



# Children of the Savage City

By Elizabeth Heider

Critically acclaimed author of *May the Wolf Die*

BOOK CLUB KIT

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**Some cities feed on secrets. Naples is ravenous.**

A peaceful evening mass at the historic Chiesa del Gesù Nuovo is shattered when a young couple is killed in one of the cathedral's quiet chapels. The daughter of the US Ambassador sees it happen, but she'll speak only to one person: Nikki Serafino.

Shaken by betrayal in her last high-profile case, Nikki has retreated from the relentless vigilance that once defined her work as liaison between Italian police and the US military. Withdrawn and mistrustful, she works her shifts, cares for her aging family, teaches self-defense classes, and avoids entanglement. But this case threatens her self-imposed invisibility—drawing her into a web of lies and resurfacing old wounds and buried loyalties. The murder investigation leads Nikki and her friend, Naples officer Valerio Alfieri, into a shadow architecture of power: built to protect the guilty and hide their secrets at any cost.

Can she and Valerio—each carrying dangerous debts—resist the undertow of corruption that swallows truth whole?

Set against the chaos of modern Naples—the city of Roberto Saviano’s *Gomorrah* and Elena Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend*—where grace and corruption share the same narrow streets, Nikki and Valerio navigate a landscape where even the most principled must confront the cost of survival.

Elizabeth Heider is a former civilian analyst for the U.S. Navy whose fiction draws from real experience aboard warships, inside intelligence briefings, and within fractured systems of control. Her debut novel, *May the Wolf Die*, was named a **Best Crime Novel of 2024** by *The New York Times*, **A Best Mystery of 2024** by *The Washington Post*, and a **Best Book of 2024** by *Publishers Weekly*. Her science writing has been read aboard the International Space Station.

In *Children of the Savage City*, Heider deepens her interrogation of institutional failure with unforgettable clarity, and sharp emotional stakes. At a time when the mechanisms of elite abuse are again in public view, this novel asks what happens when exploitation isn’t simply a failure of power, but its method of consolidation. It explores what it means to witness and resist.

We would love to share an early copy with you and discuss whether *Children of the Savage City* might be a fit for your readers. It’s a novel of reckoning, resistance, and the courage to speak to systems that demand silence.

## Who are the potential readers?

*Children of the Savage City* sits at the intersection of psychological thriller, political noir, and international crime fiction, with strong appeal to readers of feminist and morally complex narratives.

The novel will appeal to readers who gravitate toward character-driven thrillers in the tradition of Tana French, Dervla McTiernen, and Robert Galbraith, and to those who appreciate high-end commercial fiction that engages with themes of institutional failure, systemic exploitation, and the cost of truth. It shares tonal resonance with prestige dramas like *The Night Manager* and *The Diplomat*, where the personal and political collide under pressure.

Set in Naples but resonant far beyond it, the book invites both international and English-language audiences into a world where justice is negotiable, and innocence is currency. It speaks to our current cultural moment, where complicity and corruption are under scrutiny, but does so through the focused, propulsive lens of crime fiction.

The story stands alone, but continues the arc of investigator Nikki Serafino—a woman navigating betrayal, silence, and the long path back to emotional visibility. With its blend of slow-burn suspense, geopolitical realism, and emotional depth, *Children of the Savage City*

will appeal to readers of literary crime fiction who seek more than resolution, and want reckoning.

## Nikki Serafino's Emotional Journey in *Children of the Savage City*

At the beginning of *May the Wolf Die*, Nikki Serafino believed that vigilance and discipline could avert catastrophe. But by the end of that book, the system she had carefully constructed to maintain control had unraveled.

When we meet her again in *Children of the Savage City*, Nikki has taken refuge in invisibility. Self-erasure is now her armor against an unbearable truth: that people she loved (and maybe still loves) did real, permanent harm.

At the core of this harm is her former friend, Durant—one of the few people who saw her, and made her feel safe. His betrayal broke not only Nikki's trust in him, but also her faith in her own instinct to distinguish love from danger.

Unfortunately, that wound wasn't an isolated event. It was presaged by Enzo's violence and, before that, Tito's betrayal. It was also amplified by an emotional disconnection from her mother, Beatrice, who seemed forever unknowable, and from a father who never seemed able to see her. And it's always been there: in the systematic devaluation of institutions built by and for men.

So, Nikki has disappeared—a psychological retreat out of a desperate need to avoid the grief she can't yet bear.

