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Romance
Millionaire Dad:
Wife Needed
NATASHA
OAKLEY

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Millionaire Dad: Wife Needed

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Millionaire Dad: Wife Needed / N. OAKLEY — «HarperCollins»,

Nick Regan-Phillips: a millionaire, whom the world assumes has it all…but he's got a secret that he's kept from the world–he's a single dad. Nick's daughter, Rosie, is deaf. Nick missed the first five years of Rosie's life, but now she's come to live with him he's struggling to communicate with her….Lydia Stanford: beautiful, courageous, award-^nnning journalist. And seemingly the only person who can help Nick forge a bond with his daughter…"But when their fragile relationship is tested, will , Lydia realize how much this millionaire dad really means to her–and needs her–before it is too late?

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 27

Dear Reader,

Who was it who said "You make your plans and then life happens?" Certainly that's true of my life.

It's also true for Nick and Lydia in this story. By the end of this book they've learned a great deal about themselves…and each other. For Nick, full-time parenting is something of a challenge. And Lydia—well, she has to sort out what her dreams really are before she finds her happy ending. Just like all of us!

The British sign language Nick's daughter, Rosie, uses to communicate is a particular passion of mine.

It all began for me when I was in an open-air production of Much Ado About Nothing, which was "signed" once a week. Sitting in the bushes waiting for my next entrance, I had a perfect view of the interpreter—who was amazing. I fell in love. Not with the man himself, although he was quite gorgeous, but with the language.

I'm now a qualified communicator—and in a few years I'm sure Nick will join me.

With love,

Natasha

NATASHA OAKLEY

told everyone at her primary school she wanted to be an author when she grew up. Her plan was to stay at home and have her mum bring her coffee at regular intervals—a drink she didn't like then. The coffee addiction became reality, and the love of storytelling stayed with her. A professional actress, Natasha began writing when her fifth child started to sleep through the night. Born in London, she now lives in Bedfordshire with her husband and young family. When not writing, or needed for "crowd control," she loves to escape to antiques fairs and auctions. Find out more about Natasha and her books on her Web site—www.natashaoakley.com.

Millionaire Dad: Wife Needed
Natasha Oakley

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CHAPTER ONE

THERE was no one there.

Lydia Stanford set her heavy briefcase down and banged again on the dark blue front door of the cottage, stepping back to look at the top floor windows that peeked sleepily out of a roof of handmade tiles.

It was picturesque, but she wasn't here to admire the view and it all looked ominously quiet. There was no glint of movement in the upstairs rooms. No sound of radio or television in the background. Nothing.

Well, nothing except the half-open window above the ramshackle single brick addition at the back. She lifted the brass plate covering the letterbox and peered inside. 'Ms Bennington? Are you there?'

Total silence.

'Ms Bennington? It's Lydia Stanford. We have an appointment at ten.'

Had an appointment at ten, she corrected silently. It was now nearly twenty past. Damn and blast the woman. Where was she? Lydia straightened and shook back her hair. What exactly was she supposed to do now?

Was it possible Wendy Bennington had forgotten their meeting? Lydia wrinkled her nose and stared at the closed door as though it held all the answers. It didn't seem likely she'd have forgotten. The woman was in her late seventies but had a mind so sharp she made politicians quake at the knees the minute she opened her mouth. She'd lay money on her not forgetting a thing. Ever.

Which was why she'd grabbed at the chance to write an authorised biography of Wendy Bennington. It was the kind of once-in-a-lifetime opportunity which meant she'd broken off her first holiday in five years. Why she'd got the first flight back to London and had immersed herself in researching the inveterate campaigner's astonishing life.

So where was she? Lydia peered round the empty garden as though she expected to see Wendy Bennington walk up the path. Just yesterday the older woman had sounded so enthusiastic about the project; surely she wouldn't have gone out? And leaving a window open? No one did that any more.

Lydia sucked in her breath and considered her options. She could, of course, get back in her car and drive back up the motorway to London. Or she could go and get a coffee in Cambridge and come back in an hour or so. Either one would be an irritating waste of her time.

She pushed the bell and rattled the letterbox. Even though it didn't seem worth doing, she bent down and shouted loudly, 'Ms Bennington?' Through the narrow opening she could see the green swirly patterned carpet, but nothing else. The cottage seemed completely deserted.

She half closed the plate, her fingers still on the brass. It wasn't a voice or even a definite noise that made her pause. Perhaps it was a sixth sense that something was wrong. She called again, 'Ms Bennington, are you there?'

Silence. And then a soft thud. Almost.

'Hello? Hello, Ms Bennington?'

She couldn't be absolutely certain, but she thought she heard the sound again. Not a footstep or someone falling…nothing that obvious. But something. She was almost sure of it.

Lydia straightened and shifted her briefcase into her other hand. Of course it could be nothing more exciting than a cat knocking over a waste-paper basket, but…

But if that soft noise had been the elderly lady's attempt to attract attention she wouldn't thank her for walking away and leaving her. Would she? She'd expect her to use her initiative…and do something. Which meant…

What?

Lydia chewed gently at the side of her mouth. It had to be worth a try at getting into the cottage through the open window. If Wendy Bennington had been taken ill…

It was possible. She might have fallen. Accidents in the home were very common, after all. If anything like that had happened, trying to get into the cottage would be the right thing to do. She glanced down at her watch, now showing twenty-five minutes past the hour.

With sudden energy, Lydia quickly walked round to the back of the cottage and stared at the small upstairs window. It was tantalisingly open. If she could just climb on to the flat roof, reaching the window would be child's play. It didn't look that difficult.

She glanced over her shoulder. There was no one around. No one to ask if they'd seen Wendy Bennington that morning.

There was no choice…

Lydia carefully concealed her briefcase beneath a large rhododendron and stood back to consider her options. It really wasn't going to be difficult—as long as the flat roof was strong enough to take her weight.

She took a moment to pull a black velvet scrunchie from her jacket pocket and twist her long hair into an untidy topknot before pulling the dustbin up against the wall. Then, holding on to the drain pipe, she hoisted herself up the first few feet—just high enough to get a grip on the roof.

Easy. Well, perhaps, not easy…but easy enough. And if Wendy Bennington wasn't home it would be just as straightforward getting out again. No one need know.

With the dexterity of the county-level gymnast she'd once been, Lydia swung her leg up and pulled herself on to the roof. If nothing else she could tell the elderly woman her home was a security disaster. Anyone could break in. Where she lived in London no one would dream of doing anything as foolish as going out and leaving a window open. You didn't even leave your car unattended in Hammersmith for five minutes without careful thought.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

A man's voice shot through the silence. Lydia's hand paused on the open window, her heart somewhere in the vicinity of her throat.

'Get down! Now.'

Startled, she turned and looked at the man standing below on the crazy paving. Tall. Handsome…in a scruffy, rough kind of a way. Mid-thirties, maybe late. It was difficult to tell.

