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# MAGGIE COX

In Petrakis's Power



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### **Аннотация**

An inconvenient arrangement... To safeguard her family's future Natalie Carr must make a deal with the devil – Ludo Petrakis. She doesn't trust him, but the energy between them leaves her breathless and powerless. So Natalie agrees to his outlandish proposition: travel to Greece as his fiancée! Natalie can see the cracks in Ludo's unshakeable control as the lines between pretence and reality blur. In a challenge to his terms she longs to expose the shadows behind his eyes, and it's getting harder and harder to resist the smouldering tension between them... 'Vivid landscapes and an exotic tone set the story alight from page one!' – Sian, 47, Warrington [www.maggiecox.co.uk](http://www.maggiecox.co.uk)

# Содержание

About the Author	6
In Petrakis's Power	7
CHAPTER ONE	8
CHAPTER TWO	29
CHAPTER THREE	45
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	51



***‘Perhaps you won’t be in such a hurry to leave if I tell you that I have a deal in mind that I’d like to talk to you about? A deal that would benefit your father as well as yourself,’ Ludo asserted calmly.***

Riveted, Natalie immediately pulled her hand away from the brass doorknob and turned to face him.

‘What kind of a deal?’

Pacing a little to help arrange his thoughts, Ludo took his time in answering. He stopped pacing to settle his gaze on the beautiful inquisitive face in front of him.

‘I will increase what I paid for your father’s business by half the amount again if you agree to come with me to Greece and play the role of my fiancée.’

Natalie turned as still as a statue, her stunned expression suggesting she wasn’t entirely sure she’d heard him right. She moved across the room to a burgundy-coloured wing-backed armchair and slowly sank down into it.

When she glanced up again to meet his eyes Ludo experienced a private moment of undeniable triumph, because he suddenly knew she was going to give in to his offer.

# About the Author

The day **MAGGIE COX** saw the film version of *Wuthering Heights*, with a beautiful Merle Oberon and a very handsome Laurence Olivier, was the day she became hooked on romance. From that day onwards she spent a lot of time dreaming up her own romances, secretly hoping that one day she might become published and get paid for doing what she loved most! Now that her dream is being realised, she wakes up every morning and counts her blessings. She is married to a gorgeous man, and is the mother of two wonderful sons. Her two other great passions in life—besides her family and reading/writing—are music and films.

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# **In Petrakis's Power**

## **Maggie Cox**



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# CHAPTER ONE

‘TICKETS, PLEASE.’

Having just dropped down into her seat after a mad dash to catch the train, flustered and hot, Natalie Carr delved into her voluminous red leather bag and unzipped an inside compartment to retrieve her ticket. The discovery that it was nowhere to be seen was akin to the jolting shock of tumbling down an entire flight of stairs. With her heartbeat hammering in her chest, she raised her head to proffer an apologetic smile to the guard.

‘Sorry ... I know it’s here somewhere ...’

*But it wasn’t.* Desperately trying to recall her lastminute trip to the ladies’ before running onto the platform to catch the train, she had a horrible feeling that after checking her seat number she’d left the ticket, in its official first-class sleeve, on the glass shelf beneath the mirror, when she’d paused to retouch her lipstick.

Feeling slightly queasy as a further search through her bag failed to yield it, she exhaled a frustrated sigh. ‘I’m afraid it looks like I’ve lost my ticket. I stopped off at the ladies’ just before boarding the train and I think I might have accidentally left it in there. If the train weren’t already moving I’d go back and look for it.’

‘I’m sorry, miss, but I’m afraid that unless you pay for another ticket you’ll have to get off at the next stop. You’ll also have to pay for the fare there.’



The officious tone used by the florid and grey-haired train guard conveyed unequivocally that he wouldn't be open to any pleas for understanding. Natalie wished that she'd had the presence of mind to bring some extra cash with her, but she hadn't. Her father had sent her the ticket out of the blue, along with an unsettling note that had practically begged her not to 'desert him' in his 'hour of need', and it had sent her into a spin. Consequently, she'd absent-mindedly grabbed a purse that contained only some loose change instead of the wallet that housed her credit card.

'But I can't get off at the next stop. It's very important that I get to London today. Could you take my name and address and let me send you the money for the ticket when I get back home?'

'I'm afraid it's company policy that—'

'I'll pay for the lady's ticket. Was it a return?'

For the first time she noticed the only other passenger in the compartment. He was sitting in a seat at a table on the opposite side of the aisle. Even though she'd flown into a panic at losing her ticket, she couldn't believe she hadn't noticed him straight away. If the arresting scent of his expensive cologne didn't immediately distinguish him as a man of substantial means and impeccable good taste, the flawless dark grey pinstriped suit that looked as if it came straight out of an Armani showroom certainly did.

Even without those compelling assets, his appearance was striking. Along with blond hair that had a fetching kink in it, skin

that was sun-kissed and golden, and light sapphire eyes that could surely corner the market in sizzling intensity, a dimple in his chin set a provocative seal on the man's undoubted sex appeal. Staring back into that sculpted visage was like having a private viewing of the most sublime portrait by one of the great masters.

A wave of heat that felt shockingly and disturbingly intimate made Natalie clench every muscle in her body. If she hadn't already been on her guard, she certainly was now. She didn't know this man from Adam, *or* his motive for offering to pay for her ticket, and she quickly reminded herself that the newspapers were full of stomach-churning stories about gullible women being duped by supposedly 'respectable' men.

'That's a very kind offer but I couldn't possibly accept it ... I don't even know you.'

In a cultured voice, with a trace of an accent she couldn't quite place, the stranger replied, 'Let me get the matter of a replacement ticket out of the way. Then I will introduce myself.'

'But I can't let you pay for my ticket ... I really can't.'

'You have already stated that it is very important you get to London today. Is it wise to refuse help when it is offered?'

*There was no doubt she was in a fix and the handsome stranger knew it.* But Natalie still resisted. 'Yes, I do need to get to London. But you don't know me and I don't know you.'

'You are wary of trusting me, perhaps?'

His somewhat amused smile made her feel even more gauche than she felt already.

‘Do you want a ticket or not, madam?’ The guard was understandably exasperated with her procrastination.

‘I don’t think I—’

‘The lady would most definitely like a ticket. Thank you,’ the stranger immediately interjected.

Her protest had clearly landed on deaf ears. Not only did he have the chiselled good looks of a modern-day Adonis, the timbre of the man’s voice was like burnished oak—smoky, compelling, and undeniably sexy. Natalie found her previous resolve to be careful dangerously weakening.

‘Okay ... if you’re sure?’

