petty.’

Nessa thought of being cooped up indoors cleaning floors and already felt claustrophobic. ‘You accused me of potential sabotage.’

Barbier’s jaw got even tighter. ‘At this point in time I have no idea what you’re capable of. You’ve put yourself in this position in a bid to convince me your brother is innocent. Mrs Owens, my housekeeper, needs someone to help her out—’

‘And I’m just the handy house-arrest guest you can move about at will to wherever it suits you,’ Nessa interrupted, feeling frustrated and angry.

‘You’re the one who is here by choice, Nessa. By all means you’re free to walk out this door at any time, but if you do I won’t hesitate to involve the local police.’

Nessa tipped up her chin, feeling reckless. ‘So why don’t you do it, then? Just call them!’

Barbier didn’t look remotely fazed at her outburst. ‘Because,’ he said easily, ‘I don’t believe it serves either of our interests to involve the law at this point. Do you really want to drag your family name into the open and inform everyone of what your brother has done?’

Nessa went cold inside when she thought of the lines of pain already etched into her father’s face. Indelible lines that would never fade even in spite of his much better mental state. She

thought of Iseult's frantic worry and her husband, Nadim, who would undoubtedly storm in to take over—just weeks before their baby was due.

Nessa looked at the man in front of her and hated him at that moment. Hated the way he was able to hold her to ransom so easily, and then that hatred turned inwards. She only had herself to blame. And Paddy.

She had taken responsibility and she couldn't crumble now.

She forced down an awful feeling of futility and said, 'No, I don't want anyone to know what has happened. If I stay and do as you ask, can you promise that you won't report what Paddy has done?'

Barbier inclined his head slightly. 'Like I said, it serves us both to keep this to ourselves for the time being.'

Nessa wondered why he was so reluctant to let this get out, but then she realised that he would hardly like it to be known that payment for a horse had gone astray. It would put off potential sellers everywhere.

For a fleeting moment Nessa considered threatening to leak this news in return for Barbier's assurance that Paddy wouldn't be prosecuted. But she realised, without even testing him, that Barbier was not a man who could be so easily manipulated.

Apart from which, she didn't have the stomach for blackmail, and there would be no way that Paddy's reputation could remain unsullied. He might never get the chance to prove his innocence, and with the stain of possible theft and corruption on his record

he'd never get a job in the industry he loved again. It would ruin him. Not to mention the disappointment of their father and sister...

As if privy to her thoughts, Barbier said, 'You're the only insurance Paddy has at the moment. His only guarantee of any kind of protection. You walk out of here and that's gone, along with any sliver of doubt I may have about his guilt.'

Nessa's heart thumped hard at that. So there *was* a chance that Barbier might believe in Paddy, if she could just convince him to return and explain what had happened. She had to cling onto that.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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