And angry. Definitely angry. No doubt about that at all.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' he repeated.

Lydia moved away from the open window. 'Getting in. I thought I heard a noise.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really,' she fired back, irritated by the heavy sarcasm in his voice. How many burglars did he know who went out on a job dressed in a genuine Anastasia Wilson jacket? It was time he took a reality check. 'I had an appointment with Wendy Bennington at ten—'

'It didn't occur to you to wait until she answered the door?' he asked with dangerous politeness, his accent at odds with his very casual clothes. Lydia looked at him more carefully. Whoever he was, he certainly wasn't the farm labourer she'd thought he might be.

And he wasn't as handsome, either. He had a hard face and an arrogant stance that made her want to explain the principles of feminism—very slowly—because he'd probably never grasped the concept of equality.

'It occurred to me, yes—'

'So, what changed your mind?' he asked, still in that same supercilious tone of voice.

Lydia struggled to hang on to her temper. 'Forty minutes standing about in the garden is probably what did it. I'm going to climb in and see if she's hurt. If that's all right with you?' she added, turning her back on him.

'It isn't.'

She looked round. 'Pardon?'

'I said, it isn't.'

'Don't be so…stupid. I had a ten o'clock appointment. I'm sure Wendy wouldn't have forgotten, it was too important. She might be lying hurt inside. Have you thought of that?' Lydia turned and pushed the tiny window open.

'I'd rather you used the key.'

'What?' She swung round in time to see him open the back door. 'H-How did you do that? The door was locked. I checked—'

'She keeps a spare key under the pot.'

Lydia watched him disappear inside with a sense of disbelief. Damn it! This couldn't be happening to her. It had been a very long time since anyone had managed to make her feel so completely foolish.

Logically she knew there was no reason for her to have known Wendy Bennington kept a key hidden. The idea that a formidable campaigner of human rights would keep her back door key under a terracotta flowerpot seemed, frankly, incongruous. But clearly she did…and the local populace all knew about it.

At least this particular member of it did. Who in…blazes was he anyway? Arrogant, sarcastic, supercilious…The words flowed easily. It didn't help knowing she might have reacted in a very similar way herself if she'd discovered someone about to break into a neighbour's upstairs window. Presumably he was a neighbour?

Gingerly Lydia lowered herself down, careful not to scrape her jacket on the brickwork. She brushed herself down and picked up her briefcase from under the rhododendron.

'Tall, dark and sarcastic' had left the door open, no doubt expecting her to follow him. She wiped her feet on the worn doormat and let her eyes adjust to the gloom. The small cottage window ensured the kitchen would always be dark, but the situation was made so much worse by the heavy net curtain hung on plastic-coated wire.

Lydia let out a low whistle. Even though the outside of the cottage was looking frayed around the edges and the garden was hopelessly overgrown, she honestly hadn't believed anyone lived like this any more.

The kitchen looked like something out of a nineteen-forties movie. There were no fitted kitchen units at all. Just a freestanding gas cooker that looked as if it ought to be consigned to a museum and a thickly painted cupboard with bakelite handles. The orange and cream marmoleum floor tiles had begun to lift and the whole room was dominated by a floor-standing boiler.

It was, frankly, grim.

She hadn't been aware that she'd had any preconceptions about what she'd expected Wendy Bennington's home to be like—but, clearly, she'd had many. She stepped over the twin bowls of water and cat food respectively and tried to ignore the faint odour of animal and stale cigarettes.

This had been a mistake. She should have stayed in Vienna, marvelled at the Stephansdom, eaten sachertorte and enjoyed the opera like any other sensible person. What the heck was she doing here?

She'd given up her holiday…for this. Crazy. She was crazy.

And there was still no sign of Wendy Bennington. The house was completely quiet except for the ticking of a clock somewhere in the further recesses of the cottage. She placed her briefcase down by the rusting boiler and looked across at the man as he flicked through the mail on the kitchen table.

'I'm Lydia Stanford,' she said with pointed emphasis, waiting for him to look up and acknowledge she was there.

'I know.'

'You know?' He said nothing. 'And you are?'

'Nick.' His eyes were still on the sheaf of letters in his hand. 'Nick Regan.'

Which told her absolutely nothing.

‘Do you live nearby?’ If he’d looked up he’d have seen her head indicate the direction of the only other house within a mile or so of the cottage.

‘No.’

No? ‘You’re not a neighbour?’

He looked up at that. Very briefly. The expression in his brown eyes made it absolutely clear he’d no intention of assuaging her curiosity. ‘No.’

Nick Regan.

Had she read his name anywhere in connection to Wendy Bennington? She was fairly sure she hadn’t. All those hours on the Internet? All those pages of notes? Was it possible she’d missed something vital?

His accent spoke of an expensive private school education and his assurance indicated he was very used to being in the cottage. Comfortable, even.

Her eyes took in the expensive watch on his wrist and the soft leather of his shoes. Her mother had always sworn you could tell everything about a man by looking at his shoes. If she was right, this one had a bank account to be proud of, despite the worn jeans and faded jumper.

So who was he?

Someone Wendy Bennington had hidden from the public spotlight for over thirty years? A secret son?

She half smiled and pushed the thought aside. It didn’t seem likely—which was such a shame because it would have made a great story.

It didn’t fit, though. From all she’d learnt of Wendy Bennington so far, she’d have been more likely to announce it proudly. Her whole life had been characterised by a complete disregard for social conventions, so the absence of the ‘father’ wouldn’t have deterred her. She’d have told the world that her son’s father was an ‘irrelevance’ and no more than a biological necessity.

‘Should your name mean something to me?’

He looked up and then back at the letters in his hand. ‘No.’

Lydia frowned, irritated. What was the matter with the man? This kind of information was hardly highly classified. His behaviour was bizarre, to say the least. And rude.

‘How do you know Wendy Bennington?’ she persisted, moving closer.

He threw the pile of letters back on the kitchen table. ‘I’ve known her all my life.’

‘Really? How’s that?’

His dark eyes flicked momentarily across to her and then he walked out of the room.

Lydia let out her breath in one long stream and just about managed to bite down on the expletive which was on the tip of her tongue. Perhaps he hadn’t fully understood that she was the one with the appointment.

Pausing only to shut the back door, she followed him out into the narrow hallway.

‘Wendy?’ Nick Regan opened the door immediately to his left and glanced inside.

‘Is she there?’

He brushed past her. ‘I’ll check upstairs.’

Lydia gave in to temptation and swore softly as he took the stairs a couple of steps at a time. Even allowing for the possibility that he was genuinely worried, there was really no excuse for his attitude towards her. Much more of it and he was going to get the sharp edge of her tongue.

Her hand was on the newel post as he shouted down to her, ‘Get an ambulance.’

Ambulance?

‘Quickly.’

Dear God. No.

Despite everything, she hadn't really expected that. For all her dramatic attempt at breaking and entering, she hadn't anticipated anything other than the elderly woman had popped out to get some milk.