Her need to get to London was paramount, and it overrode her reservations. Besides, her instinct told her the man was being utterly genuine and didn’t pose any kind of threat. She prayed it was a good instinct. Meanwhile the train guard was staring at them in obvious bewilderment, as though wondering why this handsome, well-heeled male passenger would *insist* on paying for a complete stranger’s ticket. After all, with her bohemian clothing, casually dried long brown hair with now fading blonde highlights, and not much make-up to speak of, she knew she wasn’t the kind of ‘high-maintenance’ woman who would attract a man as well-groomed and wealthy as the golden-haired male sitting opposite her. But if the smoky-coloured pencil she’d used to underline her big grey eyes with helped create the illusion that she was more attractive than she was, then at that moment Natalie was grateful for the ruse. For she knew she had no choice but

to accept the man's kindness. It was vital that she met up with her dad.

She could hardly shake the memory of his distressed tone when she'd rung him to confirm that she'd received the train ticket and once again he'd reiterated his urgent need to see her. It was so unlike him to admit to a human need, and it suggested he was just as fallible and fragile as anyone else—she had guessed all along that he was. Once, long ago, she had heard her mother angrily accuse him of being incapable of loving or needing anyone. His business and the drive to expand his bank account was the real love of his life, she'd cried, and Natalie didn't doubt his obsessive single-mindedness had been a huge factor in their break-up.

When, after their divorce, her mother made the decision to return to Hampshire, where she had spent much of her youth, Natalie, then sixteen, had elected to go with her. As much as she'd loved her dad, and known him to be charming and affable, Natalie had also known he was far too unreliable and unpredictable to share a home with. But in recent years, after visiting him as often as she could manage, she'd become convinced that in his heart he knew money was no substitute for not having someone he loved close by.

From time to time she'd seen loneliness and regret in his eyes at being separated from his family. His tendency to try to compensate for the pain it caused him by regularly entertaining the company of young attractive women was clearly not helping

to make him any happier. Several of her visits over the past two years had confirmed that. He seemed disgruntled with everything ... even the phenomenally successful chain of small bijou hotels that had made him his fortune.

‘I just need a single,’ she told the arresting stranger, who didn’t seem remotely perturbed that she’d taken so long to make up her mind about whether to accept his offer or not. ‘And it doesn’t have to be in first class. My dad sent me the ticket, but I’m quite happy to travel as I usually do in second.’

She couldn’t disguise her awkwardness and embarrassment as she watched the man hand his credit card over to the guard. She felt even more awkward when he deliberately ignored her assertion and went ahead and requested a first-class ticket. Natalie hoped to God he believed her explanation about her dad sending her the ticket. After all, she was sure she didn’t resemble a typical first-class passenger.

Trust her dad to unwittingly add to her discomfort by making such a needlessly overblown gesture. He always travelled first class himself, which was why he’d automatically paid for his daughter to do the same. Now she really wished he hadn’t.

When the satisfied train guard had sorted out the necessary ticket, then wished them both an enjoyable journey, the impeccably dressed stranger handed it over to her and smiled. Natalie was very glad that the compartment was occupied by just the two of them right then, because if anyone else had witnessed the man’s astonishing act of chivalry she would have wanted the

floor to open up and swallow her.

Accepting the ticket as her face flooded with heat, she prayed her see-sawing emotions would very soon calm down. 'This is so kind of you ... thank you ... thank you so much.'

'It is my pleasure.'

'Will you write down your name and address for me so that I can send you what I owe you?' She was already rummaging in her voluminous red leather tote for a pen and notepad.

'We will have plenty of time for that. Why don't we sort it out when we get to London?'

Lost for words, and somewhat exhausted by her growing tension, Natalie lowered her bag onto the seat next to her by the window and exhaled a heavy sigh.

With a disarming smile, her companion suggested, 'Why don't we help ease any awkwardness between us by introducing ourselves?'

'All right, then. My name is Natalie.'

It was a mystery to her why she didn't give him her full name. The thought that it was because she was momentarily dazzled by his good looks hardly pleased her. What did she think she was playing at? How often had she groaned at a friend who seemed to lose every ounce of common sense whenever a fit, handsome man engaged her in conversation and became convinced he must think her the most beautiful girl in the world? Such embarrassing silliness was not for her. She'd rather stay single for the rest of her natural life than delude herself that she was something that

she wasn't ...

'And I am Ludovic ... but my family and friends call me Ludo.'

She frowned, 'Ludovic? How unusual.'

'It's a family name.' Beneath his immaculate tailoring the fair-haired Adonis's broad shoulders lifted and fell as if the matter was of little concern. 'And Natalie? Is that a name you inherited?'

'No. Actually, it was the name of my mum's best friend at school. She sadly died when she was a teenager and my mum called me Natalie as a tribute to her.'

'That was a nice gesture. If you don't mind my saying, there's something about you that suggests you are not wholly English ... am I right?'

'I'm half-Greek. My mother was born and raised in Crete, although when she was seventeen she came to the UK to work.'

'What about your father?'

'He's English ... from London.'

The enigmatic Ludo raised an amused sandy-coloured eyebrow. 'So you have the heat of the Mediterranean in your blood, along with the icy temperatures of the Thames? How intriguing.'

'That's certainly a novel way of putting it.' Struggling hard not to display her pique at the comment, and wondering at the same time how she could convey without offending him that she really craved some quiet time to herself before reaching London, Natalie frowned.

'I see I have offended you,' her enigmatic fellow passenger

murmured, low-voiced. ‘Forgive me. That was definitely not my intention.’

‘Not at all. I just—I just have a lot of thinking to do before my meeting.’

‘This meeting in London is work-related?’

Her lips briefly curved in a smile. ‘I told you that my dad sent me the train ticket? Well, I’m going to meet him. I haven’t seen him for about three months, and when we last spoke I sensed he was extremely worried about something ... I just hope it’s not his health. He’s already suffered one heart attack as it is.’ She shivered at the memory.

‘I’m sorry. Does he live in the city?’

‘Yes ... he does.’

‘But you live in Hampshire?’

‘Yes ... in a small village called Stillwater with my mum. Do you know it?’

‘Indeed I do. I have a house that’s about five miles from there in a place called Winter Lake.’

‘Oh!’ Winter Lake was known to be one of the most exclusive little enclaves in Hampshire. The locals referred to it as ‘Billionaire’s Row’. Natalie’s initial assessment that Ludovic was a man of means had been spot-on, and she didn’t know why but it made her feel strangely uneasy.

Leaning forward a little, he rested his hand on the arm of his seat and she briefly noticed the thick gold ring with an onyx setting he wore on his little finger. It might be some kind



of family heirloom. But she was quickly distracted from the observation by his stunning sapphire gaze.

