



VOWS MADE IN
Secret

MODERN™



LOUISE FULLER

Louise Fuller

Vows Made in Secret

Аннотация

A woman scorned...Art expert Prudence Elliot is shocked when a new job brings her face-to-face with Laszlo de Zsadany – the irresistible enigma who blazed through her life like a comet, leaving only her shattered heart in his wake.A husband discovered...Even more shockingly, not only is Laszlo a secret millionaire, but their youthful pledging of love was legally binding – he's her husband!A fiery reconciliation!Prudence is an addiction that Laszlo cannot fight – but surely the heat between them will quickly burn out? Except soon he's forced to admit that his craving for his wife is blazing out of control... !Discover More At www.millsandboon.co.uk/louisefuller

'I honoured you with a gift. The most important gift a man can give to a woman. I made you my wife and you threw it in my face.'

Prudence gaped at him, shock washing over her in waves. She opened her mouth to deny his claim but the words clogged her throat. *His wife?* Surely he didn't really think that they were actually married? Her heart was pounding and the palms of her hands felt suddenly damp. *Married?* That was ridiculous! Insane!

Dazedly she thought back to that day when she'd been led, giggling and blindfolded, to his great-uncle's trailer. Laszlo had been waiting for her. She felt a shiver run down her spine at the memory, for he'd looked heartbreakingly handsome and so serious she had wanted to cry. They'd sworn their love and commitment to one another and his great-uncle had spoken some words in Romany, and then they had eaten some bread and some salt.

Her pulse was fluttering, and despite her best efforts her voice sounded high and jerky. 'We're not married,' she said tightly. 'Marriages are more than just words and kisses. This is just another of your lies ...'

Her voice trailed off at the expression of derision on his face. 'You're going off topic, *pireni*. We're still married. I'm still your husband. And you're my wife.'

LOUISE FULLER was a tomboy who hated pink and always wanted to be the prince—not the princess! Now she enjoys creating heroines who aren't pretty pushovers but are strong,

believable women. Before writing for Mills & Boon® she studied literature and philosophy at university and then worked as a reporter on her local newspaper. She lives in Tunbridge Wells with her impossibly handsome husband, Patrick, and their six children.

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Louise Fuller



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To my husband, Patrick, who provided inspiration not just for the love scenes but the emotional conflict!

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Extract from Tycoon's Delicious Debt by Susanna Carr

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CHAPTER ONE

SCOWLING, A LOCK of dark hair falling onto his forehead, Laszlo Cziffra de Zsadaný stared at the young woman with smooth fair hair. His jaw tightened involuntarily as he studied her face in silence, noting the contrast between the innocence of the soft grey eyes and the passionate promise of her full mouth.

She was beautiful. So beautiful that it was impossible not to stand and stare. Such beauty could seduce and enslave. For such a woman a man would relinquish his throne, betray his country and lose his sanity.

Laszlo smiled grimly. He might even get married!

His smile faded and, feeling restless and on edge, he leant forward and squinted at the cramped, curled inscription at the bottom of the painting. Katalina Csesnek de Veszprem. But even though his eyes were fixed intently on the writing his mind kept drifting back to the face of the sitter. He gritted his teeth. What was it about this painting that he found so unsettling? But even as he asked himself the question he shrank from acknowledging

the answer.

Anger jostled with misery as he stared at the face, seeing not Katalina but another, whose name was never spoken for to do so would burn his lips. Of course it wasn't so very like *her*; there were similarities, in colouring and the shape of her jaw, but that was all.

Disconcerted by the intense and unwelcome emotions stirred up by a pair of grey eyes, he glanced longingly out of the window at the Hungarian countryside. And then he froze as he heard an unmistakable hooting. It was bad luck to hear an owl's cry in daylight and his golden eyes narrowed as he uneasily searched the pale blue sky for the bird.

From behind him there was a thump as Besnik, his lurcher, sat down heavily on the stone floor. Sighing, Laszlo reached down and rubbed the dog's silky ears between his thumb and forefinger.

'I know,' he murmured softly. 'You're right. I need some air. Come.' Standing up straight, he clicked his fingers so that the dog leapt lightly to its feet. 'Let's go! Before I start counting magpies.'

He wandered slowly through the castle's corridors. The wood panelling on the walls gleamed under the low lights, and the familiar smell of beeswax and lavender calmed him as he walked down the stairs. Passing his grandfather's study, he noticed that the door was ajar and, glancing inside, he saw with some surprise that the room wasn't empty; his grandfather, Janos, was sitting at his desk.

Laszlo felt his chest tighten as he took in how small and frail Janos appeared to be. Even now, more than six years after his wife Annuska's death, his grandfather still seemed to bear the burden of her loss. For a moment he hesitated. And then, softly, he closed the door. There had been an almost meditative quality to his grandfather's stillness and he sensed that Janos needed to be alone.

He wondered why his grandfather was up so early. And then he remembered. Of course. Seymour was arriving today!

No wonder Janos had been unable to sleep. Collecting art had been his hobby for over thirty years: a personal, private obsession. But today, for the first time ever, he would reveal that collection to a stranger—this expert, Edmund Seymour, who was arriving from London.

Laszlo grimaced. He instinctively distrusted strangers and he felt a ripple of dislike for Seymour—a man he'd never met, and to whom he had never so much as uttered a word, but whose company he would now have to suffer for weeks.

Pushing a door open with his shoulder, he glanced warily into the kitchen and then breathed out slowly. Good! Rosa wasn't up. He wasn't ready to face her gimlet eye yet. Apart from his grandfather their housekeeper was the only other person from whom he couldn't hide his feelings. Only, unlike Janos, Rosa had no qualms about cross-examining him.

Pulling open the cavernous fridge, he groaned as he saw the cold meats and salads arranged on the shelves.

And then, despite the rush of cold air on his face, and the even colder lump of resentment in his chest, he felt his mood shift and he closed the fridge door gently. Food had been a comforting distraction during his grandmother's long illness. But by the time of her death it had become a passion—a passion that had led to him financing a restaurant in the centre of Budapest. The restaurant had been his project: it had been a risk, and a lot of hard work, but he thrived on both and he was now the owner of a staggeringly successful chain of high street restaurants.

Laszlo lifted his chin. He was no longer just Janos's grandson but a wealthy, independent businessman in his own right.

He sighed. Not that he wasn't proud of being a de Zsadany. It was just that the name brought certain responsibilities along with it. Such as Seymour's impending visit. He gritted his teeth. If only the blasted man would ring and cancel.

As if on cue, his mobile phone vibrated in his pocket. Clumsy with shock, and a ridiculous sense of guilt, he pulled it out with shaking fingers: it was Jakob! Relief, and the tiniest feeling of regret, washed over him.