Her mind played havoc as she pictured Wendy Bennington lying bleeding…or dead, even… She reached into her handbag and fumbled for her mobile phone while she ran up the short flight of stairs. 'What's happened?'

In the doorway she saw a figure, instantly recognisable despite the flamboyant caftan and grey flowing hair, slumped in the doorway. It wasn't the way she'd imagined she'd meet Wendy Bennington.

Every picture she'd ever seen had shown Ms Bennington to be a highly capable and formidable woman. Her energy and strength had radiated from each and every image. This woman looked simply old. Her face was filled with fear and complete bewilderment.

Lydia flicked open her mobile and glanced across at Nick, for the first time grateful she hadn't made this discovery alone. Presumably he would know whether Wendy Bennington was prone to bouts like this and whether she was on any kind of medication.

'I think she may have had some kind of stroke,' he said quietly, his long fingers smoothing back a lock of grey hair. 'Wendy?'

Lydia watched as the woman on the floor frowned and struggled to articulate what she was feeling—but what came out of her mouth was incomprehensible. Her words were slurred and her frustration mounted as she realised she was communicating nothing.

'Wendy, can you touch your nose for me?' Nick asked.

Again that frown, two deep indentations in the centre of her forehead, and yet there was no discernible movement. Nick looked over his shoulder. 'Have you rung?'

Lydia tapped out the emergency number and waited for the operator's voice. It was only a matter of seconds, but it seemed an age before there was an answer. Her hand gripped on to the mobile until her knuckles glowed white and she forced her mind to stay in the present.

The last time she'd telephoned for an ambulance it had been for Izzy. Lydia felt her eyes smart with the effort of holding back the emotion those images unleashed. She'd never been so frightened as she'd been then. Waiting for the ambulance to arrive had been the longest fifteen minutes of her life.

It had seemed like every minute, every moment, had been stretched out to maximum tension and it was etched on her memory. The feeling of complete helplessness. The guilt. The regret. The panic. And the mind-numbing fear. A whole hotchpotch of feelings she hadn't even begun to unpack yet. All there. All reaching out towards her like fog in a nightmare.

But this was different, she reminded herself. The circumstances were completely different. She forced her breathing to slow and tried to focus on the questions she was being asked.

Nick looked over his shoulder. 'Tell them to take the left hand fork at the top of the lane. It's a confusing junction. They could lose five minutes or more if they take the wrong turn.'

Lydia gave a nod of acknowledgement and reached into her jacket pocket for the piece of paper on which she'd written the directions to the cottage. Wendy had been very thorough.

She watched Nick disappear into one of the bedrooms and return with a pillow and satin eiderdown. He used the pillow as a cushion and wrapped the elderly woman gently in the apricot-coloured eiderdown.

'Yes, the last cottage on the right.' The voice on the other end was precise and calming. 'About half a mile out of the village. Yes. Thank you.' Lydia finished the call and clicked her mobile shut.

'Well?' Nick turned to look at her.

'An ambulance is on its way.'

'Is there anything I need to do while I wait?'

Lydia shook her head. 'You've already done it. She said not to move her and to wrap her in something warm as she might be in shock.'

He smiled grimly and settled himself back down on the floor, taking Wendy's hand between his own. 'It won't be long now.'

Lydia watched the shadow pass across the elderly woman's face as she struggled to speak. She seemed so confused. Frightened. So unlike anything she'd been expecting to find in such a formidable woman—and yet would anyone be otherwise?

Her knowledge of strokes was woefully scanty, but she knew the consequences of them could be devastating. It didn't seem right. A woman of Wendy's courage couldn't be struck down like this. It wasn't fair.

But life wasn't fair, was it? It wasn't fair that her parents had died when they were so young. Or that her sister Izzy had miscarried her baby. Life had a way of kicking up all kinds of unpleasant surprises. She ought to know that by now.

Lydia put her phone back in her handbag, taking more care than usual to fasten the stud. 'Do you want me to put together an overnight bag? Or s-something…?' Her voice faltered as he looked up, his expression conveying exactly what he thought of her suggestion.

'I'll do it later,' Nick said curtly, 'and take it when I go to the hospital.'

What was his problem? He looked as though she'd told him she'd ransack the entire room instead of offering to gather together a few toiletries and a nightdress. Her eyes shifted to Wendy's hugely swollen ankle, visible beneath the eiderdown. 'I'll get some ice.'

'Sorry?'

'For her ankle. Whether it's broken or just sprained, ice will help it.'

He followed the line of her gaze. 'Right.'

Lydia turned and started down the stairs before she thought to ask, 'Does she have a freezer?'

'In the old scullery. She keeps a chest freezer out there.'

Lydia continued down the stairs. As she reached the bottom she jumped as a warm furry shape twisted round her legs. 'Hello,' she said softly. The cat mewed loudly and pushed that little bit closer. Lydia stooped and ran her hand across the sleek black fur.

Stepping to one side, Lydia carried on to the kitchen. Two concrete steps led down to the old scullery, the ancient copper wash tub in one corner. The freezer stood, large and white, on the far wall. Spots of rust discoloured the surface and the lid seemed to have slightly bowed.

There was so much about Wendy Bennington's house that made her feel unutterably sad. It was as though the elderly woman did no more than camp here. She'd certainly made no effort to make the place feel comfortable…or even like a home.

The freezer was in desperate need of being defrosted and Lydia struggled to lift the lid. She chipped off huge chunks of ice and lifted out the top basket.

Inside there were countless boxes of pre-prepared meals for one, half-opened packets of stir-fry and frozen vegetables. Surely more than enough to feed a single person for several months? Lydia lifted out a small packet of peas and headed back upstairs.

Nick turned as soon as she got there. 'Have you found something? Her ankle seems to be bothering her now.'

'You'll need to wrap this in a towel. It's very cold.'

But even as she spoke he'd pulled out a pillow from its pillowcase and tucked the frozen packet inside. She watched as he carefully held it up against the swelling and heard Wendy's small moan of pain.

'Is there anything else I can do? I'd like to help.'

Nick glanced up. 'If you want to be useful you could take your car down to the village and point the ambulance in the right direction.'

'I'm sure there's no need for that. I found my way here without a problem.'

'But it's a single track road and if they miss the junction there's nowhere to turn for a couple of miles.'

Lydia frowned, uncertain what to do. What he was saying about the junction was true—but it was more than that. He so clearly wanted her to leave.

She heard the elderly woman mumble incomprehensibly and wondered whether he wished her to go because he knew how much Wendy would hate being seen this way. If the situation was reversed, if she were the woman lying on the floor, she would prefer there were no strangers to see it.

And there was no doubt that Wendy trusted Nick implicitly, not once had she glanced across in Lydia's direction. Her eyes searched out his as though they would be her salvation.

It felt intensely private. His strong hand calmly held Wendy's frail agitated one in his. Lydia didn't think she'd ever seen a man so gentle or so eminently capable of managing a situation alone.