‘I presume your parents must be divorced if you live with your mother?’ he deduced.

‘Yes, they are. In any case, tonight I’ll be staying at my dad’s place ... we have a lot of catching up to do.’

‘You are close ... you and your father?’

The unexpected question took her aback. Staring into the fathomless, long-lashed blue eyes, for a long moment Natalie didn’t know how to answer him. Or how much she might safely tell him.

‘We definitely were when I was younger. After my parents divorced it was ... well, it was very difficult for a while. It’s got much better in the last couple of years, though. Anyway, he’s the only dad I have, and I do care about him—which is why I’m anxious to get to London and find out what’s been troubling him.’

‘I can tell that you are a devoted and kind daughter. Your father is a very fortunate man indeed to have you worry about him.’

‘I *endeavour* to be kind and devoted. Though, to be frank, there are times when it isn’t easy. He can be rather unpredictable and not always easy to understand.’ She couldn’t help reddening at the confession. What on earth was she doing, admitting such a personal thing to a total stranger? To divert her anxiety she asked, ‘Are you a father? I mean, do you have children?’

When she saw the wry quirk of his beautifully sculpted mouth she immediately regretted it, surmising that she’d transgressed

some unspoken boundary.

‘No. It is my view that children need a steady and stable environment, and right now my life is far too demanding and busy to provide that.’

‘Presumably you’d have to be in a steady relationship too?’

Ludo’s magnetically blue eyes flashed a little, as though he was amused, but Natalie guessed he was in no hurry to enlighten her as to his romantic status. Why should he be? After all, she was just some nondescript girl he had spontaneously assisted because she’d stupidly left her train ticket in the ladies’ room before boarding the train.

‘Indeed.’

His short reply was intriguingly enigmatic. Feeling suddenly awkward at the thought of engaging in further conversation, Natalie stifled a helpless yawn and immediately seized on it as the escape route she was subconsciously searching for.

‘I think I’ll close my eyes for a while, if you don’t mind. I went out to dinner last night with a friend, to help celebrate her birthday, and didn’t get in until late. The lack of sleep has suddenly caught up with me.’

‘Go ahead. Try and get some rest. In any case I have some work to catch up on.’ Ludo gestured towards the slim silver laptop that was open on the table in front of him. ‘We will talk later.’

It sounded strangely like a promise.

With the memory of his smoky, arresting voice drifting tantalisingly through her mind like the most delicious warm

breeze, Natalie leaned back in her luxurious seat, shut her eyes and promptly fell asleep ...

*In the generous landscaped garden of her childhood London home she squealed with excitement as her dad laughingly spun her round and round.*

*'Stop, Daddy, stop! You're making me dizzy!' she cried.*

*As she spun, she glimpsed tantalising snatches of blue summer sky, and the sun on her face filled her with such a sense of well-being that she could have hugged herself. In the background the air was suffused with the lilting chorus of enchanting birdsong. The idyll was briefly interrupted by her mother calling out to them that tea was ready.*

The poignant dream ended as abruptly as it had begun. Natalie felt distraught at not being able to summon it back immediately. When she was little, she'd truly believed that life was wonderful. She'd felt safe and secure and her parents had always seemed so happy together.

A short while after the memory of her dream started to fade, the muted sound of the doors opening stirred her awake just in time to see a uniformed member of staff enter the compartment with a refreshment trolley. She was a young, slim woman, with neatly tied back auburn hair and a cheery smile.

'Would you like something to eat or drink, sir?' She addressed Ludo.

With a gently amused lift of his eyebrows, he turned his head towards Natalie.

‘I see that you have returned to the land of the living. Are you ready for some coffee and a sandwich?’ he asked. ‘It’s almost lunchtime.’

‘Is it, really?’ Feeling a little groggy, she straightened in her seat and automatically checked her watch. She was stunned to realise that she’d been asleep for almost an hour. ‘A cup of coffee would be great,’ she said, digging into her purse for some change.

‘Put your money away,’ her companion ordered, frowning. ‘I will get this. How do you take your coffee? Black or white?’

‘White with one sugar, please.’

‘What about a sandwich?’ He turned to the uniformed assistant, ‘May I see a menu?’ he asked.

When the girl handed a copy of said menu over to him, he passed it straight to Natalie. About to tell him that she wasn’t hungry, she felt her stomach betray her with an audible growl. Feeling her face flame red, she glanced down at the list displayed in slim gold lettering on the leaflet in front of her.

‘I’ll have a ham and Dijon mustard sandwich on wholemeal bread, please. Thank you.’

‘Make that two of those, and a black coffee along with the white one.’ He gave the assistant their order, then waited until she’d arranged their drinks and sandwiches on the table and departed before speaking again. ‘You sounded a little disturbed when you were dozing,’ he commented.

Natalie froze. Remembering her dream, and thinking that she must have inadvertently cried out at the very real sensation of her

dad spinning her round and round, she answered, 'Do you mean I was talking in my sleep?'

'No. You were, however, gently snoring,' he teased.

Now she really *did* wish the floor would open up and swallow her. As the train powered through the lush green countryside she hardly registered the sublime views because she was so incensed.

'I don't snore. I've never snored in my life,' she retorted defensively. Seeing that Ludo was still smiling, she added uncertainly, 'At least ... not that I know of.'

'Your boyfriend is probably too polite to tell you.' He grinned, taking a careful sip of his steaming black coffee.

Her heart thudded hard at the implication. Not remotely amused, she stared fixedly back at the perfectly sculpted profile on the other side of the aisle. 'I don't have a boyfriend. And even if I had you shouldn't assume that we would—' Her impassioned little speech tailed off beneath the disturbing beam of Ludo's electric blue eyes.

'Sleep together?' he drawled softly.

Anxious not to come across as hopelessly inexperienced and naive to someone who was clearly an accomplished and polished man of the world and about as far out of her reach socially as the earth was from the planet Jupiter, Natalie bit into her sandwich and quickly stirred some sugar into her coffee.

'This is good,' she murmured. 'I didn't realise how hungry I was. But then I suppose it's because I didn't have any breakfast this morning.'

‘You should always endeavour to eat breakfast.’

‘That’s what my mum says.’

‘You told me earlier that she was from Crete?’

The less tricky question alleviated her previous embarrassment a little. Even though she had only visited the country a couple of times, she’d grown up on her mother’s enchanting tales of her childhood homeland, and she would happily talk about Greece until the cows came home. ‘That’s right. Have you been there?’

‘I have. It is a very beautiful island.’