'Laszlo! I thought you'd be up. I know you'll have forgotten, so I've just rung to remind you that we have a visitor arriving today.'

Laszlo shook his head. Typical Jakob—ringing to check up on him. Jakob Frankel was the de Zsadany family lawyer, and a good man, but Laszlo couldn't imagine letting his guard down with him or any other outsider. Not any more: not after what had happened the last time.

‘I know you won’t believe me, Jakob, but I did actually remember it was happening today.’

He heard the lawyer laugh nervously.

‘Excellent! I’ve arranged a car, but if you could be on hand to greet—?’

‘Of course I will,’ Laszlo interrupted testily, irritated by the tentative note in the lawyer’s voice. He paused, aware that he sounded churlish. ‘I want to be there,’ he muttered roughly. ‘And let me know if I can do anything else.’ It was the nearest he got to an apology.

‘Of course. Of course! But I’m sure that won’t be necessary.’ Jakob spoke hurriedly, his desire to end the conversation clearly overriding his normal deference.

Laszlo murmured non-committally. For most of his life Janos’s hobby had seemed a strangely soulless and senseless exercise. But Annuska’s death had changed that opinion as it had changed everything else.

After her funeral life at the castle had grown increasingly bleak. Janos had been in a state of shock, inconsolable with grief. But once the shock had worn off his misery had turned into a kind of depression—a lethargy which no amount of time seemed able to heal. Laszlo had been in despair; weeks and months had turned into years. Until slowly, and then with increasing momentum, his grandfather had become almost his old self.

The reason for his recovery, like all catalysts for change, had been wholly unexpected. A stack of letters between Annuska and

Janos had reminded him of their mutual passion for art.

Tentatively, not daring to hope, Laszlo had encouraged his grandfather to revive his former hobby. To his surprise, Janos had begun to lose his listless manner and then, out of the blue, his grandfather had decided to have his sprawling collection catalogued. Seymour's auction house in London had been contacted and its flamboyant owner, Edmund Seymour, had duly been invited to visit Kastely Almasz.

Laszlo grimaced. His grandfather's happiness had overridden his own feeling but how on earth was he going to put up with this stranger in his home?

Jakob's voice broke into his thoughts.

'I mean, I know how you hate having people around—' There was a sudden awkward silence and then the lawyer cleared his throat. 'What I meant to say was—'

Laszlo interrupted him curtly. 'There are more than thirty rooms at the castle, Jakob, so I think I'll be able to cope with one solitary guest, don't you?'

He felt a sudden, fierce stab of self-loathing. Seymour could stay for a year if it made his grandfather happy. And, really, what was a few weeks? Since Annuska's death time had ceased to matter. Nothing much mattered except healing his grandfather.

'I can manage,' he repeated gruffly.

'Of course...of course.' The lawyer laughed nervously. 'You might even enjoy it. In fact, Janos was only saying to me yesterday that this visit might be a good opportunity to invite some of the

neighbours for drinks or dinner. The Szecsenyis are always good fun and they have a daughter around your age.'

In the early-morning light the room seemed suddenly grey and cold, like a tomb. Laszlo felt his fingers tighten around the handset as his heart started to pound out a drumroll of warning.

He took a shallow breath, groping for calm. 'I'll think about it,' he said finally. His tone was pleasant, but there was no mistaking the note of high-tensile steel in his voice. 'I mean, our guest may simply prefer paintings to people.'

He knew what his grandfather really wanted, and why he had inveigled Jakob into suggesting it. Janos secretly longed to see his only grandchild married—to see Laszlo sharing his life with a soulmate. And why wouldn't he? After all, Janos himself had been blissfully happy during his forty-year marriage.

Laszlo's fingers curled into his palms. If only he could do it. If only he could marry a perfectly sweet, pretty girl like Agnes Szecsenyi. That would be worth more than fifty art collections to Janos.

But that was never going to happen. For he had a secret, and no matter how many dinner dates his grandfather engineered, a wife was most certainly not going to result from any of them.

* * *

'Now, you *have* read my notes properly, haven't you, Prue? Only you do have a tendency to skim...'

Pushing a strand of pale blonde hair out of her cloud-grey eyes, Prudence Elliot took a deep breath and counted slowly up

to ten. Her plane had landed in Hungary only an hour ago, but this was the third time Uncle Edmund had rung her to see how she was doing: in other words, he was checking up on her.

Edmund paused. 'I don't want to sound like a nag, but it's just... Well, I just wish I could be there with you...you *do* understand?'

His voice cut through her juddering, panicky thoughts and her anxiety was instantly replaced by guilt. Of course she understood. Her uncle had built up the auction house that bore his name from scratch. And today would have undoubtedly been the most important day of his career—the pinnacle of his life's work: cataloguing reclusive Hungarian billionaire Janos Almasz de Zsadany's legendary art collection.

With a lurch of fear, Prudence remembered the look of excitement and terror on Edmund's face when he'd been invited to the de Zsadany castle in Hungary. His words kept replaying in her head.

'The man's a modern Medici, Prue. Of course no one actually knows the exact contents of his collection. But a conservative valuation would be over a billion dollars.'

It should be Edmund with his thirty years of experience sitting in the back of the sleek, shark-nosed de Zsadany limousine. Not Prudence, who felt she could offer little more than her uncle's reputation by proxy. Only Edmund was in England, confined to bed, recovering from a major asthma attack.

Biting her lip, she glanced out of the window at the dark fields. She hadn't wanted to come. But she'd had no choice. Edmund

owed money, and with debts mounting and interest accruing on those debts the business was in jeopardy. The fee from the de Zsadany job would balance the books, but the de Zsadany family lawyer had been adamant that work must start immediately. And so, reluctantly, she'd agreed to go to Hungary.

She heard Edmund sigh down the phone.

'I'm sorry, Prue,' he said slowly. 'You shouldn't have to put up with my nagging when you've been so good about all this.'

Instantly she felt ashamed. Edmund was like a father to her. He had given her everything: a home, a family, security and even a job. She wasn't about to let him down now, in his hour of need.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to inject some confidence into her voice. 'Please try not to worry, Edmund. If I need anything at all I'll ring you. But I'll be fine. I promise.'

He rang off and gratefully Prudence leant back against the leather upholstery and closed her eyes until, in what felt like no time at all, the car began to slow. She opened her eyes. Two tall wrought-iron gates swung smoothly open to let the limousine pass, and within minutes she was looking up at a huge, grey stone castle straight out of a picture book.

Later she would realise that she had no memory of how she got from the car to the castle. She remembered only that somehow she had found herself in a surprisingly homely sitting room, lit softly by a collection of table lamps and the glow of a log fire. She was about to sit down on a faded Knole Sofa when she noticed the painting.