At the start of *Children of the Savage City*, her theory of survival is simple:  
*If I make myself invisible—if I erase myself from the story and the emotional ledger, then what happened wasn't betrayal. It just happened. I wasn't really there. So it didn't really hurt.*

Her journey through the novel is a transformation: from distance and detachment into grief. This happens through action: witnessing, remembering, and choosing to engage – even as the danger and stakes intensify.

The theme of invisibility runs throughout the book: the invisibility of women, the invisibility of harm, and the hidden structures of power.

This is a story in which the invisible must be seen, named, and confronted.

As Adriano once told Nikki:

**“To kill the beast, you need to understand it completely... you must watch and learn... find its beating heart.”**

In systems where corruption hides itself inside institutional procedure, intellect and logic and will never be enough to crack the case. Instead, every real breakthrough comes through intimacy and compassion:

- Nikki's protection of Audrey gets her onto the yacht
- Ravenna's compassion for Ines and Gaetano helps Valerio uncover the truth
- Valerio's nonjudgmental care for Maria prompts her confession
- Nikki's empathy for Lydia unlocks the truth about Claire Sexton
- Orlanda's love for her brother compels her to agitate for his rescue
- Federico's love for Valerio leads him to risk his life
- Nikki's former intimacy with Tito leads him to spare her
- Nikki's care for Audrey drives her to save her

Throughout, the novel probes:

- What kind of love can be trusted?
- What is the cost of a world built on transaction?
- Can we reclaim intimacy after betrayal?

At the start of the book, both Valerio and Nikki are wary and brittle, armored against false affection. Over time, each must evolve toward vulnerability. Their arcs suggest that intimacy is an act of courage, rather than a sign of naiveté—and that compassionate witnessing is the only true antidote to institutional rot.

By the end of the novel, the contours of the “shepherd”—the hidden beast behind the curtain—are becoming clearer. We glimpse its scale and scope. And we begin to understand the role Nikki has inherited. She isn't yet ready to confront the shepherd fully. But the journey toward that reckoning has begun.

## What are the main themes/issues addressed in the book?

The title *Children of the Savage City* refers both to the literal young people caught in the novel's violent machinery, and to those who have been shaped, wounded, and transformed by a place that demands compromise for survival. The "savage city" is any system where power hides behind legitimacy, where institutions fail the vulnerable, and where silence is rewarded over truth.

### The Inheritors of a Broken System

The "children" in this story are those who've grown up inside institutional rot, and bear its consequences. They've learned what to hide and how to endure. The word "Savage" doesn't mean primitive. It means ruthless. The city is both Naples, in all its contradiction and corruption, and a stand-in for any place where unchecked power feeds on complicity.

### The Vulnerable Made Prey

The novel examines how vulnerable people (especially children and young women) are targeted, exploited, and discarded by those who claim legitimacy. These are the casualties of elite control: violated by men in power, and erased by systems designed to protect them.

### Invisibility and Erasure

The emotional heart of the novel is Nikki Serafino's invisibility to both herself and others. Her self-erasure is both protective and corrosive: an attempt to avoid grief by stepping outside the emotional ledger entirely. This theme of invisibility echoes across a chorus of women: Claire, Beatrice, Ravenna, Maria, Fiona, Dorotea. Each has been rendered invisible in a different way, and each helps the novel explore how female pain is minimized, discredited, or destroyed.

### Witnessing as Moral Reckoning

When a system depends on blindness and silence, witnessing becomes a moral and emotional reckoning. Claire is killed, and her death is witnessed by the women gathered around her. Valerio witnesses Gaetano's death. Ravenna's refusal to look away leads to Valerio's witnessing of Maria. When Nikki chooses to see Audrey, she's allowed to save her.

### Power, Corruption, and Complicity

There's certainly more than one villain in this book—it's a story about networks. Institutions meant to deliver justice have become machinery for protecting the powerful. The novel interrogates the myth of neutrality, showing how even those who try to stay uninvolved are shaped by the harm they refuse to confront.

### Truth, Grief, and Control

Truth in this story is suppressed, discredited, or buried—often by the institutions that claim to pursue it. And grief can't begin until truth is faced. Nikki's arc is one of slow, painful reentry into feeling.

## Resistance and Righteous Rage

This is a novel shaped by those who refuse to be quiet. Nikki's rage, coming from loss, loyalty, and betrayal is clarifying. In the face of systemic erasure, it also becomes a survival mechanism.

## Compassion and Connection

Despite its darkness, *Children of the Savage City* is ultimately a story about compassion and connection, and a rejection of transactional relationships. Nearly every plot breakthrough comes from emotional risk: someone choosing to trust, to care, to confess, to protect. The novel rejects the idea that vulnerability is weakness. Instead, it proposes that compassion is the only viable antidote to institutional rot.