‘I’ve only been there a couple of times but I’d love to go again.’ Her grey eyes shone. ‘But somehow or other, time passes and work and other commitments inevitably get in the way.’

‘You must have a demanding career?’

Natalie smiled. ‘It’s hardly a career, but I’m extremely glad that I chose it. My mum and I run a small but busy bed and breakfast together.’

‘And what do you enjoy most about the enterprise? The day-to-day practicalities, such as greeting guests, making beds and cooking meals? Or do you perhaps like running the business side of things?’

Privately she confessed to being inspired to do what she did because her dad had run an extremely successful hotel business. As she’d grown older she’d picked up some useful tips from him along the way, in spite of the eventual dissolution of her parents’ marriage.

‘A bit of both, really,’ she replied. ‘But it’s my mum that does most of the meeting and greeting. She’s the most sublime hostess and cook, and the guests just adore her. Taking care of the business side of things and making sure that everything runs smoothly is my responsibility. I suppose it comes more naturally to me than to her.’

Ludo’s compelling sapphire-coloured eyes crinkled at the corners. ‘So ... you like being in charge?’

The comment instigated an unsettling sensation of vague embarrassment. Did he perhaps think that she was boasting? ‘Does that make me sound bossy and controlling?’ she quizzed him.

Her handsome companion shook his head, ‘Not at all. Why be defensive about an ability to take charge when a situation calls for it ... especially in business? A going concern could hardly be successful if someone didn’t take the reins. In my view it is a very admirable and desirable asset.’

‘Thanks.’ Even as she shyly acknowledged the unexpected compliment it suddenly dawned on Natalie that Ludo had revealed very little about himself. Yet he had somehow got her to divulge quite a lot about her own life.

Was he a psychologist, perhaps? Judging by his extremely confident manner and expensive clothing, whatever profession he was in it must earn him a fortune. She realised that she really *wanted* to know a bit more about him. What sentient woman wouldn’t be interested in such a rivetingly attractive man? Maybe

it was time she turned the tables and asked *him* some questions.

‘Do you mind if I ask you what *you* do for a living?’ she ventured.

Ludo blinked. Then he stared straight ahead of him for seemingly interminable seconds, before finally turning his head and gifting her with one of his magnetically compelling smiles. Her heart jumped as she found her glance irretrievably captured and taken hostage.

‘My business is diverse. I have interests in many different things, Natalie.’

‘So you run a business?’

He shrugged disconcertingly. Why was he being so cagey? Did he think she was hitting on him because he was wealthy? The very idea made her squirm—especially when he had displayed such rare kindness in paying for her train ticket. Not one in a thousand people would have been so generous towards a complete stranger, she was sure.

‘I would rather not spoil this unexpectedly enjoyable train journey with you by discussing what I do,’ he explained. ‘Besides ... I would much rather talk about you.’

‘I’ve already told you what I do.’

‘But what you do, Natalie, is not who you are. I would like to know a little bit more about your life ... the things that interest you and why.’

She flushed. Such a bold and unexpected declaration briefly struck her dumb, and coupled with the admission that he was



enjoying travelling with her, it made her feel strangely weak with pleasure. The last time she could recall feeling a similar pleasure was when she'd had her first kiss from a boy at school she'd had a massive crush on. Her interest in him hadn't lasted for more than a few months, but she'd never forgotten the tingle of fierce excitement the kiss had given her. It had been tender and innocently explorative, and she remembered it fondly.

Threading her fingers through her long, gently mussed hair, she lowered her gaze and immediately felt strangely bereft of Ludo's crystalline blue glance. What would a kiss from *his* lips feel like? It certainly wouldn't be like an inexperienced schoolboy's.

Disturbed by the thought, she drew in a steadying breath. 'If you mean my favourite pastimes or hobbies, I'm sure if I told you what they were you'd think them quite ordinary and boring.'

'Try me,' he invited with a smile.

Natalie almost said out loud, *When you look at me like that I can't think of a single thing I like except the dimples in your carved cheekbones when you smile.*

Shocked by the intensity of heat that washed through her at the private admission, she briefly glanced away to compose herself. 'I enjoy simple pleasures, like reading and going to the cinema. I just love watching a good film that takes me away from the worries and concerns of my own life and transports me into the story of someone else's ... especially if it's uplifting. I also love listening to music and taking long walks in the countryside or on

the beach.'

'I find none of those interests either boring or ordinary,' Ludo replied, the edges of his finely sculpted lips nudging the wryest of smiles. 'Besides, sometimes the most ordinary things in life—the things we may take for granted—can be the best. Don't you agree? I only wish I had more time to enjoy some of the pleasures that you mention myself.'

'Why can't you free up some time so that you can? Do you have to be so busy *all* of the time?'

Frowning deeply, he seemed to consider the question for an unsettlingly long time. His perusal of Natalie while he was mulling over her question bordered on intense. Flustered, she averted her gaze to check the time on her watch.

'We'll soon be arriving in London,' she announced, reaching over to the window seat for her bag and delving into it for a pen and something to write on. 'Do you think you could give me your full name and address now, so I can send you the money for my ticket?'

'We might as well wait until we disembark.'

He bit into his sandwich, as if certain she wouldn't give him an argument. She wanted to insist, but in the end decided not to. What difference could it possibly make to take his address now or later, as long as she got it? 'Never a borrower or a lender be,' her mother had always told her. 'And always pay your debts.'

Instead of adding any further comment, Natalie fell into a reflective silence. Observing that she wasn't eating her lunch,

Ludo frowned, and the gesture brought two deep furrows to his otherwise silkily smooth brow.

‘Finish your food,’ he advised. ‘If you haven’t had any breakfast you’ll need it. Especially if you face a difficult meeting with your father.’

‘Difficult?’

‘I mean emotional. If his health has deteriorated then your discussion will not be easy for either of you.’

The comment made a jolt of fear scissor through her heart. She was genuinely afraid that her dad’s urgent need to see her was to tell her he’d received a serious diagnosis from the doctor. They’d had their ups and downs over the years but she still adored him, and would hate for him to be taken from her when he had only just turned sixty.

‘You’re right. No doubt it will be emotional.’ She gave him a self-conscious smile and chewed thoughtfully on her sandwich.

‘I’m sure that whatever happens the two of you will find great reassurance in each other’s company.’

The sudden ring of Ludo’s mobile instantly commanded his attention. After a brief acknowledgement to the caller, he covered the speaker with his hand and turned back to Natalie.

‘I’m afraid I need to take this call. I’m going to step outside into the corridor for a few minutes.’