Her heart started to pound. Stepping closer, she reached out with one trembling hand and touched the frame lightly, and then her eyes made a slow tour of the walls. She felt light-headed—as though she had woken up in dream. There were two Picassos—pink period—a delightfully exuberant Kandinsky, a Rembrandt portrait that would have sent Edmund into a state of near ecstasy, and a pair of exquisite Lucian Freud etchings of a sleeping whippet.

She was still in a state of moderate shock when an amused-sounding voice behind her said softly, ‘Please—take a closer look. I’m afraid the poor things get completely ignored by the rest of us.’

Prudence turned scarlet. To be caught snooping around someone’s sitting room like some sort of burglar was bad enough, but when that someone was your host, and one of the richest men in Europe, it was mortifying.

‘I’m so—so sorry,’ she stammered, turning round. ‘What must you...?’ The remainder of her apology died in her throat, the words colliding into one another with a series of shuddering jolts as her world imploded. For it was not Janos Almasy de Zsadany standing there but Laszlo Cziffra.

Laszlo Cziffra. Once his name had tasted hot and sweet in her mouth; now it was bitter on her tongue. She felt her insides twist in pain as around her the room seemed to collapse and fold in on itself like a house of cards. It couldn’t be Laszlo—it just couldn’t. But it was, and she stared at him mutely, reeling from the shock

of his perfection.

With his high cheekbones, sleek black hair and burning amber eyes, he was almost the same boy she had fallen in love with seven years ago: her beautiful Romany boy. Only he most certainly wasn't hers any more; nor was he a boy. Now he was unmistakably a man: tall, broad-shouldered, intensely male, and with a suggestion of conformity that his younger self had lacked. Prudence shivered. But it was his eyes that had changed the most. Once, on seeing her, they would have burnt with the fierce lambent fire of passion. Now they were as cold and lifeless as ash.

She felt breathless, almost faint, and her hand moved involuntarily to her throat. Laszlo had been her first love—her first lover. He had been like sunlight and storms. She had never wanted anything or anyone more than him. And he had noticed *her*. Chosen *her* with a certainty that had left her breathless, replete, exultant. She had felt immortal. The knowledge of his love had swelled inside her—an immutable truth as permanent as the sun rising and setting.

Or so she'd believed seven years ago.

Only she'd been wrong. His focus on her—for that was what it had been—had burnt white-hot, fire-bright, and then faded fast like a supernova.

Prudence swallowed. It had been the ugliest thing that had happened to her. After the fierce bliss of what she'd believed was his love, that disorientating darkness had felt like death itself. And now, like a ghost from paradise lost, here he was, defying

all logic and reason.

Surely he couldn't be real? And if he was real then what was he doing *here*? It didn't make any sense. She stared at him, groping for some kind of answer. Her stomach lurched as she remembered the last time she'd seen him: being pushed into the back of a police car, his face dark and defiant.

Laszlo didn't belong in a place like this. And yet here he was. Standing there, as though he owned the place.

She felt her stomach lurch. In the back of her mind, pushed down in the darkness, she'd always imagined that he'd drifted into bad ways. So to watch him saunter into the room was almost more than her brain could fathom. Helplessly, she racked her brain for some shred of explanation.

'Wh—what are you doing here?' she stammered, her voice sounding small and shrunken, like a soul facing purgatory.

Laszlo stared at Prudence, his handsome face cold and blank. But inside it was as though he was falling from a great height. His mind was racing, explanations tumbling over one another, each one more desperate and untenable than the last. And all the time, like a silent movie, the short, doomed pretence of their love played out before his eyes.

Aware that he was playing for time, he felt a rush of anger. But words had literally failed him—for he had blotted out all traces of her so completely that just looking at her made him feel dizzy.

'I could ask you the same question,' he murmured.

And then, with shock, he remembered that it had been only

that morning that his hunger-fuelled brain had conjured up her memory. He shivered as the hairs stood up on the back of his neck and he remembered the cry of the owl he had heard earlier. Had he somehow summoned her here?

The part of his mind not numb with shock pushed the suggestion away irritably: of course he hadn't. Clearly she hadn't come looking for him, for her own shock was unmistakable. So what exactly was she doing here?

Eyes narrowing, he stared assessingly at her and waited for answers.

White-faced, Prudence stared back at him dazedly. She must have fallen down a rabbit hole, for what other explanation could there be? Why else was Laszlo Cziffra here in this isolated castle in the Hungarian countryside? Unless—her blood turned cold—could he be working for Mr de Zsady?

Her mind cringed from the possibility and, remembering his blank-eyed indifference when she'd told him she was leaving him, she felt suddenly sick. But that had been seven years ago. Surely after all this time they could treat each other with at the very least a polite neutrality? But instead of cool curiosity, he was watching her with a sort of icy contempt.

'I don't understand—' She broke off, the colour draining from her cheeks as he walked slowly across the faded Persian carpet towards her. 'What are you doing here?' she said again. 'You *can't* be here.'

Watching the shock on her face turn to horror as he

approached, Laszlo felt the floor yaw beneath him like a wave-tossed ship. But he had no intention of revealing to Prudence how strongly he was affected by her presence. Or her evident dismay at seeing him again.

Breathing deeply, he steadied himself. 'But I am,' he said slowly. 'Why are you trembling, *pireni*?'

She tried to ignore it. Just as she was trying to ignore how handsome he was and his nerve-jangling nearness. But the familiar word of endearment seemed to grow to a roar inside her head, drowning out her answer to his question.

For what felt like a lifetime they stood, staring at one another in silence, as they had done a hundred...a thousand times before.

The man's voice, when it came, startled both of them.

'Ah, there you are! I'm sorry I'm late. The traffic was terrible.'

A plumpish, middle-aged man, with thick, dull blonde hair and a panicked expression on his face, hurried into the room. Turning to Prudence, he shuffled some files under his arm and held out his hand.

'I'm so sorry to have missed you at the airport, Miss Elliot. You got my message, though?'

Still speechless with shock, Prudence nodded. She had felt a momentary spasm of relief at the man's arrival. But now it would appear that her relief was premature. For his words had made it painfully clear to her that Laszlo's presence was a shock only to *her*.

The man glanced cautiously at Laszlo and cleared his throat. 'I

see you two have already met. So let me introduce myself. Jakob Frankel. I work for the law firm that represents Mr de Zsadany. May I say on behalf of the family how grateful we all are for you stepping in at the last moment. It was really very kind of you.'

Laszlo felt his guts twist. His brain was struggling to give meaning to what was happening. Jakob *had* told him that Edmund Seymour was ill and that someone else was coming in his place. Typically, he'd forgotten—for one stranger was no better or worse than another. But suddenly Jakob's words seemed to take on a new and wholly unpalatable significance: Seymour's replacement was *Prudence Elliot*. And that meant she would be living under his roof for the foreseeable future!

'It's my pleasure,' Prudence said hoarsely.