'I'll wait in the village.'

Nick scarcely noticed she'd spoken; his mind and energy were focused entirely on Wendy Bennington.

As it should be, she reminded herself. Of course, he should be totally concerned about the sick woman.

Lydia reached inside an inner pocket of her handbag and pulled out a business card. 'Would you call me? I'd like to know how Ms Bennington is doing.'

He turned, his expression unreadable. If he wasn't a poker player, he ought to be. She couldn't tell whether he thought it reasonable that she wanted to know what happened to Wendy or whether he thought it an intrusion.

'Please?'

His face didn't change, but after a short pause he reached out and took her card. 'Make sure you leave the front door open,' he said, tucking it in the back pocket of his jeans.

Lydia supposed she had to take that as an agreement that he would call her. Whether he would remember to actually do it or not was a different matter.

Quietly she walked down the stairs and into the oppressively gloomy kitchen. Her briefcase was still by the rusting boiler where she'd left it. Lydia bent and picked it up, before taking a last opportunity to glance about her.

Sad. It was a truly sad place.

Slowly she walked along the hall and carefully put the front door on the latch. It was strange that Nick Regan let Wendy Bennington live in such a way. He so obviously loved her. It was in the way he'd brushed her hair off her forehead and held her hand.

So who was he? Why was he so concerned about Wendy Bennington? It surely went beyond being a mere friend, but his name hadn't appeared in her research. As far as she'd been able to ascertain, Wendy had no family at all. Not even a nephew. An only child of only children.

She walked down the narrow front path, mulling over the possibilities. At the gate she stopped, mouth open in disbelief. His car was parked immediately in front of her own—and her mother's wealth barometer had been spot on. Nick Regan drove a top of the range sports car. So who the heck was he?

Lydia opened her car door, feeling vaguely ashamed. There was something in her which made it impossible to switch off 'the journalist'. Why couldn't she merely be pleased that Wendy had someone who loved her? Wendy had lived her life entirely for other people; it was right that when she needed help herself there should be someone to give it. Someone who cared because they chose to, rather than doing so out of a sense of duty.

She tipped the front seat of her more modest car forward and slid in her briefcase. Perhaps she hadn't been so far adrift in thinking he was behaving like a son? It had to be a possibility because what else was there?

The engine purred into life and Lydia took a last glance back at the cottage through her rear-view mirror. He was the right kind of age. Thirty-four, maybe as much as thirty-eight. Certainly no more.

Perhaps he was the result of a passionate affair? She let her imagination soar. An affair with a married man? Or the husband of a friend? Or was he a sperm donor baby? Or…

She was getting ridiculous. If Wendy Bennington had ever been pregnant someone somewhere would have written about it. She glanced up again at her driver's mirror and groaned at the image she presented. Her hair was still bunched up in a childish topknot. Hardly the look of an award-winning journalist.

Damn.

She ripped out the scrunchie and let her hair fall softly around her shoulders. Nick bloody Regan probably thought she was some kind of tea girl rather than the woman his…friend…had chosen as her biographer.

It shouldn't matter. Lydia crunched her car into first gear. It didn't matter—at all. But…but this was not turning out to be a good day.

Nick heard her leave. First her footsteps on the stairs and then the sound of her car pulling away. He let out his breath in a steady stream and tried to settle himself into a more comfortable position on the floor.

He hadn't expected Lydia Stanford would give up so easily. Her kind always stayed to the last. They circled overhead, waiting for the kill, like the scavengers they were. The wonder was that she hadn't whipped out her camera and taken some photographs as 'background colour'—or whatever she called it to salve her conscience.

Nick rested his head against the wall. There were other journalists, with far better credentials than Ms Stanford, who would have been more than anxious to write an authorised biography. Some he would have trusted to do a fair and balanced job of it.

But Lydia Stanford…

No. He wouldn't trust her as far as he could spit. What Wendy had been thinking of to insist on a woman capable of building her career by using her own sister's tragedy he couldn't imagine. You had to be an automaton to do what Lydia had done.

Any normal person would have been overcome by grief at her sister's attempted suicide. They'd have hung by her bedside, too traumatised to do anything else.

But not Lydia Stanford. Ms Stanford had launched an exhaustive vendetta against the man at the centre of the scandal. She'd meticulously collected information on his fraudulent business dealings, making sure she had enough to ruin him.

And in the process she'd made her own fortune. Not bad going. But what about the sister? How did she feel about being a stepping stone in her sister's career?

Even his ex-wife, Ana, wouldn't have been so coldly calculating. He rubbed a hand across the spike of pain in his forehead. Or just not as overt? But that made precious little difference to the people around them. They still got hurt. Collateral damage in a game they didn't know they were playing.

One thing was certain; Wendy's decision to choose Lydia Stanford had nothing to do with the mane of honey-brown hair which she wore in that half up, half down sexy thing women did. Nor would Wendy have noticed the amber flecks in her brown eyes, or her long legs, or, he altered his position slightly, her unfortunate taste for his ex-wife's jacket design. Presumably Ms Stanford thought it worth selling her soul to be able to afford an Anastasia Wilson jacket. Now Ana would most certainly have approved of that.

Nick shifted uncomfortably on the floor, listening out for the sound of the ambulance. He stroked the hand in his lap. 'It can't be much longer, Wendy. Hang on in there for me.'

He watched the frown of concentration and heard the quietly determined, 'Apple.'

He leant closer. 'What about an apple?'

With total concentration she carefully repeated, 'Apple.'

It made no sense. Nick kept stroking her hand and tried to sound calm and reassuring. The minutes ticked by interminably slowly.

He tried to picture Lydia Stanford at that crucial junction making sure the ambulance crew didn't waste precious minutes. She'd do that, he decided. She might have ambition running through her veins where lesser mortals had blood, but he believed she'd take a few moments to help the woman whose biography she'd agreed to write.

Even Ana would have spared a few minutes from her hectic schedule. His smile twisted. Or perhaps not. Ana spared no thought for anyone but herself.

The garden gate banged and he sat a little straighter. Thank God. 'Up here,' he shouted.

He heard the mumble of voices as they came into the hall; seconds later a face appeared at the top of the stairs. 'Wendy Bennington, is it?' the woman said, taking in the slumped figure on the floor.

Nick nodded, standing up and brushing down his jeans.

'Your friend made sure we didn't miss the turning.' She knelt down and spoke to Wendy. 'I'm Sarah. We'll soon have you sorted, my love.'

CHAPTER TWO

IZZY put a plate of spicy crab cakes and salad in front of her sister. 'So, tell me. What's the matter?' She sat down opposite Lydia and flicked back her softly waving hair. 'I might have overdone the chilli in the dipping sauce, so go careful.'

Lydia took a mouthful of the crab cake. 'This is fantastic.'

'I know. It's the Tobasco.'

'You're getting good.'