As he rose to his feet she was taken aback to see how tall he was ... at least six foot two, she mused. The impressive physique beneath the flawless Italian tailoring hinted at an athletically

lean and muscular build, and she couldn't help staring up at him in admiration. Concerned that she might resemble a besotted teenager, staring open-mouthed at a pop idol, she forced herself to relax and nod her head in acknowledgement.

‘Please, go ahead.’

As the automatic twin doors of the compartment swished open Ludo turned to her for a moment and, with a disconcerting twinkle in his eye, said, ‘Whatever you do, don't run away, Natalie ... will you?’

## CHAPTER TWO

‘I ASSUME THAT all the papers are ready?’

Even as he asked the question Ludo rapidly assessed the detailed information he’d been given, turning it over in his mind with the usual rapier-like thoroughness that enabled him to dive into every corner and crevice of a situation all at once and miss nothing.

At the other end of the line, his personal assistant Nick confirmed that everything was as it should be. Rubbing a hand round his clean-shaven, chiselled jaw, Ludo enquired ‘And you’ve scheduled the meeting for tomorrow, as I asked?’

‘Yes, I have. I told the client that he and his lawyer should come to the office at ten forty-five, just as you instructed.’

‘And you’ve obviously notified Godrich, my own man?’

‘Of course.’

‘Good. It sounds like you’ve taken care of everything. I’ll see you back at the office some time this afternoon to give the papers a final once-over. Bye for now.’

When he’d concluded the call Ludo leant his back against the panelled wall of the train corridor, trying in vain to calm the uncharacteristic nerves that were fluttering like a swarm of intoxicated butterflies in the pit of his stomach. It wasn’t the call or its contents that had perturbed him. Finalising deals and acquiring potentially lucrative businesses that had fallen on hard

times was meat and drink to him, and he was famed for quickly turning his new acquisitions into veins of easily flowing gold. It was how he had made his fortune.

No, the reason for his current disquiet was his engaging fellow passenger. How could a mere slip of a girl, with the reed-slim figure of a prima ballerina, long brown hair and big grey eyes like twin sunlit pools, electrify him as if he'd been plugged into the National Grid?

He shook his head. She wasn't anything like the voluptuous blondes and redheads that he was usually attracted to, and yet there was something irresistibly engaging about her. In fact, from the moment Ludo had heard the sound of her soft voice she had all but seduced him ... Even more surprising than that, what were the odds that she should turn out to be half-Greek? The synchronicity stunned him.

Distractedly staring down at several missed messages on his phone, he impatiently flicked off the screen and gazed out of the window at the scenery that was hurtling by instead. The mixture of old and new industrial buildings and the now familiar twenty-first-century constructions rising high into the skyline heralded the fact that they were fast approaching the city. It was time he made up his mind about whether or not he wanted to act on the intense attraction that had gripped him and decide what to do about it. It was clear that the lovely Natalie was in earnest about reimbursing him for her train ticket, but he was naturally wary of giving his home address to strangers ... however charming and

pretty.

Although she'd transfixed him from the moment she'd stepped breathlessly into the first-class compartment and he'd scented the subtle but arresting tones of her mandarin and rose perfume, it wasn't in his nature to make snap decisions. While he was a great believer in following strong impulses in his business life, he wasn't so quick to apply the same method to his romantic liaisons. Sexual desire could be dangerously misleading, he'd found. It might be tempting as far as satisfying his healthy libido, but not if it turned into a headache he could well do without.

Sadly, he'd had a few of those in his time. He didn't mind treating his dates to beautiful *haute couture* clothing or exquisite jewellery from time to time, but Ludo had discovered to his cost that the fairer sex always wanted so much more than he was willing to give. More often than not, top of the list of what they wanted was a proposal of marriage. Even his vast wealth couldn't cushion him from the disagreeable inevitability of another broken relationship because the woman concerned had developed certain expectations of him ... expectations that he definitely wasn't ready to fulfil. No matter *how* much his beloved family reminded him that it was about time he settled down with someone.

His mother's greatest desire was to become a grandmother. At thirty-six, and her only son, Ludo seemed to be constantly disappointing her because he wasn't any closer to fulfilling her wish. She was desperate for him to meet a suitable girl

—'suitable' meaning someone who she and his father approved of. But it wasn't easy to meet genuinely caring and loving women who desired a relationship and children more than wealth and position, he'd found. And when his wealth and reputation preceded him it was apt to attract the very kind of shallow, ambitious women he should avoid.

Frankly, Ludo was heartily tired of that particular unhappy merry-go-round. The truth was, in his heart he yearned to find a soulmate—if such a creature even existed—someone warm and intelligent, with a good sense of humour and a genuinely kind disposition. He returned his thoughts to Natalie. If he embarked on a relationship with her and she should learn that he was as rich as a modern-day Croesus and counted some of the most influential business people in Europe as his friends, then he would never be sure that she was dating him for himself and *not* his money. Already he'd inadvertently let slip that he lived in the affluent area of Winter Lake. But then she must surely guess he wasn't short of money if he was travelling first class and could spontaneously pay for her ticket?

Regarding the ticket she'd lost, she'd told him that her father had sent it to her. Was *he* a wealthy man? Surely he must be. If that was the case then the pretty Natalie must have been used to a certain level of comfort before her parents had divorced. Would she be holding out for someone equally wealthy—if not more so—in a relationship?

Frowning, Ludo quickly decided it would make sense to ask



for her phone number if he wanted to see her again, rather than give her his address. That way *he* would be the one in control of the situation, and if he should glean at any time that she was a gold-digger then he would drop her like a hot potato. Meanwhile, they could meet up for a drink while she was in London under the perfectly legitimate excuse of his allowing her to settle her debt. If after that things progressed satisfactorily between them, then Ludo would be only too happy to supply more personal information, such as his full address.

Feeling satisfied with his decision, he exhaled a sigh, briefly tunnelled his fingers through his floppily perfect hair, and slipped his mobile into the silk-lined pocket of his jacket. Before depressing the button that opened the automatic doors into the first-class compartment he stole a surreptitious glance through the glass at the slender, doe-eyed brunette who was gazing out of the window with her chin in her hand, as if daydreaming. His lips automatically curved into a smile. He couldn't help anticipating her willing agreement to meet up with him for a date. What reason could she possibly have *not* to?

'I don't understand. You're saying you want to meet me for a drink?'

Blinking in disbelief at the imposing Adonis who was surveying her with a wry twist of his carved lips as they stood together on the busy station platform, Natalie convinced herself she must have become hard of hearing. Ludo's surprising suggestion sounded very much as if he was inviting her out on a

date. But why on earth would he do such a thing? It just didn't make sense. Perhaps she'd simply got the wrong end of the stick.