The lawyer nodded and, looking nervously from Prudence to Laszlo, said, 'Everyone is most grateful.'

Prudence smiled weakly and opened her mouth to speak but Laszlo interrupted her.

'Miss Elliot could buy her own castle with the fee we're paying her. I don't think she needs our gratitude as well.'

Flinching at the undertone of hostility in his voice, Prudence felt rather than saw Laszlo's dark, probing gaze turn towards her. Her breath, suddenly sharp and serrated, tore at her throat and she touched her neck nervously. She still had no idea what he was doing here but he must be important, for the lawyer was clearly deferring to him. The thought somehow exhausted her, and she felt suddenly on the verge of tears.

This wasn't supposed to be happening. It was bad enough feeling out of her depth professionally. But now there was Laszlo, staring at her with those cold, dismissive eyes, and all she could think was that he could still make her feel like nothing. How he had made her feel like nothing seven years ago. Swallowing, she gritted her teeth. At least she'd fought for their relationship; he, on the other hand, had been too busy doing whatever he'd done to get himself arrested.

And she *wasn't* nothing. In his words, she was being paid enough to buy a castle to do this job and that was what she was there to do. Her job. It didn't matter that once upon a time, her love hadn't been good enough for him.

Lifting her chin, she turned towards the lawyer. 'You're very kind, Mr Frankel,' she said clearly. 'Thank you for allowing me to come. This is a marvellous opportunity for me. I just hope I can live up to your expectations.'

'Oh, I wouldn't worry about that,' Laszlo murmured softly. 'We have very low expectations.'

There was another long, tense moment of silence and then Frankel gave a nervous laugh. 'What Mr Cziffra is trying to say —'

'Is that Miss Elliot and I can take it from here,' Laszlo finished smoothly.

The lawyer looked at him doubtfully. 'You can?'

'I think I can manage.' Laszlo's voice was as cold and flat as an Arctic ice floe and Prudence shivered as Frankel nodded, his

plump face flushed.

‘Of course,’ he said hastily. ‘Of course.’ He turned towards Prudence.

‘You’ll be in safe hands, Miss Elliot! After Mr de Zsadany, no one knows more about the collection than his grandson.’

The shock was like a jolt of electricity.

Prudence felt her whole body still and then start to shake. The room was spinning at the edge of her vision. Janos Almasy de Zsadany was Laszlo’s grandfather! But how could he be? Janos Almasy de Zsadany was a billionaire several times over. Laszlo was a Romany—a traveller who lived in a trailer. How could they possibly be related?

With an almost painful stab of hope she wondered if she had misheard Frankel and she turned to Laszlo, expecting, praying he would still be staring at her with the same cold, uninterested expression. But she saw instead that he was staring at her with a look of pitying scorn and horror.

Her stomach convulsed with fear. Frankel was telling the truth.

Heart thumping, feeling dizzy and sick, she glanced numbly at the lawyer. But he seemed unaware of the turmoil he had created with his simple statement of fact. Fighting her misery, she glanced back at Laszlo. There was no denial on his face—no embarrassment or confusion, and she stared at him, unable to ignore, even in her misery, his luminous, impossible beauty.

He looked up and she flinched as he met her gaze, the softness

of his mouth only seeming to emphasise the hard challenge in his eyes.

Frankel coughed. 'Right. In that case I'll be on my way. Goodnight, Miss Elliot! I'll see myself out, Mr Cziffra.'

'Thank you, Frankel.' Laszlo stared steadily at Prudence, his eyes glittering like shards of yellow glass. 'Enjoy the rest of your evening. And don't worry. I'll take good care of Miss Elliot.'

Prudence felt her stomach turn to liquid as Laszlo turned towards her and nodded.

'I promise I'll give her my full and undivided attention.'

The table lamps felt suddenly like spotlights, and although the room was warm she felt cold and shivery. She watched Frankel leave with a mounting sense of dread, every nerve in her body straining to breaking point. She wanted to run after the lawyer and beg him to stay but her body was rooted to the spot. Numbly, she stared at the paintings on the wall. Just moments ago they had given her such innocent pleasure. But not any more. Now they seemed like cruel-eyed onlookers, mocking her stupidity.

The anaesthetic of shock and bewilderment was starting to wear off and she felt a sudden stabbing surge of irritation. Okay, it was awkward and stressful for both of them to be thrown together like this, but surely she had a far greater reason to be upset than him? Surely she deserved some answers here? Her lip curled. In fact, how could he just stand there and not offer one word of explanation?

Glancing at his expressionless face, she gritted her teeth. Quite

easily, it would appear. Her chest tightened. He hadn't changed a bit. He was still putting the onus on her to resolve everything. As though he were a witness rather than a central protagonist in what was happening.

'Pretending I'm not here isn't going to make this go away!' she said slowly. Willing herself to stay as cool as she sounded, she lifted her chin and met his gaze. 'We need to sort this out.'

Laszlo stared at her. "'Sort this out'?" he echoed softly. His mouth tightened as he suppressed a humourless laugh. There was nothing *to* sort out! Except out of which door he would throw her! 'Is that what we need to do?' His eyes met hers. 'So. You're Seymour's replacement?' he said coolly.

Heart thumping against her ribcage, Prudence nodded. Keeping her eyes straight ahead, she cleared her throat. 'And you're Mr de Zsadany's grandson!'

She fell silent and waited for his answer. But he did nothing more than nod. Turning her head, she clenched her fists: the words *incurrable* and *impossible* were ricocheting inside her brain. Was that it, then? No explanations. Not one word to acknowledge the impact and implication of those words.

As though reading her mind, Laszlo sighed. His eyes looked through her and past her as he spoke. 'My mother was Zsafia Almasy de Zsadany. She was Janos's daughter and only child.'

It was like hearing a marble statue speak and her heart flinched at the chill in his voice.

'She met my father, Istvan, when she was sixteen. He was

seventeen, a Kalderash Roma. Both their families opposed the match but they loved each other so much that nothing could keep them apart.'

His eyes gleamed and she felt a jolt of pain at the accusatory barb of his words.

'They were married and I was born nine months later.'

Prudence stared at him numbly. Who *was* this Laszlo? And what had he been doing living in a shabby trailer in England? Had he been rebelling? Or estranged from the de Zsadanys? Her head was swimming with questions. From knowing next to nothing about him she suddenly had so much information she could hardly take it all in. But her heart contracted as she realised that even the small things he had shared with her had been half-truths.

'Why were you there? In England, I mean?'

He frowned. 'After my parents died I spent time with both my families. My grandfather wanted me to go to school. To be educated. So I stayed in Hungary during term-time, and in the holidays I went and visited my father's family, wherever they happened to be living.' His eyes gleamed remorselessly. 'I wanted to be loyal to both my mother *and* my father.'