## Identity, Fracture, and the Fight to Stay Human

Nikki and Valerio carry visible and invisible scars. They've been shaped by guilt, grief, betrayal, and by the psychological cost of what they've seen and experienced. Their arcs explore what it means to remain whole in a world that rewards detachment and punishes vulnerability.

## Redemption and Moral Choice

Everyone in this novel is touched by harm, but not everyone repeats it. The story asks: What does goodness look like when the system is rigged? What does it cost to act with integrity?

## Book Club Discussion Questions

1. **The novel begins with a brutal murder in a sacred space.** How does the setting of the church shape your expectations for the story? What is the significance of that violation of sanctuary?
2. **The title *Children of the Savage City* suggests a legacy of violence and survival.** How does the novel define “children”—and what does it mean to grow up or live within a place (or system) shaped by power, silence, and betrayal?
3. **Nikki is both the emotional and operational center of this novel—yet she is often invisible to those around her.** Why do you think so many characters underestimate, dismiss, or betray her? What emotional cost does this invisibility carry? How does Nikki reinforce or reject this erasure? How does Nikki’s erasure reflect broader societal patterns?
4. **Like Nikki, there’s a chorus of women in the novel—Claire, Beatrice, Ravenna, Maria, Fiona, Dorotea—each invisible or overlooked in different ways.** What connects them? How do they reflect Nikki’s journey? Did any of these women feel especially tragic, unjustly treated, or familiar to you?
5. **The novel presents a devastating portrait of how young and vulnerable people are exploited and discarded.** How does Heider depict this violence without sensationalism? What questions does the book raise about protection, access, and institutional responsibility?
6. **“You are involved,” Benedetto De Rosa tells Nikki. Later, Valerio is warned, “If you listen to your own lie, you can’t see the truth.”** This novel suggests that neutrality is an illusion—and that even those who try to stand apart are shaped by what they refuse to confront. How do Nikki and Valerio each struggle with their own form of denial? What does the story say about the danger of pretending not to be implicated?
7. **Rage—particularly Nikki’s—is not portrayed as weakness but as a form of moral clarity.** How does righteous anger function in this story? Do you see it as healing, destructive, or both? How does Nikki’s rage connect to her loyalty, grief, and resistance?
8. **This novel explores what it means to be a witness.** In a world where female pain is often discredited or erased, how does *Children of the Savage City* reclaim the act of witnessing as something powerful or sacred? Who in this story truly sees Nikki? Who sees Claire? What does it cost to bear witness—and what does it change?

9. **For all its darkness, this is also a novel about compassion.** Nearly every breakthrough in the investigation comes from a moment of empathy—when someone chooses to trust, to confess, to protect, or to see. How does the novel suggest that compassion can be more powerful than institutional authority? Which moments of care or emotional connection made you feel like something shifted?
10. **The novel depicts Naples as both place and symbol.** How does Heider use setting not just as backdrop, but as moral terrain? What did you learn—or feel—about the city through the eyes of Nikki and Valerio?
11. **The novel ends with Nikki saving someone else, not being saved herself.** Why is this choice so significant in the context of her emotional arc? Do you see it as healing? Heroic? Bittersweet?
12. **Elizabeth Heider draws heavily from her lived experience with the U.S. Navy and international power structures.** How does that real-world background affect your reading of the novel? Did it feel like a more grounded or urgent story as a result?

*Bonus Questions (for reflection or play)*

13. **If this book were adapted for TV or film, who would you cast as Nikki, Valerio, Tito, or Sonia?** Who absolutely *shouldn't* be cast?
14. **What scene haunted you the most—or stayed with you unexpectedly long after reading?**
15. **If you could ask one character a single, uncensored question, who would you ask—and what would you want to know?**
16. **What did you learn about Naples—its beauty, chaos, or history—that you didn't expect? Would you want to visit?**



## In the Words of the Author

### What compelled you to write this book?

I wrote this book to expose how institutions fail to protect; and how the vulnerable are often exploited instead. Wealth and power shield perpetrators – and this rotten system is supported by complicity, silence, and fear. Unfortunately, this has become even more apparent since I wrote the book; we see it play out in our newsfeeds every day.

At the heart of the novel is a disturbing question: What if abuse isn't a side effect of power, but its method of consolidation?

This was shaped by a hypothesis that gained traction after Jeffrey Epstein's arrest and death. That his horrific crimes were systematically built as leverage. *Children of the Savage City* explores this dynamic. Blackmail isn't some incidental residue of exploitation, it's the point. The more monstrous the secret, the greater its power.