Practically every other woman who'd disembarked from the train was stealing covetous glances over her shoulder at the handsome and stylishly dressed man standing in front of her as she hurried by, she noticed. No doubt they were privately wondering why a girl as unremarkable as herself should capture his attention for so much as a second. Her heart skipped one or two anxious beats.

'Yes, I do,' he replied.

His jaw firmed and his blue eyes shimmered enigmatically. For Natalie, meeting such an arresting glance was like standing in the eye of a sultry tropical storm—it shook her as the wind shook a fragile sapling, threatening to uproot it. She held her voluminous red leather bag over her chest, as though it were some kind of protective shield, and couldn't help frowning. Instead of sending her self-esteem soaring, Ludo's suggestion that they meet up for a drink had had the opposite effect on her confidence. It hardly helped that in faded jeans and a floral print gypsy-style blouse she felt singularly dowdy next to him in his expensive Italian tailoring.

'Why?' she asked. 'I only asked for your address so that I can send you the money for my train fare. You've already indicated that you're a very busy man, so why would you go to all the trouble of meeting up with me instead of simply letting me post you a cheque?'

Her companion shook his head bemusedly, as if he couldn't fathom what must be, to him, a very untypical response. Natalie guessed he wasn't used to women turning him down for anything.

'Aside from allowing you to personally pay me back for the ticket, I'd like to see you again, Natalie,' he stated seriously. 'Did such a possibility not occur to you? After all, you indicated to me on the train that you were a free agent ... remember?'

Unfortunately, she had. She'd confessed she didn't have a boyfriend when Ludo had assumed that if she had he must be too polite to tell her that she snored in her sleep. She blushed so hard at the memory that her delicate skin felt as if she stood bare inches from a roaring fire.

Adjusting her bag, she endeavoured to meet the steady, unwavering gaze that was so uncomfortably searing her. 'Are *you* a free agent?' she challenged. 'For all I know you could be married with six children.'

He tipped back his head and released a short, heartfelt laugh. Never before had the sound of a man's amusement brushed so sensually over her nerve-endings—as though he had stroked down her bare skin with the softest, most delicate feather. Out of the blue, a powerful ache to see him again infiltrated her blood and wouldn't be ignored ... even if he *did* inhabit an entirely different stratosphere from her.

'I can assure you that I am neither married nor the father of six children. I told you before that I've been far too busy for that. Don't you believe me?'

Ludo's expression had become serious once more. Conscious of the now diminishing crowd leaving the train, and realising with relief that they were no longer the focus of unwanted interest, Natalie shrugged.

'All I'll say is that I hope you're telling me the truth. Honesty is really important to me. All right, then. When do you want us to meet?'

'How long do you think you'll be in London?'

'Probably a couple of days at most ... that is unless my dad needs me around for longer.' Once again she was unable to control the tremor of fear in her voice at the thought that her father might be seriously ill. To stop from dwelling on the subject, and to prevent any uncomfortable quizzing from Ludo, she smiled and added quickly, 'I'll just have to wait and see, won't I?'

'If you are only going to be staying in town for a couple of days, that doesn't give us very much time. That being the case, I think we should meet up tomorrow evening, don't you?' There was an unexpected glint of satisfied expectation in his eyes. 'I can book us a table at Claridges. What time would suit you best?'

'The restaurant, you mean? I thought you said we were only meeting for a drink?'

'Don't you eat in the evenings?'

'Of course, but—'

'What time?'

'Eight o'clock?'

‘Eight o’clock it is, then. Let me have your mobile number so I can ring you if I’m going to be delayed.’

Her brow puckering, Natalie was thoughtful. ‘Okay, I’ll give it to you. But don’t forget it might be me who’s delayed or can’t make it if my dad isn’t well ... in which case you’d better let me have *your* number.’

With another one of his enigmatic smiles, Ludo acquiesced unhesitatingly.

She’d never got used to a doorman letting her into the rather grand Victorian building where her father’s luxurious flat was situated. It made her feel like an audacious usurper pretending to be someone important.

The contrast between how her parents lived was like night and day. Her mother was a conscientious and devoted home-maker who enjoyed the simple and natural things in life, while her father was a real hedonist who loved material things perhaps a little *too* much. Although undoubtedly hard-working, he had a tendency to be quite reckless with his money.

Now, as she found herself travelling up to the topmost floor in the lift, Natalie refused to dwell on that. Instead she found herself growing more and more uneasy at what he might be going to tell her.

When Bill Carr opened the door to greet her, straight away his appearance seemed to confirm her worst suspicions. She was shocked at how much he’d aged since she’d last seen him. It had only been three months, but the change in him was so marked

it might as well have been three years. He was a tall, handsome, distinguished-looking man, with a penchant for traditionally tailored Savile Row suits, and his still abundant silver-grey hair was always impeccably cut and styled ... *but not today*. Today it was messy and in dire need of attention. His white shirt was crumpled and unironed and his pinstriped trousers looked as if he'd slept in them.

With alarm Natalie noticed that he carried a crystal tumbler that appeared to have a generous amount of whisky in it. The reek of alcohol when he opened his mouth to greet her confirmed it.

'Natalie! Thank God you're here, sweetheart. I was going out of my mind, thinking that you weren't going to come.'

He flung an arm round her and pulled her head down onto his chest. Natalie dropped her bag to the ground and did her utmost to relax. Instinct told her that whatever had made her father seek solace in strong drink must be more serious than she'd thought.

Lifting her head she endeavoured to make her smile reassuring. 'I'd never have let you down, Dad.' Reaching up, she planted an affectionate kiss on his unshaven cheek as the faintest whiff of his favourite aftershave mingled with the incongruous and far less appealing smell of whisky.

'Did you have a good journey?' he asked, reaching over her shoulder to push the door shut behind her.

'I did, thanks. It was really nice to travel first class, but you shouldn't have gone to such unnecessary expense, Dad.'

Even as she spoke Natalie couldn't help but recall her meeting

with Ludo, and the fact that he'd stumped up the money for her ticket when he'd heard her explain to the guard that she'd lost hers. His name was short for Ludovic, he'd told her. For a few seconds she lost herself in a helpless delicious reverie. The name was perfect. She really liked it ... *she liked it a lot*. There was an air of mystery about the sound of it ... a bit like its owner. They hadn't exchanged surnames but every second of their time together on the train was indelibly imprinted on her mind, never to be forgotten. Particularly his cultured, sexy voice and those extraordinarily beautiful sapphire-blue eyes of his. Her heart jumped when she nervously recalled her agreement to meet him for dinner tomorrow ...

'I've always wanted to give you the best of everything, sweetheart ... and that didn't change when your mother and I split up. Is she well, by the way?'