She forced herself to meet his gaze. 'I see,' she said slowly. 'But you didn't want to be open and honest with me?' She felt a sudden rise in tension as his eyes slid slowly and assessingly over her rigid frame.

'No. I did not,' he said finally.

Prudence gaped at him, her pledge to stay calm and detached now completely forgotten. ‘Didn’t you think it might have been better, not to say *fairer*, to share the whole truth with me?’ she said furiously. ‘You know—the fact that your grandfather was one of the richest men in Europe? And that you lived in a castle surrounded by priceless works of art?’

He looked away from her and shrugged. Prudence felt almost giddy with rage. How dare he just stand there and shrug at her? As if it didn’t matter that he’d lied to her. As if *she* didn’t matter.

‘What difference would it have made?’ he said flatly. ‘There were lots of facts you didn’t know about me—why focus on that one?’ His face twisted. ‘Unless, of course, it wasn’t the truth you wanted to share. Maybe there were other things you’d have liked to share. Like my grandfather’s money.’

The breath seemed to snarl up in her throat. ‘How can you say that?’ She stepped towards him, her body shaking with anger. ‘How can you even suggest—?’ Her head was spinning, nerves humming with rage and frustration. ‘Don’t you dare try and twist this, Laszlo. You lied to me!’

Laszlo’s face was suddenly as pale and rigid as bone and she had to curl her fingers into her hands to stop herself from flinching at the hostility in his eyes.

‘I didn’t lie,’ he said coldly. ‘I *am* half-Romany and I *did* live in a trailer.’

‘Oh, that’s okay, then,’ Prudence said sarcastically. ‘Maybe it was your other half. The half that lived in a castle. Perhaps *he*

lied to me?'

Anger was bubbling up inside her, her breath burning her throat. *She* wasn't the one who'd lied about who she was. She winced as her nails dug into her skin. Had he actually told her the truth about anything?

Laszlo met her gaze. 'You believed what you wanted to believe.'

Prudence shook her head in disbelief. 'I believed what you encouraged me to believe,' she said furiously. 'There's a difference.'

There was a dangerous silence and then his eyes narrowed. 'You're missing the point, Prudence. It doesn't matter what someone believes if they don't have faith.' His voice was ragged, frayed with a bitterness she had never heard before. 'Without that it's all just words.'

She sucked in a breath. 'Yes, it is. *Your* words. The lies you told me.' Her heart was pounding; her hands were tight fists against her sides. 'Don't try and turn this into some philosophical debate, Laszlo. I'm upset because you lied to me and you took away my choices.'

'So now we're even,' he said coldly.

CHAPTER TWO

SHE STARED AT him blankly. Even? *Even!*

'What that's supposed to mean?' She flung the words at him, wishing they were sticks or stones or better still bricks. But he didn't reply. Instead he made an impatient sound and she watched

helplessly as his face closed tight like a trap. Her muscles were aching with the effort of not picking up a lamp and beating him to death with it. How could he *do* that? Just switch off in the middle of a conversation and take himself outside of it?

Feeling a familiar cold, paralysing panic, she wrapped her arms around herself. But of course she didn't need him to answer anyway. She knew exactly what he was talking about.

An undertow of defiance tugged at her frustration and slowly she shook her head. 'No, Laszlo. If you're talking about the fact that I ended our relationship, then we are *not* even. Not even close to being even.'

Her whole body was suddenly shaking and she wrapped her arms more tightly around herself. Walking away from Laszlo and from her romantic hopes and dreams had been hard—one of the hardest things she'd ever done—and it had taken every ounce of willpower she'd had. But if he'd wanted to, if he'd wanted her, he could have stopped her; she'd given him every chance to change her mind. Only he'd barely uttered a word when she'd told him that she was leaving him. Certainly not the sort she'd craved. He'd let her go and that had been his choice.

A sudden, suffocating misery reared up inside her as, with a shudder, she remembered just how cold and unapproachable he'd been.

She stood rooted to the spot, numbed and struck dumb at her own stupidity. No wonder he'd been so secretive—smuggling her into his trailer and carefully sidestepping her requests to meet his

family. Fool that she was, she'd been too dizzy with love, too in thrall to the way her body had softened and transformed beneath his touch, to wonder why. Besides, she'd been flattered at the start, at least, for she'd believed that he wanted her all to himself. He'd stolen her heart and her virginity in quick succession and all the while he'd been living a lie.

She looked at him wearily. But why did this lie matter, really? After all, she couldn't change the past. Or change the fact that he hadn't loved her enough to fight for her. Her mouth twisted. This discussion was a dead end. There was no point in trying to talk about their relationship now: it was seven years too late. And besides, she had a new life now. Maybe not the one she'd been hoping for, but a good life, and she wasn't about to let him pick up her world and smash it to smithereens.

Her pulse fluttered into life and she glanced at the door, wishing she could go back in time to the moment before she'd walked through it. And then, with a start, she remembered that even if that had been possible it simply wasn't an option. Edmund needed this job. That was why she had come to Hungary. And she needed to focus on that fact and not get sidetracked into a post-mortem of her romantic past.

She took a calming breath. The cataloguing was more important than her feelings. Not that she had any feelings for Laszlo any more. At least not any that should get in the way of what was essentially a job like any other. Their relationship was history and, while clearly she would never have chosen to meet

him again, let alone work with him, there was no reason not to treat him like any other client—albeit one who was difficult, bordering on the socially inept.

Fighting down the urge to bolt through the door, she lifted her chin and met his gaze. She wasn't going to let his inability to let go of the past upset her. She would be calm and efficient—a detached professional.

'This is getting us nowhere, Laszlo,' she said firmly. 'I'm here to do a job for you and your grandfather.'

Biting her lip, she paused, her muscles tightening again. Did Janos know about her relationship with his grandson? That could be awkward. But then her body relaxed. Somehow she didn't think so. It was a long time ago, and they'd never met, and Laszlo had probably had hundreds of girlfriends since her. Her cheeks grew suddenly hot and quickly she pushed that thought away.

'I know he wants to start on the cataloguing as soon as possible, so why don't we put aside our differences and try and concentrate on making that happen for him? Can we do that? Can we call a truce?' She gave a small, tight smile and clenched her hands into fists to stop herself from crossing her fingers.

Laszlo stared at her speculatively. She wanted this job. It was obvious from the conciliatory note in her voice and the slight increase in tension around her shoulders. His gaze drifted hungrily over her neck to the pulse beating in the hollow at the base of her throat. To anyone who didn't know her she looked like the perfect English Rose, pale and demure. But he knew the

other Prudence. The one beneath that calm, poised exterior, who had wrapped herself around him with passion and fervour. That contrast, and the knowledge that he alone possessed that other, hidden Prudence, had excited him unbearably. With a spasm of disbelief, he realised it still did.