'I'm a genius,' Izzy said, smiling over the top of her glass of wine, 'but that's not why you're here, is it? What's happened?'

'You mean apart from Wendy Bennington having a stroke?'

Izzy nodded. 'Apart from that. Although it's horrible for her, of course. I don't mean it isn't, but…'

The silence hung between them.

'You've seen far worse things than an elderly woman having a stroke, Liddy.'

Which was true.

'So, what's bothering you?'

Lydia sighed and looked across at her younger sister, uncertain as to what it was that was nagging at her. It seemed to be a whole mixture of things twirling about in her head making her feel discontented. Irritated. That wasn't the right word either.

It was as though she'd been travelling happily in one direction only to have it violently blocked off. Like a train being derailed, if you liked. Normally she'd have worked out a way to make it an opportunity, but…

Lydia winced. It didn't feel like an opportunity. It felt—

She didn't know what it felt like. There was something about seeing Wendy Bennington slumped in that doorway that had affected her deeply—and in a way she found difficult to understand. Instead of driving back to Hammersmith she'd rung Izzy and begged a bed for the night.

But why? Her sister was absolutely right when she said she'd seen and experienced so much worse.

In her nine years as a journalist she'd witnessed many terrible things. Not just death and injury, but mindless violence and examples of sadistic cruelty that defied description. Some days it was difficult to maintain any kind of belief in the innate goodness of human nature, but she'd trained herself to cope with it. She was inured against it all.

Almost.

Certainly detached. Lydia picked up her wineglass and sipped. It was as if a steel screen came down and kept her objective. It was the only way it was possible to do her job. She imagined it was similar to the way a surgeon worked. You could care, really deeply, but not so much that it prevented you from thinking clearly.

She looked across at Izzy, patiently waiting, her hands cradled around her wineglass. The only time in her life when she'd felt completely out of control was when she'd found Izzy unconscious. There would never, could never, be any event more terrible than finding her sister had taken an overdose.

She hadn't felt detached then. That night she'd experienced emotions she hadn't known she was capable of feeling. She'd believed Izzy would die and fear had ripped through her like lightning in a night sky. There'd been the sense of being utterly alone and desperately frightened. Not even the unexpected death of her parents had inspired such an extreme reaction.

The only thing that had kept her functioning, on any level, was the passionate hatred she felt for Steven Daly—the man responsible. Bitter anger had uncurled like a serpent within her. It had driven her. Had demanded retribution.

Looking at Izzy now, little more than two years on, it could almost have been a dream. She looked so young—and hopeful. Time was a great healer.

'Well?' Izzy prompted.

Lydia forced a smile. 'I think it was the house,' she said at last, trying to put words on thoughts she couldn't quite catch hold of. 'You've never seen anything like it. She lives in a cottage that time's all but forgotten. All alone in the middle of nowhere.'

'Perhaps she likes solitude? Some people do.'

'It's not that…It's…' Lydia frowned. 'The cottage smells of damp and cat urine…and then there are all these frozen meals for one in the freezer. It's so incredibly…sad. There's no other word for it—' She broke off. 'Oh, no!'

'What?'

'I'd forgotten about the cat.' Lydia put down her wineglass. 'She's got a cat.'

'It's not your problem, Liddy.'

'But who's going to feed it?'

'Probably the irritating Nick Regan. It really isn't your problem,' Izzy repeated, taking in her sister's expression. 'If not him, there'll be a neighbour.'

'You think?'

'There's bound to be.'

Lydia relaxed. Of course there was. Wendy Bennington went abroad for long stretches of time. There were bound to be structures in place to take care of her pet. Lydia picked up her knife and fork. 'You're right. I know you're right. It's just…'

Izzy smiled. 'You really like this Wendy Bennington, don't you?'

'I hardly know her.' Lydia cut a bite-sized piece off her crab cake. 'We've spoken on the phone half a dozen times, no more. I'd never met her face to face.' Until today—when she'd been confused and frightened. Nothing like the woman she'd been expecting. The image of her slumped in her bedroom doorway hovered at the front of Lydia's mind.

'But you like her. I can tell you do.'

Lydia paused, fork halfway to her mouth. Did that explain it? She certainly admired Wendy. Had been flattered and very excited at the prospect of writing her biography.

Izzy seemed to follow her thoughts. 'There's no reason to think you won't still write the biography. Give it a few days and see how serious her stroke was. You might be surprised.'

'I might,' she conceded.

'Perhaps that Nick Regan will phone you.'

Lydia pulled a face. 'I'd be surprised at that. He didn't like me at all.'

'Why?'

'No idea.' Lydia thought for a moment. 'It didn't help that he found me standing on a flat roof, trying to get into the cottage through an upstairs window, but—' she looked up as Izzy gave a sudden spurt of laughter '—I don't think it was that.'

'I can't think why. Most people would think it odd.'

Lydia shook her head, a reluctant twinkle in her eyes. 'It probably didn't help,' she conceded, cutting another mouthful off her crab cake, 'but he really didn't like me. At all. You know, eyes across a crowded room, instantaneous dislike. No mistaking it.'

'Is he handsome?' Izzy sat back.

'That's irrelevant.'

'It's never irrelevant.'

Lydia ignored her.

'Well, is he?'

'No.' Even without looking up she could feel Izzy smile. She put down her fork. 'Not exactly.'

'Which means he is.'

'It does not!'

And then Izzy laughed again. 'He is, though. I searched for his name on the Internet while you were having your shower. He's gorgeous. A bit like…what's the name of that actor in…Oh, stuff it, I can't remember. Regency thing. You used to have him as your screensaver.'

'The actor from Pride and Prejudice? Nick Regan looks nothing like him!' Lydia protested.

'Not exactly, but a bit. He's got the same brooding, intense expression. At least, this Nick Regan does. He's an inventor. I think.' She waved her hand as though it didn't matter in the slightest. 'Basically, he is Drakes, if you get what I mean. He owns the company and came up with the idea of the electrical component in the first place. Worth millions.'

Lydia frowned. 'He can't be. That's Nicolas…' Regan-Phillips. She closed her eyes. Damn it! It couldn't be.

Could it? And, if so, what had he got to do with Wendy Bennington?

'I've bookmarked it for you to see.'

'I'll look later.'

Could Nick Regan be Nicolas Regan-Phillips? Izzy must have made a mistake. A multimillionaire corporate businessman and a human rights campaigner—what could possibly link the two together?

The cottage had been securely locked up. Lydia moved the terracotta pot with very little expectation of finding the key beneath it—but there it was.

She clutched the small tin of cat food and bent to pick up the key. If the almighty Nicolas Regan-Phillips had anticipated she might return to the cottage he might not have put it back there. So much for his apparently awesome ability to read character, but at least the cat wouldn't starve.

The back door opened easily. Izzy had laughed at her for deciding on making the thirty minute detour, but it felt like the right thing to do. How could she return to London knowing she could have done something to help Wendy but had chosen not to? And this was little enough.

