

JESSIE KEANE

THE MAKE

18th December

The instant the police were ushered into her office over the casino, Gracie Doyle knew there was trouble brewing. She was slouching in her chair with her aching bare feet up on her desk after a long, long day. It was a cold, blustery Friday night, and in precisely a week's time – *seven days! Count 'em!* – it would be Christmas Day.

She was already sick of all the jingle-bells and fake bonhomie, the endless Wizard and Slade tracks being pumped out of every shopping mall's sound system, the crazed crush of people wherever you went. Bad things happened at Christmas. For instance, her Dad had died just before last Christmas Day. Fatal heart attack, right there in the middle of the casino boulevard. Boom! One minute there, the next – gone. Gracie *hated* Christmas.

Now she was just sitting contemplating what she would actually do over the festive break – as usual, she'd made no real plans and *also* as usual she hadn't even put up a tree in her flat – fuck *that* – when there was a knock at the door and two cops, one male, one female, were shown in by Brynn, the manager.

Gracie's feet slipped off the desk as she sat bolt upright with surprise.

Cops were rarely seen in the casino, mostly because Gracie Doyle, thirty-year-old daughter of the late Paddy Doyle, ran a very tight ship here in the centre of

Manchester. Since she'd been catapulted into the driving seat following Dad's death, she'd put in lots of new security, even an ultra-sophisticated 'eye in the sky' surveillance system that recorded every word, every movement, every bet placed every chip handled. There had been scammers, of course; there always were. But no-one had yet beaten Gracie's system.

So what were the cops doing here?

'Miss Doyle?' asked the male uniformed PC.

It was funny how, after all this time, she still half-expected to hear her other name, but now she used just plain Gracie Doyle. Head of *Doyles*. She was proud of her achievements. She'd feared she'd sink without Dad at the helm, but she'd swum. Hell she'd *powered* through the waters of the casino world, glad now that dad had insisted she work her way up the ranks; she'd kicked against it sometimes, but now she knew he'd been right.

She knew the business inside-out. She'd started as a slots trainee, then a dealer; then she'd graduated to box man – or box *person*, to use the politically correct term. Then she was a floor person, then a pit boss, a shift boss, and finally she was shadowing the casino manager – Brynn – and now, she was proprietor, sole owner. The buck stopped, very firmly, with her.

Now, when she walked through the vast sliding double-doors and into reception, moved with her easy long-legged stride down the sumptuously thick gold carpet of the boulevard of slot machines and into the casino proper, she felt like a queen – and everyone treated her as such.

Gracie loved the late-night casino world; the ping and tinkle of the slots as players ‘comped’ with free booze and soft drinks chanced their luck; the intense concentration of the high-stakes punters as the gold-liveried croupiers scooped up their brightly-coloured plastic chips and positioned them on this number or that, then spun the roulette wheel. Their howling yells of triumph when they won; their disappointment when they lost – and usually they did lose – but always, always, they came back to try and beat the house again.

Someone *really* ought to tell them it was impossible.

This place was Gracie’s *life*. She loved it all. Let the punters gamble, that was fine; but she played things straight down the line, paid her taxes, ran a good business.

So why the cops?

She quickly slid her feet back into her black high-heeled patent leather shoes and stood up, rising to her full six feet. She smoothed down her navy pinstriped skirt suit, straightened her open-necked cream shirt, ran a hand briefly over the dark red plait of hair that hung, thick as knotted rope, down over her shoulder. Assembled herself. Took a breath.

‘I’m Gracie Doyle,’ she said, planting her hands on the desk. ‘How can I help?’

‘I’m afraid there’s bad news, Miss Doyle.’

‘Oh?’ Gracie tensed, thinking *here we go. The Christmas curse of the Doyles strikes again.* ‘This is a legitimate business, officers. Run strictly within legal boundaries.’

It was the truth. Her Dad might have bent the rules a time or two – she particularly remembered his habit of ever only paying *red* bills – but Gracie liked to sleep nights, and if that meant being legit and paying her taxes, so be it.

‘News of a personal nature,’ added the female PC, glancing at her colleague.

Personal?

How could it be personal? All she’d had in the world was her Dad, and he was gone.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

The male PC swallowed delicately. ‘It’s your brother, Miss Doyle.’

Brother?

She had to think about that. *Her brother?* Both her brothers were in London and she hadn’t seen or communicated with them since they were teenagers – nearly fifteen years ago. ‘Which one?’ she asked.

The male PC consulted his notebook. ‘Mr George Doyle. He’s very ill in hospital, Miss.’

Gracie looked at Brynn. Fiftyish, skinny, with the leather skin and wrinkles of the dedicated chain-smoker, Brynn had been a close friend to her father and a great help to her when she’d still been wet behind the ears at the casino game.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ Brynn asked, seeing that Gracie was flummoxed by the news.

‘He’s been assaulted,’ said the female PC, watching Gracie like she feared she was about to faint away or something. ‘I’m sorry, Miss Doyle, it looks very serious. His mother – *your* mother – thought you should be contacted.’

What the fuck for? wondered Gracie. Her mother hadn’t thought to get in touch for years. And when Gracie had dutifully notified her mother of her father’s sudden death, she hadn’t even received a reply. Neither her mother nor her brothers had come to the funeral, and they hadn’t even sent a wreath. She would never forget that. Standing there alone, unsupported by her family, in the cold January graveyard.

George was in hospital.

She tried to take it in but she couldn’t get a handle on her own feelings about it. Was she sorry? Was she concerned? Did she – after all this time – really give a shit? She didn’t know. The last time she’d seen George, she’d been sixteen and he was twelve; still a child. He was a stranger to her now – and really, did she now want it any other way? She had her life; George had his.

‘Have they got who did it?’

‘No,’ said the policeman.

‘And it’s bad? Really bad?’

‘I’m afraid so, Miss.’

Shit, thought Gracie. And it was at that precise moment that she felt, quite distinctly, her cosy, orderly, trouble-free world tilt on its axis. It felt to her like something had ended. Or maybe ... maybe it had just begun.