Feeling his body stiffen, he lifted his gaze and smiled at her almost mockingly. ‘Since you put it so nicely—’

She stared at him warily. She hadn’t expected him to come round so easily. But then, with Laszlo you never knew what to expect. ‘Thank you,’ she said stiffly. ‘I must say I’m a bit surprised —’

He smiled coolly. ‘I know how much women love surprises.’

Nodding, she forced herself to breathe slowly. Perhaps she could make this work. She just needed to stay focused on what was important: the fact that Laszlo was nothing more than a client. She looked up and found him watching her. A tingle of heat ran down her spine. She could almost see his desire—feel him wrapping it round her like a dark velvet cloak.

Her cheeks were burning. Quickly, before the sudden softness in his eyes could rattle her even more, she looked away. She was here to work and it didn’t matter that she and Laszlo had once shared a passion so pagan, so consuming, that the outside world had ceased to exist. Now their relationship needed to work only on a business level.

She met his eyes. ‘And I know men hate delays.’ She paused and cleared her throat. ‘So I suggest we discuss what happens

now.'

Laszlo stared at her. A peony-pink flush had crept over the skin on her throat and his gaze drifted down over the pale grey blouse that clung to the soft swell of her breasts, then lower still to where the smooth downward curve of her hips and waist pressed tight against the fabric of her skirt. She was so close they were practically touching and, breathing in the familiar scent of jasmine, he found himself almost paralysed with longing again.

Breathing in sharply, he gritted his teeth. He had spent so long hating her, hating what she had done to him, that he had never supposed that he might still want her.

And yet apparently he did.

He stared at her, confused. He wanted her. But he also wanted to punish her. And yet even that wasn't wholly true, for he couldn't help but admire her. After all, how many other women—particularly one as shy and unworldly as Prudence—would stand their ground in this situation? Not that it surprised him. She had always possessed that quality of being in a state of quiescence, of teetering on the edge. His jaw tensed as her misty grey gaze rested on his face. Only now was not the time to be thinking about Prudence's finer qualities. Better to concentrate on her flaws.

'You tell me. Talking was always your thing, wasn't it? For me, actions speak louder than words.'

He watched colour creep across her cheeks. Saw the moment that she relaxed, the tension leaving her body, making it softer

and more vulnerable.

Prudence felt her cheeks grow warm. She needed no reminder of how eloquent his actions had been. Particularly not now, when she needed to keep her thoughts in some semblance of order. But his smile was like a beam of sunlight breaking through cloud. She just wanted to follow it...place herself in its path.

Focus, she told herself firmly. She cleared her throat and began to talk quickly. 'As I said before, I know how keen your grandfather is to begin the cataloguing. So I think we should push on with the original timeframe.'

He stepped towards her and she tensed, her body suddenly a helix of tendon and muscle.

'You're the expert,' he murmured.

Blushing, Prudence swallowed. His voice was such a captivating mix of soft and seductive. She felt heat begin to build inside her and for one brief moment allowed herself to remember the touch of his fingers, travelling over her skin with the virtuosity of a concert pianist. How the rippling rhythms of their bodies had quickened and intertwined to a breathless cadence.

Prudence took a deep breath. Surely she couldn't still actually find him attractive? She must have more sense than that. But what had sense got to do with lust? No woman alive could stand next to Laszlo Cziffra and feel nothing.

Somewhere in the castle a door slammed and Prudence started forward with surprise. For a moment her hands grazed his chest

as she swayed against him and then, breathing unsteadily, she teetered backwards. They were standing inches apart now. He was so close she could feel the heat of his skin. Her heart was pounding as though she'd been running and her body was trembling helplessly. He smelt of newly mown hay and rain-soaked earth and she felt almost dazed with longing as every inch of her reacted to him.

‘Castles were built to keep out arrows and cannon fire. Not draughts,’ he said drily.

Still horrified by the revelation that her body apparently had no loyalty to her heart, Prudence dragged her gaze away, hoping that he hadn't noticed or, worse, correctly interpreted her physical response to him.

‘Weren't they?’ she mumbled, her cheeks flushing. ‘Wh— what was I saying? Oh, yes. The timeframe. Three weeks is a typical estimate for a preliminary assessment. It's important to be thorough at that stage.’ She frowned. ‘And don't worry. If I have any problems I can speak to Mr Seymour. In fact, I'll be in close contact with him the entire time.’ She gave a small, tight smile. ‘I find it helpful to have another point of view. For clarity.’

Her smile faded and she stared at him nervously, aware of a sudden stillness in him, a slight narrowing of his eyes, although she couldn't quite understand what had changed. But then, why should she care? She was here to work, and Laszlo's moods were no longer her concern.

Clearing her throat, she straightened her shoulders and forced

herself to ignore the undertow of apprehension tugging at the back of her mind. ‘A-and obviously I’m happy to discuss any concerns Mr de Zsadany has,’ she stammered. His eyes clashed with hers and despite herself she felt another twinge of foreboding.

‘Obviously...’ he said coolly. ‘I know how you love to discuss problems.’

Her heart was thumping hard. There it was again: a tiny but deliberate dig. He was taking what was nothing more than a casual, unpremeditated remark and making it something personal, to do with the past. *Their* past. She felt sudden swift anger. Hadn’t they agreed to call a truce? This was going to be hard enough as it was, without him making a difficult situation worse with his snippy double-edged comments.

Her mind was so churned up with emotion it took her another couple of moments before she understood just *how* difficult the situation was going to be. For it wasn’t as if she was just going to *work* with Laszlo—her blood seemed to still in her veins—she was going to have to live with him too.

A tremor grew at the back of her neck. Of course she would have to live with him. But not like this. Not dreading his every remark—not deliberately having to misunderstand his every insinuation. She needed to make it clear now that she would not tolerate being treated like that.

‘I don’t *like* discussing problems.’ Returning his gaze coldly, she lifted her chin. ‘It’s just that I think communication is key to

a successful relationship.'

She had meant to sound assured, without being overtly confrontational. But she knew the moment she spoke that it was the wrong thing to say. For he went entirely still and his eyes locked onto hers like an infrared missile seeking its target.

Swaying, she took a faltering step backwards. 'I didn't mean us—'

'Don't bother! I already know pretty much all there is to know about your views on relationships.'

Watching the shock and confusion bloom on her face, Laszlo felt a surge of satisfaction.

His voice was little more than a rasp. 'You explained them to me in great detail when you walked out on me—*Prudence*.'

She flinched as he turned towards her and spat her name into the air as though it were a poison he had inadvertently swallowed.

'In fact...' He paused, his lip curling with contempt. 'You made it abundantly clear how pitiable I was to have ever imagined that our relationship might work, given the range and depth of my flaws.'