'Cat,' she called softly. She set her handbag on the stainless steel draining board. 'Cat, where are you? Breakfast time.'

The bowl of leftover cat food on the floor looked revolting. Lydia picked it up with two fingers and carried it across to a plastic swing-bin. 'Why do people keep pets?' she mumbled softly to herself, turning back to the sink and giving the bowl a swill out. 'This is disgusting.'

'To keep them company?'

Lydia gave a startled cry and whipped round.

'Because they love them?' Nicolas Regan-Phillips said, leaning against the kitchen doorway, looking much more like the photograph Izzy had found than he had the day before. He wore a sharp and very conventional pinstripe suit. Power dressing at its most effective.

And he was handsome. Her sister's words popped into her mind and she silently cursed her. The resemblance to her favorite actor was really very superficial, but it was there all the same.

'I—I came to feed the cat.' Lydia turned away and pulled back the loop on the tin, irritated at the slight nervous stutter. Where had that come from? And, more importantly, why?

'So did I.' He placed a brown paper bag down on the draining board.

'I hope you don't mind that I—' She stopped herself, swinging round to look up at him as a new thought occurred to her. 'How did you get in?'

He held up a key. 'Front door.'

'Oh.' Lydia cursed herself for the inanity of her reply. Of course he would have Wendy's key. He would have needed it to lock up the cottage. What was the matter with her?

She carefully scooped out the contents of the tin with a spoon, aware that Nick continued to watch her. He made her feel uncomfortable, as though, perhaps, she'd been caught out doing something he considered wrong rather than the good deed she'd intended. 'I suddenly remembered I'd seen a cat. I couldn't leave it to starve,' she said, glancing up.

He really did have the most inscrutable face. Normally she was good at picking up emotional nuances—but Nicholas Regan-Phillips seemed to short circuit some connection and she was left uncertain.

On balance he didn't seem as angry as he'd been yesterday. More suspicious. She looked away. It probably wasn't anything personal. He had a reputation for avoiding journalists and for protecting his privacy. Lydia swilled out the empty tin under the tap. 'Does Wendy have a recycling bin?'

'I imagine so.'

Lydia looked up in time to catch his swift frown. If she puzzled him she was glad. He certainly puzzled her. What had he to do with Wendy Bennington? She hadn't managed to discover any connection at all. It was a mystery—and mysteries really bugged her.

'Shall I leave this on the side then?'

'I'm sure that'll be fine.'

Lydia carefully placed the tin at the back of the draining board and rinsed the spoon. 'How's Wendy?'

There was a small beat of silence while, it seemed, he evaluated her right to ask the question. 'Better than she looked yesterday.'

Lydia glanced over her shoulder, a question in her eyes.

'She's had a TIA. A mini-stroke, if you like. She'll be fine.' His mouth quirked into a half-smile. It was a nice mouth, firm and sensual. 'No permanent damage, but she's been told to make some life changes.'

'That's…fantastic.'

His smile broadened and something inside her flickered in recognition. 'I'd love to hear you try and convince her of that.'

'When will she be home?'

'Well—' he stretched out the word '—that depends on who you speak to. She's broken her ankle. It's a fairly simple break, apparently, and doesn't need surgery, but…'

Lydia looked around her and then down at the uneven floor levels.

Nick followed her gaze. 'Exactly. She's not going to manage here for a few weeks, however much she'd rather be in her own home.'

'No,' Lydia agreed. She placed the clean bowl back on the floor and picked up the other one. 'So, who's won?'

'The cards are stacked in my favour. I'm here to pick up Nimrod. Hopefully lure him in with food.'

Lydia emptied the water into the sink and put in some fresh. 'That's the cat?'

'Nimrod, the mighty hunter,' Nick agreed, moving away into the hall, his voice slightly muffled. 'I gather his namesake was Noah's great-grandson.' He reappeared moments later, carrying a cat basket.

'Great name,' she said, smiling at the incongruous sight of a city gent with rustic cat basket.

'Certainly appropriate. He's something of a killer cat. Wendy picked him up as a stray a couple of years ago, only he turned out not to be so much a waif as a con artist. If it moves, Nimrod will hunt it. There never was a cat more suited to life in the wild.'

Lydia laughed. 'Good luck getting it into that thing then,' she said with a gesture at the cat basket.

'So Wendy's warned me,' he said, setting it down on the kitchen table.

She rinsed her hands under the tap. 'I'm glad it's all sorted. It suddenly occurred to me, after I'd left, that you might forget about…Nimrod. I was going to contact you today.'

'How?'

She looked up, surprised by the abrupt single word question. 'It wouldn't have been too difficult. A call to your company…'

His nod was almost imperceptible, but she could see his attitude towards her change. 'I thought you didn't know who I was.'

'I didn't, but you have an Internet presence—'

'And you checked.'

Lydia thought of Izzy and smiled, deciding that she wouldn't tell him that her description of him had inspired her sister with a burning fascination to discover who had managed to rile her so much. There'd been little enough information to find, nothing he could object to.

He was thirty-six and divorced. His only child, a daughter, lived with her mother and he was hugely successful at what he did. Nothing particularly unusual in any of that.

'Do you always pry into other people's business?'

'Pretty much.' She looked about her for a towel on which to dry her hands. 'It's an occupational hazard. But, this time, you've got to acknowledge I was invited to pry.'

'Not by me.'

'By Wendy.' She turned to face him. 'Though I dispute the use of the word pry.'

His eyes narrowed. 'Do you?'

'She's led an amazing life. Don't you think it's in the public interest to have that properly chronicled? What she's achieved, particularly for women, is amazing.'

'I think what's deemed to be "in the public interest" is stretched beyond belief,' he said dryly, 'but that's not to undermine what Wendy has achieved.'

'Can't argue with that, I suppose—but I'm not here as a representative of any tabloid paper. Wendy will have complete control over what I write about her and, as long as it's truthful, I've no problem with that.'

'No?'

'Absolutely not.'

She sounded aghast, but Nick knew better. Confronting Lydia Stanford was like coming up against a snake in the grass. You could never trust her. Never.

Very early in her career she'd worked undercover to highlight the ill treatment of the elderly in care homes and, while you couldn't question the validity of her findings…you had to be suspicious of her ability to lie. And lie convincingly enough for colleagues to trust her.

Wendy might be impressed by her ability to stick to her purpose, of owning a cause and staying with it, whatever the personal cost—but he suspected a different motivation lay at the heart of it. He suspected her only cause was herself—Lydia Stanford. And where was the virtue in that?

She carefully folded the towel and threaded it back through the loop. 'So how do you know Wendy?'

'You don't give up, do you?'

Lydia smiled, her eyes the colour of topaz. Warm and beguiling. 'It's usually easier to give in and tell me what I want to know.'

He turned away as though that would stop him being drawn in. 'She's my godmother.'

'Really?'