Her father's curiously intense expression catapulted her back to the present, and Natalie saw the pain that he still carried over the break-up with his wife. Her mouth dried uncomfortably as she privately empathised with the loss that clearly still haunted him.

'Yes, she's very well. She asked me to tell you that she hopes you're doing well too.'

He grimaced and shrugged. 'She's a good woman, your mother. The best woman I ever knew. It's a crying shame I didn't appreciate her more when we were together. As to your comment that she hopes I'm doing well ... It near kills me to have to admit

this, darling, but I'm afraid I'm not doing very well at all. Come into the kitchen and let me get you a cup of tea, then I'll explain what's been going on.'

The admission confirmed her increasingly anxious suspicions, but it still tore at Natalie's insides to hear him say it. Feeling suddenly drained, she followed his tall, rangy frame into his modern stainless-steel kitchen, watched him accidentally splash water over his crumpled sleeve as he filled the kettle at the tap—was she imagining it, or was his hand shaking a little?—and plugged it into the wall socket. He collected his whisky glass before dropping wearily down onto a nearby stool.

'What is it, Dad? Have you been having pains in your chest again? Is that why you wanted to see me so urgently? Please tell me.'

Her father imbibed a generous slug of whisky, then slammed his glass noisily back down on the counter, rubbing the back of his hand across his eyes. Communication was suspended for several disturbing moments as he looked to be struggling to gather his thoughts. 'For once it's not my health that's at stake, here, Nat. It's my livelihood.' His mouth shaped a rueful grimace.

Outside, from the busy street below, came the jarring sound of a car horn honking. Natalie flinched in shock. Drawing in a steadying breath, she saw that her dad was perfectly serious in his confession.

'Has something gone wrong with the business? Is it to do with a downturn in profits? I know the country's going through a tough



time economically at the moment, but you can weather the storm, Dad ... you always do.'

Bill Carr looked grim. 'The hotel chain hasn't made any profit for nearly two years, my love ... largely because I haven't kept up with essential refurbishment and modernisation. And I can no longer afford to keep on staff of the calibre that helped make it such a success in the first place. It's so like you to blame it on the economy, but that just isn't the case.'

'Then if it's not that *why* can't you afford to modernise or keep good staff? You've always told me that the business has made you a fortune.'

'That's perfectly true. It *did* make a fortune. But sadly I haven't been able to hold on to it. I've lost almost everything, Natalie ... and I'm afraid I'm being forced to sell the business at a loss to try and recoup some money and pay off the vast amount of debt I've accrued.'

Natalie's insides lurched as though she'd just narrowly escaped plunging down a disused elevator shaft. 'It's really that bad?' she murmured, hardly knowing what to say.

Her father pushed to his feet, despondently shaking his head. 'I've made such a mess of my life,' he told her, 'and I suppose because I've been so reckless and irresponsible the chickens have come home to roost, as they say. I deserve it. I was blessed with everything a man could wish for—a beautiful wife, a lovely daughter and work that I loved ... But I threw it all away because I became more interested in seeking pleasure than keeping a

proper eye on the business.'

'You mean women and drink?'

'And the rest. It's not hard to understand why I had a heart attack.'

Needing to offer him some comfort and reassurance, even though she was shocked and slightly dazed at what 'the rest' might refer to, Natalie urgently caught hold of his hand and folded it between her own.

'That doesn't mean you're going to have another one, Dad. Things will get better, I promise you. First of all, you've got to stop blaming yourself for what you did in the past and forgive yourself. Then you have to vow that you won't hurt yourself in that way ever again—that you'll look after yourself, move on, and deal with what's going on right now. You said you're being forced to sell the business at a loss ... to whom?'

'A man who's known in the world of mergers and acquisitions as "the Alchemist" because he can turn dirt into diamonds at the drop of a hat it seems. A Greek billionaire named Petrakis. It's a cliché, I know, but he really did make me an offer I couldn't refuse. At least I know he's got the money. That's something, I suppose. The thing is I need cash in the bank as soon as possible, Nat. The bank wants the money from the sale in my account tomorrow, after we complete, or else they'll make me bankrupt.'

'Don't you have any other assets? What about this flat? Presumably you own it outright?'

Again her father shook his head. 'Mortgaged up to the hilt,

I'm afraid.' Noting the shock in her eyes, he freed his hand from hers, winced, and started to rub his chest.

Natalie's own heart started to race with concern. 'Are you all right, Dad? Should I call a doctor?'

'I'm fine. I probably just need to rest a bit and stop drinking so much whisky. Perhaps you'd make me a cup of tea instead?'

'Of course I will. Why don't you go and put your feet up on the couch in the living room and I'll bring it in to you?'

His answer to her suggestion was to impel her close into his chest and plant a fond kiss on the top of her head. When she glanced up to examine his suddenly pale features, his warm smile was unstintingly loving and proud.

'You're a good girl, Natalie ... the best daughter in the world. I regret not telling you that more often.'

'You and Mum might have parted, but I always knew that you loved me.' Gently, she stepped out of the circle of his arms.

'It does my heart good to hear you say that. I don't want to take advantage, but perhaps you won't mind me asking another favour of you?'

Her throat thick with emotion, Natalie smiled back at him. 'Ask away. You know that I'll do anything I can to help.'

'I want you to come with me to this meeting I've got with Petrakis and his lawyers tomorrow. Just for a little moral support. Will you?'

Instinctively she knew it would probably be one of the hardest things she'd ever done, watching her father sign away the business

he'd worked so hard to build all these years to some fat-cat Greek billionaire who didn't have a clue about how much it meant to him, or care that the sale might be breaking his heart ...

'Of course I will.' She lightly touched her palm to his cheek. 'Now, go and put your feet up, like I said. I'll make that cup of tea and bring it in to you.'

Her father's once broad shoulders were stooped as he turned to exit the room. Natalie had never felt remotely violent towards anyone before, but she did now as she thought of the Greek billionaire known as 'the Alchemist' who was buying his business from him for a song when he could no doubt well afford to purchase it for far more and at least give her dad a fighting chance to get back on his feet again ...

## CHAPTER THREE

IF NATALIE HAD had a restless night, then her father had had a worse one. Several times she'd heard him get up to pace the hallway outside their bedrooms, and once when he'd omitted to close his door she'd heard the sound of violent retching coming from his bathroom. It had so frightened her that she'd raced straight into his room and banged urgently on the en-suite door. He had pleaded with her to let him sort himself out, telling her that it had happened before, that he knew how to deal with it, and Natalie had reluctantly returned to her room, heavy of heart and scared out of her wits in case he should have a seizure or a fit during the night.