'N-no. I didn't—' Prudence began shakily, shocked and unnerved by the level of venom in his voice. But her voice died as he stepped towards her and she saw real anger in his eyes.

'Oh, but you did.' His face was tight with emotion. 'Only you were wrong. They weren't *my* flaws. They were yours!' he ground out between gritted teeth. 'You were just too weak and snobbish —'

‘I was *not* weak and snobbish.’ The injustice of his words melted her shock and suddenly she was coldly furious. ‘I just didn’t want to pretend any more.’

‘Pretend what? That you loved me?’ His face was blunt, angular with hostility.

Liquid misery trickled through her. ‘That we had anything in common.’

He shook his head. ‘Like loyalty, you mean? Maybe you’re right. We certainly felt differently about *that*!’

‘You don’t need to tell me about the differences between us,’ she snapped, stung into speech by the censure in his voice. ‘I know all about them. They’re why our relationship didn’t work. Why it could never have worked.’

Her throat tightened as he looked at her coldly.

‘Our relationship didn’t fail because we were different. It failed because you cared more about those differences than you did about me,’ he snarled. ‘Tell me, *pireni*, how are you finding my communication skills now? Am I making myself clear enough?’

Her heart gave a sudden jerk as abruptly he turned and walked towards the fireplace.

For a moment she stood frozen, gazing speechlessly at his back. Anger was building inside her, displacing all other feeling, and suddenly she crossed the room and yanked him round to face her.

‘That’s not true! I *did* care—’ She broke off. Rage, hot and unstoppable, choked her words. ‘Don’t you dare try and tell me

what I felt.’ She set her jaw, her eyes narrowing. ‘If I cared about the differences between us it was because, yes, I thought they mattered. Unlike you, I like to talk about the things that matter to me. And, crazy though this may sound, I try and tell the truth. But what would *you* know about that? The truth is like a foreign language to you.’

She watched his eyes darken with fury, the pupils seeming almost to engulf the golden irises.

‘The truth?’ he said savagely. ‘You left me because you thought I wasn’t good enough for you. *That’s* the truth. You’re just too much of a coward to admit it.’

Silently, Prudence shook her head. Not only because she was disagreeing with him but because she was too angry to speak. She hadn’t even known she could feel that angry.

Finally, she found her voice. ‘How dare you talk to me about the truth when we’re standing here in this castle? *Your* castle. A castle I didn’t even know existed until today.’ Her eyes flashed with anger. ‘And just because I wanted to talk about the leaks in the trailer and the fact that we didn’t have enough money to buy food for more than a couple of days didn’t mean I thought you weren’t good enough!’

‘Those things shouldn’t have mattered. They didn’t matter to *me*,’ Laszlo snarled.

‘I know!’ she snarled back at him. ‘But they did to me. And you can’t punish me for that fact. Or for the fact that it worried me: how we felt differently about things. We disagreed about stuff

and that was going to be a problem for us sooner or later, only you wouldn't admit it,' she raged at him. 'So it wasn't me who was a coward. It was you.'

She took a sudden step backwards as he moved towards her; his face was in shadow but the fury beneath his skin was luminous.

'I am not the coward here, Prudence,' he said quietly, and his dispassionate tone was frighteningly at odds with the menacing gleam in his eyes.

Prudence felt her insides lurch. Beneath the chill of his gaze her courage and powers of speech wilted momentarily and she felt suddenly defeated. Suddenly she didn't want to talk any more. What was the point? Judging by the last twenty minutes it would only hurt more than it healed.

When at last she spoke, her voice was defeated. 'This is going nowhere,' she said wearily. 'I know you're angry. We both are. But can't we just put our past behind us? At least until after the cataloguing is complete?'

Laszlo stared at her, his eyes glittering with fury. 'The *cataloguing*? Do you know what my grandfather's collection means to him? Or why he decided to have it catalogued?' He shook his head. 'After everything that's happened between us, do you really think I'd trust *you*, of all people—?' He broke off and breathed out unsteadily.

Prudence felt a stab of fear. What was he trying to say? 'But you can,' she said shakily. 'I'll do a good job. You have my word.'

He winced as though she had ripped a plaster from a scab. ‘Your *word*?’ he repeated. He tilted his head. ‘Your word...’ he said again.

And this time the contempt on his face felt like a hammer blow. Her mouth had gone dry.

‘I—I only meant—’ she stammered, but he cut across her words with a voice like a flick knife.

‘It doesn’t matter what you meant. We both know that your word is worthless.’

‘What are you talking about?’

Balling his fists, feeling sick to his stomach, Laszlo shook his head. He felt an odd rushing sensation in his head, like a sort of vertigo, and words and memories hurtled past him like debris from an explosion. What kind of woman *was* she? He had long known her to be snobbish and weak-minded, but this—this refusal to acknowledge what she’d done—

His jaw tightened.

‘I honoured you with a gift. The most important gift a man can give to a woman. I made you my wife and you threw it in my face.’

Prudence gaped at him, shock washing over in waves. She opened her mouth to deny his claim but the words clogged her throat. His *wife*? Surely he didn’t really think that they were actually *married*? Her heart was pounding; the palms of her hands felt suddenly damp. Married? That was ridiculous! Insane!

Dazedly she thought back to that day when she’d been led,

giggling and blindfolded, to his great-uncle's trailer. Laszlo had been waiting for her. She felt a shiver run down her spine at the memory, for he'd looked heartbreakingly handsome and so serious she had wanted to cry. They'd sworn their love and commitment to one another, and his great-uncle had spoken some words in Romany, and then they had eaten some bread and some salt.

Coming out of her reverie, she stared hard at him wordlessly. There had been no actual marriage. It had been no more real than his love for her. But it had been part of the fantasy of their love. And now he was destroying that fantasy. Taking the memory of something beautiful, innocent and spontaneous and turning it into a means of hurting her.

Her vision blurred and she felt suddenly giddy, as though she were teetering on the edge of a cliff-face. 'You're despicable! Why are you doing this? Why are you trying to ruin that day?'

'Ruin it?' His features contorted with fury. 'You're the one who did that. By walking out on our marriage.'

Her pulse was fluttering and despite her best efforts her voice sounded high and jerky. 'We're not married,' she said tightly. 'Marriages are more than just words and kisses. This is just another of your lies—'

Her voice trailed off at the expression of derision on his face. 'No. This is just the ultimate proof of how little you understood or respected my way of life. For you, my being Romany was just some whimsical lifestyle choice.' He watched

the blood suffuse her face and felt a spasm of pain. ‘You liked it that I was different—an outsider. But you didn’t expect or want me to stay like that. You thought I’d just throw it off, like a fancy dress costume, and become “normal” when it came to the rest of our lives.’ His eyes hardened. ‘That’s when you started whining about the mess and the moving around. But that’s what we do. It’s what *I* do.’