'I have the rattle to prove it.'

She laughed. It was the kind of laugh that made him wish she was a different woman—and they were in a different situation. He ran an irritated hand through his hair. He'd been celibate for far too long. That rich throaty chuckle was exactly what could make him forget who and what she was.

‘Actually, that’s a lie. She didn’t give me a rattle. I received two engraved napkin rings and a boxed china bowl and plate set from the other two.’

‘And from Wendy?’

‘A copy of the Bible, the Koran and the complete works of William Shakespeare.’

He watched the way her eyes crinkled into laughter. She was dangerous. You could easily relax in her company, forget that she used anyone and everyone near her to further her career—even a vulnerable sister.

People often described him as ruthless, but he would never have taken something so intensely personal and used it to advance his career. Lydia Stanford might claim that her sister had made a complete recovery, but he doubted it.

Betrayal was painful—acutely painful—and when it came so close to home it was difficult to ever recover from it. He had personal experience of it and her Anastasia Wilson jacket was a visual reminder.

Better to remember how that betrayal had felt. Better to remember how much pain the woman who’d decreed that jacket should be in precisely that caramel colour had inflicted. It didn’t matter that it exactly picked out a shade in Lydia Stanford’s long hair. Or that it accentuated a narrow waist and visually lengthened her legs.

It was a warning. And only a fool would ignore it.

‘Have you read them?’

‘What?’ He brought Lydia back into focus. Her lips parted into a smile, showing her even teeth. The woman was stunning. Like a sleek lioness. A mixture of sunshine and fire.

‘Have you read them all yet? The Bible, the Koran and the complete works of Shakespeare?’

‘By the age of thirty-two.’

‘I’m impressed.’

‘I’ve never used the napkin rings, though,’ he returned and was rewarded by the same sexy laugh. Hell, it did something to his insides that didn’t bear thinking about.

He closed his hand round the handle of the cat basket. ‘Have you seen Nimrod?’

‘Not yet, but I’m sure he’ll come in for food some time. He can’t have had anything to eat since yesterday morning.’

Nick glanced down at his wristwatch. ‘He’ll have to do it in the next twenty minutes or I’ll be out of time.’ He strode over to the back door and called.

‘Do cats come when you call?’

He looked over his shoulder. ‘No idea.’ Lydia was smiling, bright eyes ready to laugh and, God help him, he wanted to laugh back.

‘Look, why don’t you let me try and catch Nimrod? I can stay until he comes in for food.’

‘I couldn’t ask you to do that. I—’

‘Why ever not?’ She shook back her hair. ‘You’re obviously busy and I’m on holiday.’

‘On holiday?’

Her smile twisted. ‘I should be in Vienna. I flew back when I heard Wendy wanted me to write her biography.’

‘You broke off your holiday?’ He couldn’t quite believe it. What a pointless gesture. His godmother would have been more than happy to wait. There was nothing so important about the precise timing of this meeting which meant it couldn’t have been postponed.

‘Guilty as charged. Over-developed work ethic.’ She smiled, but this time it didn’t have the same effect. Nick could see a different face.

It was none of his business whether or not Lydia Stanford chose to curtail her holiday, but it reminded him of Ana. Still, four years after she’d left, he thought about her most days. There were reasons for that, of course. Good reasons.

In the three years they'd been married Ana had never taken a holiday. Had never turned off her cellphone. It was a price she'd been prepared to pay to achieve her goals. He couldn't deny she'd been totally honest about that from the very beginning, and at the start he'd admired her for it.

Presumably Lydia Stanford would agree that that kind of commitment was necessary. They were wrong.

'I've got the laptop in the car. I can work here and drive Nimrod over to you later.' She looked across at him. 'It's not a problem.'

Nick glanced down at his watch. It was tempting to accept her offer. He had back-to-back meetings scheduled for the morning and paperwork that really needed looking at after that, besides squeezing in a visit to the hospital. But to accept meant…

She seemed to read his mind. 'Don't worry. I shan't take it as an endorsement of your godmother's choice of biographer.' She met his eyes. 'By the way, what is your problem with me?'

'Have I said there's a problem?' he countered.

'You haven't needed to. It's obvious.'

He hesitated. 'Wendy is capable of making her own decisions. In fact, she would strongly resent my interference in what doesn't concern me.'

Even in his own head his reply sounded pompous and formal. Famed for his 'tell it like it is' approach to business, how had he become so verbally challenged when confronted by a beautiful…?

What was she? Not a blonde or a brunette. Richer than a blonde and lighter than a brunette.

'I don't believe that for a minute.'

He looked up.

'Oh, I believe Wendy doesn't like interference in her business. I'm like that myself, but—' her eyes met his '—but I don't believe you don't tell her what you think. I've seen you two together, remember.'

He felt a small muscle pulse in his cheek. 'I don't want her hurt.'

'I won't.'

And, strangely, he believed her. There was an innate honesty in those rich eyes that made him want to trust her. Was that how she worked? Was it a highly cultivated technique which persuaded the unsuspecting to share their innermost secrets?

'If you slander her in any way I'll sue you.'

She didn't flinch. 'An authorised biography is just that—authorised.' Then her face softened. 'You really love her, don't you?'

'She's a special lady.'

'So I gather.' Lydia slipped her arms out of her jacket and placed it over the chair by the table. 'You can trust me. Where do you want me to take Nimrod to? Do you have a housekeeper to receive him?'

A housekeeper. A nanny. A daughter.

He didn't trust her. Not with one atom of his body. If he left Lydia in the cottage she would, no doubt, look around. She'd open drawers and search through Wendy's possessions. But then, Wendy herself had argued that she'd nothing to hide.

Let her search.

'My housekeeper is Mrs Pearman. Christine Pearman.' It felt as if he'd lost some unspoken battle. 'Did your research on me extend to knowing where I live?'

As soon as the words left his mouth he regretted his phrasing of them. Lydia Stanford was doing him a favour. Even if she did have an unacknowledged agenda of her own.

'You weren't that much of an interest, but I'm sure I can find out with a couple of phone calls if you want to make it a game.'

He'd deserved that, Nick thought as he fished in his pocket and pulled out his card case. 'It's a ten, fifteen minute drive from here. No more.' He scribbled down the address. 'I'll ring Christine

and let her know to expect you. You'll need to phone up to the house when you arrive and they'll open the gates.'

Lydia took the card and looked down at it.

'If you need to leave before Nimrod puts in an appearance, I'd be grateful if you'd leave a message with my secretary and I'll come back this evening. The number's on the front. It's a direct line through to her. I don't want you to feel you have to sit here for hours.'

She turned the card over. 'It's not a problem.'

'No, well…thank you.'

Her eyes flashed up. 'You're welcome.'

'I'll lock the front door. If you leave the key beneath the flowerpot…'

'No problem,' she said again.

There was nothing left to do. 'The cage is here.' He pointed at the cat basket.

'Yes.'