After not much more than three hours' sleep she'd woken bleary-eyed and exhausted to find blinding sunshine beaming straight at her through the uncovered window, where she'd forgotten to roll down the blinds.

After checking that her dad was awake, she stumbled into the kitchen to make a large pot of strong black coffee. She rustled up some toast and marmalade and called out to him to come to the table.

The dazzlingly bright sunshine wasn't exactly a good friend to Bill Carr that morning, Natalie observed anxiously. The complexion that she'd judged as a little pasty yesterday looked ashen grey and sickly today. He made a feeble attempt at eating

the toast she'd made, but didn't hesitate to down two large mugs of coffee.

Afterwards, he wiped the back of his trembling hand across his mouth, grimaced and said, 'I suppose you could say I'm ready for anything now.'

The weak smile he added to that statement all but broke Natalie's heart.

'You won't have to face this alone, Dad. I'll be with you every step of the way ... I promise.'

'I know, darling. And, whilst I know I hardly deserve to have your support at all, I honestly appreciate it and one day soon I'll make it up to you ... that's *my* promise to you.'

'You don't need to make it up to me. We're family, remember? All I want is for you to be well and happy. Now, remind me what time we have to be at this Petrakis's office?'

'Ten forty-five.'

'Okay. After I shower and dress I'll phone a cab to pick us up. Where is the office we're going to?'

'Westminster.'

'Not far away, then. Well, you'd better go and get ready, too. Do you need anything ironed?'

Getting to his feet and digging his hands deep into the capacious pockets of his dressing gown, her father seemed completely nonplussed by the question.

Taking in a consciously deep breath to calm her disquiet, Natalie asked, 'Do you want me to come with you and check?'

‘No, darling, it’s fine. I’m wearing my best Savile Row suit, and my one ironed shirt has been hanging in the wardrobe ready ever since I got the call that the meeting was today.’

‘Good.’ Giving him an approving smile, Natalie stole a brief glance at the fashionably utilitarian stainless-steel clock on the wall. ‘We’d better get our skates on, then. We don’t want to be late.’

‘For the execution, you mean?’ His grimace, clearly tinged with bitterness and regret, had never looked more pained. Yet the comment also contained a hint of ironic humour.

‘I know it must be hard for you to contemplate letting go of the business that you put your heart and soul into to building,’ she sympathised, ‘but maybe this could be an exciting new start for you. An opportunity to put your energies into something else ... something a little less taxing that you could manage more easily. Even the direst situations can have a silver lining.’

‘And how am I going to start another business if I have barely a penny to my name?’

‘Is running a business the only way you can earn a living?’

‘That’s all I know how to do.’ Exhaling a leaden sigh, her father drove his fingers exasperatedly through his already mussed silver hair.

Struggling with her personal sense of frustration at not being able to find an instant solution that would cheer him and give him some hope, Natalie dropped her hands to hips clad in the pyjama bottoms and T-shirt she’d borrowed from him to wear to

bed and thought hard.

‘What if we ask this Petrakis if he could extend some humanitarian understanding and pay you a reasonable sum for the business? After all, if you say he has a reputation for being able to turn dirt into diamonds then surely he must know that he’s bound to make another fortune from your hotel chain? What would it hurt for him to pay you a fairer price?’

‘Sweetheart ... I don’t mean this unkindly, but you know very little about men like Petrakis. How do you think he acquired his considerable fortune? It wasn’t from taking a humanitarian approach to making money! Whatever you say to him, however impassioned or eloquent your argument, it would be like water off a duck’s back.’

Natalie’s grey eyes flashed angrily. ‘And that’s how the business world measures success these days, is it? Someone is only thought of as successful if he’s single-mindedly ruthless in his dealings and doesn’t give a fig about the psychological damage he might cause to anyone—not even a fellow entrepreneur who’s down on his luck—just as long as he can get what he wants?’

Breathing hard, she knew how much she already despised the Greek billionaire even though she hadn’t even set eyes on him yet. But there was also something else on her mind. If this meeting with Petrakis was too devastating for her dad—and she’d certainly be able to tell if it was—then she couldn’t abandon him later on tonight to go and have dinner with the enigmatic Ludo.



Even though she'd barely been able to cease thinking about the man since meeting him on the train yesterday ...

‘Apparently that is the case. But don’t distress yourself by being angry on my behalf, love. I know I asked you to come with me for moral support, but this isn’t your battle. It’s mine. Now, I think we’d better go and get ourselves ready.’

Giving a resigned shrug, her father turned on his heel. With a heavy tread he made his way down the varnished wood-panelled hall to his bedroom, as if carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

‘Ludovic ... how are you? Traffic’s bloody awful out there today. Everything’s moving at a snail’s pace.’

Ludo had been staring out of the window of his plush Westminster office, hardly registering anything on the road outside because his mind was fixed on one thought and one thought only. Tonight he was meeting the exquisite Natalie for dinner. He closed his eyes. For just a few short seconds he could imagine himself becoming entranced by the still, crystal-clear lake of her gaze all over again, and could conjure up the alluring scent of her perfume as easily as if she were standing right next to him. It was impossible to recall the last time he’d had this sense of excited anticipation fluttering in the pit of his stomach at the prospect of seeing a woman again ... if it had *ever* happened at all. So, when the booming voice of his public-school-educated lawyer Stephen Godrich unexpectedly rang out behind him he was so immersed in his daydream that he almost jumped out of

his skin.

With a wry smile he pivoted, immediately steering his mind back into work mode. There would be time for more fantasies about the lovely Natalie later, after they'd met for dinner, Ludo was sure.

Automatically stepping forward to shake the other man's hand, he privately noted that the buttons on the bespoke suit jacket he wore had about as much hope of meeting over his ever-expanding girth as Ludo had of winning the Men's Final at Wimbledon ... An impossibility, of course, seeing as polo was his sport of choice, and not tennis.

'Hello, Stephen. You're looking well ... in fact so well I fear I must be paying you too much,' he joked.

The other man's pebble-sized blue eyes, almost consumed by the generous flesh that surrounded them, flickered with momentary alarm. Quickly recovering, he drew out a large checked handkerchief from his trouser pocket and proceeded to mop the perspiration that glazed his brow.

'Being an inveterate lover of fine dining definitely has its price, my friend,' he remarked, smiling. 'I know I should be more self-disciplined, but we all have our little peccadillos, don't we? Anyway ... do you mind if I ask if your client has arrived yet?'

Glancing down at the platinum Rolex that encircled his tanned wrist, Ludo frowned. 'I'm afraid not. It looks like he may well be late. While we're waiting for him I'll get Jane to make us some coffee.'

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