By embedding this idea in a crime narrative, I wanted to explore what nonfiction often can't: the emotional toll of systemic evil, and the ways that silence and willful blindness perpetuate harm.

### What is your connection to this book?

*Children of the Savage City* emerged from lived experience: the years I spent in Naples, the time I spent at sea, and the years I've spent working in large organizations and corporations. I've learned a lot about institutions and power, and survival.

I hold a PhD in physics, and spent nearly eight years working for the U.S. Navy as a civilian analyst. My role with the Center for Naval Analyses required full immersion in military life: war games, strategy sessions, and deployments aboard naval vessels. I saw brilliant minds and extraordinary competence. I also saw broken systems, arbitrary rules, as well as clever, subtle, and underhanded ways people shape themselves to power.

In 2009, I deployed for twelve weeks aboard the *USS Nashville*, an aging amphibious transport ship on its final mission before decommissioning. We traveled down the West African coast, working with regional navies. The ship itself was in crisis. We suffered repeated engineering failures. Docked in the polluted lagoon of Lagos, Nigeria, the intake pumps sucked in so much garbage that the water systems failed. We had to be towed forty miles out to sea so divers could clear the ship's intakes. That deployment was surreal and intense, and left a permanent mark.

I was stationed in Naples from 2010 to 2013, working with the U.S. Navy's *Africa Partnership Station* mission.

I fell in love with the city. It's an overwhelming place – gorgeous and radiant, and also feral. The beauty, almost too much to take in, coexists with darkness. The streets are chaotic, and the Camorra mafia rules large swaths of life. My stay in Naples was during a period of

intense personal grief; the beauty and warmth became an antidote for pain, and the city's chaos matched my own.

The novel also draws from my experience of institutions. At their worst, they defend and protect the wrong people—and destroy those who speak out. I've also known people like Nikki and Valerio: wounded and loyal, and trying to navigate broken systems without becoming broken themselves.

The story is fictional, but its emotional architecture comes from lived experience. The characters carry pieces of people I've known: the kind, the competent, the deluded, the evil, the brave. I've lived in the world they inhabit and understand the brutality, the code-switching, and the need to compartmentalize.

This book is my attempt to bear witness to such systems. And to the people who survive them.

### Please provide any interesting details about your research

As with the previous book, *May the Wolf Die*, the years I spent working with the US Military informed much of my writing – and living in Italy also served as a strong foundation.

For *Children of the Savage City*, I took several trips to Naples, and two trips to the UK.

I've had the best of all possible resources and consultants. First, there was Sara, an Italian native. I'd met Sara in 2010 on the US military base and she'd trained me for several years in self-defense. Sara works as an investigator for the real-world unit which I call "Phoenix Seven", and Sara is the inspiration for the character of Nikki Serafino. I also had Eve, a friend and former colleague whose fascinating military career and perspective has served as the inspiration for Beatrice Serafino. In April 2023, Eve traveled with me to the UK as part of the research for those chapters of the book. And I returned in October of that year with another friend to polish up the descriptions.

When the final draft was written, I shared this with my consultants to make sure my cultural descriptions and interactions comported with their lived experiences.

They identified a few points of inauthenticity—which I edited. They also carefully reviewed the fight scenes to ensure that the physicality of each was true to life.

I also continued to read books and research about the history of Naples, about organized crime and clandestine activities. My final visit to Naples to prepare for editing the manuscript (and to work on the next book in the series) was in April 2025.

I'm excited to share this book with you. I hope you enjoy it.



## Author Biography: Elizabeth Heider

Elizabeth Heider is the author of *May the Wolf Die*, named a *New York Times* Best Crime Novel, a *Washington Post* Best Mystery, and one of *Publishers Weekly's* Best Books of the year. Her short fiction has been recognized by the *Santa Fe Writers Project* and *New Century Writer Awards*.

She holds a PhD in physics and has worked as a program manager for Microsoft's AI4Science and as a scientist in the European Space Agency's Human Spaceflight Program. She has authored original scientific research, analytical reports for the U.S. government and military, and coauthored research with astronaut Thomas Pesquet. She lived and worked in Naples, Italy, as a civilian analyst embedded with the U.S. Navy's mission in Africa, where she deployed aboard U.S. and European naval ships. Originally from Utah, she now lives in The Hague, where she's writing the next Nikki Serafino novel.

### QUICK REFERENCE TAGS

- **Full name:** Elizabeth Heider
- **Pronouns:** She / Her
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- **Past Employers:** U.S. Navy, Center for Naval Analyses, European Space Agency, Microsoft AI4Science, Cap-Geo (consulting for Northrop Grumman and INTERPOL)

## LINKS:

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