It was just leaving that was the problem. It was walking back down the hall and shutting the door.

Trust. This was about trust. About leaving her alone in Wendy's cottage.

Or was it? There was the suspicion that this was about more than that. There was something about her golden aura that touched him. He knew it—and he was almost certain she did.

Danger. Fire. And Lydia Stanford. Like the Holy Trinity they belonged together.

'Thank you.'

'Give Wendy my…'Love. She'd been about to say love. Hardly appropriate for a woman she didn't know. 'Best wishes.'

His hand went to his tie. 'I'll do that.'

Lydia made herself smile. She didn't know what was going on here. There were undercurrents she didn't understand. 'Perhaps she'll ring me when she feels…ready?'

'I'm sure she will.'

And then he left. Awkwardly—and she had no idea why. Why was it she felt so uncomfortable round Nicholas Regan-Phillips? It wasn't as if she wasn't used to men with influence and money. She was.

She heard the front door click shut and gazed about Wendy Bennington's tired kitchen. What the heck was she doing? And, more importantly, why was she doing it?

It was true, what she'd told Nicholas Regan-Phillips, she did have the time. This was her holiday.

Nicholas Regan-Phillips. What a mouthful of a name. Nick Regan. His Nick Regan suited him far better.

Lydia filled the old limescale encrusted kettle and set it on the gas hob. It was just so out of character for her to have agreed to kick her heels in such a place.

Why would she do that? This wasn't her problem.

But Nick Regan was, that little voice that sat some way to the left of her shoulder whispered. He was arrogant, rude, supercilious…and sexy. Lydia searched around for a coffee mug. Bizarrely, Nick Regan was very, very sexy—and he was probably the reason she'd agreed to stay.

Now, if Izzy knew that…

CHAPTER THREE

SOME decisions just weren't good ones. Lydia glanced over at the cat basket, ridiculously pleased to see that Nimrod was safely locked inside.

There was no man, or woman, on earth who warranted the kind of self-sacrifice she'd endured today. Wendy's cottage was an unpleasant place to kick your heels for the best part of a day and Nimrod was the kind of cat who should be certified—and she had the scratches to prove it.

Lydia changed gear to negotiate a particularly tight bend. She'd gone wrong at the moment when she'd said it would be no problem to stay. She should have cited a mountainous pile of laundry and the possibility of a phone call from her former editor as reasons she had to be back in London.

Instead, she'd endured hours sitting on an uncomfortable sofa with a laptop perched on a melamine tray before being…well, here…and on her way to Nicholas Regan-Phillips's domestic empire. Though that part didn't bother her. She had to admit she had a rabid curiosity to see what it would be like.

There'd been any number of Internet articles about Drakes but Nicholas Regan-Phillips 'the man' had emerged as something of a mystery. It was pure nosiness, of course, but when fate landed you an opportunity like this one she was not the woman to let it go to waste. She was just dying to see what kind of place he called home, considered it reparation for an otherwise completely wasted day.

Another four miles and an unexpected sharp bend and the gates of Fenton Hall loomed impressively out of a quiet country lane. Lydia pulled the car to a gentle stop. The house itself was completely hidden from view. The gates were well over six feet high, tightly shut and were edged by equally high stone walls. It was taking a desire for privacy to rather extreme lengths.

She reached into her jacket pocket for his business card and came out empty. Where had she put the blasted thing? She leant over to pull her handbag off the back seat and flipped open the soft leather. His card was tucked in the small front pocket.

Lydia keyed in the number he'd written on the reverse and within seconds she was answered. 'Hello. I…er…I need…' she searched for the name on the business card '…I need…Christine Pearman. I'm delivering Nimrod, Wendy Bennington's cat. Mr Regan-Phillips said he'd phone…?'

'Oh, yes. Yes, of course.' The voice on the other end sounded distracted and agitated. 'I'll let you in. Can you tell me when you are inside?'

'Okay.' Lydia tossed the mobile on to her lap as the wide gates started to swing open. 'Okay, I'm through,' she said moments later.

'You haven't seen anyone, have you? No one's gone out?'

'No.'

'No one at all?'

Good grief! This was getting rather ridiculous. Lydia looked doubtfully at the receiver. If the voice at the other end belonged to Christine Pearman it sounded as if the other woman ought to be more careful about the films she watched. 'There's no one here but me.'

'If you follow the drive up, I'll meet you at the front.'

Lydia shrugged. How bizarre. The drive meandered gently until she stopped in front of a spectacular house. It was the kind that had been designed along the established order of what was considered beautiful. There were just the right number of windows either side of an impressive entrance. Wide steps curved up to a front door that would have made Izzy's artistic heart drool.

Conservative estimate: upwards of two million pounds worth of 'Arts and Crafts' real estate. She leant across to speak softly to Nimrod. 'Not a bad holiday pad. Quite a contrast from home.'

Lydia unfastened her seat belt and climbed out, catching sight of a beautifully manicured lawn stretching out to the side of the house. It was a stunning place. Which made it strange, surely, for such a wealthy man to leave a godmother he loved with so little?

She lifted out the cat basket. Why not set her up with a little cottage in the grounds? There was bound to be one. Probably more than one.

'Lydia Stanford?'

Lydia spun round. 'Yes. I have…Nimrod.'

'Mr Regan-Phillips did telephone,' the other woman said with a nod. Her eyes looked past Lydia and seemed to scan the bushes behind her.

It was strange, preoccupied behaviour. She'd expected to be asked in for a cup of tea or something—a chance to see inside the inner sanctum of Nicholas Regan-Phillips's impressive home. A chance to glean some snippet of information she could regale Izzy with.

Instead the housekeeper seemed completely distracted. Her face was agitated and her eyes were continually darting around as though she were searching for something.

'Are you all right?' Lydia asked abruptly.

'Yes, I…' the other woman broke off '…that is…'

There was the sound of tyres on gravel and the housekeeper looked round. 'Thank heaven!'

Lydia turned round in time to see Nicholas Regan-Phillips's dark green Jaguar twist up the drive. She watched as he climbed out of the driver's seat and slammed the door shut.

Actually, she thought dispassionately, he was sexier than she'd first thought—if that was possible. He was taller, sharper. He looked as though he was used to the world working exactly as he wished it would. And there was something incredibly attractive about that.

She watched as his housekeeper surged forward, stopping him, the hapless Nimrod still imprisoned in the cat basket. Lydia caught no more than snatches of their conversation, words carried back to her on the breeze. 'We thought she was sleeping—'

Nick looked past her and his eyes locked with Lydia's. He crossed towards her, his feet scrunching on the gravel. 'I'm sorry. It seems my daughter, Rosie, has gone missing,' he explained quietly.

Instantly Lydia's mind flew through possible options. Was it possible she'd been kidnapped?

Something of that must have shown on her face because he added, 'It's something she does quite frequently. The grounds are fully enclosed; I'm sure there's nothing to worry about.'

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