‘Except when you’re living in a castle,’ she said shakily.

His gaze held hers. ‘You’re going off topic, *pireni*. It doesn’t matter where I lived then or where I live now. We’re still married. I’m still your husband. And you’re my wife.’

She felt a stab of shock—both at the vehemence in his voice and at the sudden spread of treacherous heat at his possessive words.

Turning her head, she swallowed. ‘What happened in that trailer wasn’t a wedding, Laszlo. There were no guests. No vicar. No witnesses. We didn’t give each other rings. We didn’t even sign anything. It wasn’t a wedding at all and I’m not your wife.’

Laszlo forced himself to stay calm. He had too much pride to let her see that her horrified denial had reopened a wound that had never fully healed—a wound that had left him hollowed out with misery and humiliation.

Shaking his head, he gave a humourless laugh. ‘Oh, believe me, *pireni*, I wish you weren’t—but you are.’ His fingers curled into the palms of his hands. ‘In my culture a wedding is a private affair between a man and wife. We don’t register the marriage,

and the only authority that's needed for it to be recognised is the consent of the bride and groom.'

Prudence felt a vertigo-like flash of fear. She shook her head. 'We're not married,' she croaked. 'Not in the eyes of the law.'

The change in him was almost imperceptible. She might even have missed the slight rigidity about his jawline had the contempt in his eyes not seared her skin.

'Not your law, maybe.' He felt a hot, overpowering rage. 'But in mine. Yes, we were married—and we still are.'

Closing her eyes, she felt a sudden, inexplicable sense of panic. Laszlo clearly believed what he was saying. Whilst she might have viewed the ceremony as a curious but charming dress rehearsal for the vintage-style white wedding she'd been planning, the marriage had been real to him. Nausea gripped her stomach. What did it really matter if there was no certificate? It didn't mean that the vows they'd made were any less valid or binding.

Heat scorched her skin. *What had she done?* She looked up and his gaze held hers, and she saw that he was furious, fighting for control.

'Laszlo, I didn't—'

His voice was barely audible but it scythed through her words and on through her skin and bone, slicing into her heart.

'This conversation is over. I'm sorry you had a wasted trip but your services are no longer required.'

Prudence looked at him in confusion, her face bleached of

colour. ‘I—I don’t understand...’ she stammered. ‘What do you mean?’

Laszlo rounded on her coldly. ‘What do I *mean*?’ he echoed. ‘I mean that you’re fired—dismissed, sacked. Your contract is terminated and this meeting is over. As of this moment I never want to see your face again.’ He turned back towards the fire. ‘So why don’t you take your bags, turn around and get out of my house? *Now*.’

CHAPTER THREE

PRUDENCE FELT THE floor tilt towards her. She reached out and steadied herself against the back of an armchair. ‘You can’t do that,’ she said slowly. ‘You can’t just fire me.’

‘Oh, but I can.’

Laszlo turned and looked at her, full in the face, and a shudder raced through her as she saw to her horror that he meant it.

‘But that’s so unfair!’ Her voice seemed to echo around the room and she gazed at him helplessly.

‘I don’t care.’

He spoke flatly, his jaw tightening, and with a spasm of pain she knew that he didn’t. Knew too that it wouldn’t matter what she said or did and that it had probably never mattered. She had lost the job the moment Laszlo walked into the room. She just hadn’t realised that fact until now.

She stared at him, shock and disbelief choking her words of objection. But inside her head there was a deafening cacophony of protest. He couldn’t fire her. What would she tell Edmund?

And what about their debts to the bank and the insurance company?

‘No.’

The word burst from her lips like a flying spear. Laszlo stared at her calmly. Firing her seemed to have lanced his fury and he seemed more puzzled than angry at her outburst.

‘No?’ he murmured softly. ‘No, what?’

She glared at him, her cheeks flooding with angry colour. ‘No, I won’t leave. I know I made a mistake, but it all happened years ago—and anyway you can’t fire me for that. Apart from anything else it’s got nothing to do with my ability to do this job.’

‘It’s got *everything* to do with your ability to do this job,’ Laszlo said coldly. ‘You lack conviction and loyalty and I don’t employ people without those qualities.’

Prudence sucked in a breath, hating him more than she had ever hated him before. ‘Stop it!’ she hissed. He was so self-righteous and hypocritical. How dare he act as if he had the moral high ground? He’d lied to her. And he was the one who’d broken the law and been arrested for who knew what! Perhaps he should examine his own failings first instead of focusing on hers.

She opened her mouth to tell him so and then closed it again. There was so much history in this room already. Why add more? She breathed out slowly.

‘Stop sitting in judgement on me! You’re not some innocent victim here, Laszlo. You lied. Maybe that doesn’t matter to you, but it does to me.’ She stopped, her breathing ragged. ‘Only I’m

not using it to get at you. I wouldn't stoop that low.'

Laszlo looked at her for one long, agonising moment.

'Really?' he said coolly. 'I wonder...' He ran his hand over the dark stubble grazing his chin. 'Just how badly do you want this job, Prudence? Are you prepared to beg for it?'

She felt nausea clutch at her stomach. 'You're a monster!' His eyes were cold and implacable.

'This is payback! Firing you makes us quits, *pireni*! And, believe me, you've got off lightly. If there were still wolves in Hungary I'd throw you to them. So if I were you I'd walk out of here while you still can.'

Prudence stared at him, her chest blazing with anger. 'What does *that* mean? Are you threatening me?' she asked tightly.

Laszlo stared at her in silence, his eyes glittering with mockery. 'Threatening you? Of course not. But this discussion is over, so I think you should accept that and walk away.' His jaw tightened. 'That shouldn't be a problem for you. After all, you've had lots of practice.'

Anger swept through her. 'Oh, you think you're so clever, don't you? Well, let's get one thing clear. This discussion is *not* over.'

He gazed at her impassively in silence. Finally he said, almost mildly, 'Then I suppose you'd better start talking. Although I'm not quite sure what difference you think it will make.'

She stared at him in confusion. How did he *do* that? Only moments earlier his anger had been incandescent beneath his skin. Now he was prepared to grant her an audience. It was

impossible to keep up with him. She gritted her teeth. But hadn't it always been this way between them, though? With her trying to chase the moods which ran like quicksilver through his veins?

She lifted her chin. But the blood was humming in her ears and she felt suddenly hot and stupid in the face of his cool composure. Was she just expected to somehow plead her case while he stood there like some hanging judge? Fixing her gaze on the wall behind him, she swallowed.

'I admit I made mistakes back then. But you're punishing me for them *now*. How is that reasonable or fair?' She paused and heat burnt her cheeks as he stared at her. For a moment his eyes fixed on her, as though her words had meant something to him, and then he shook his head slowly.

'Fair?' he echoed. '*Fair!* Since when did you care about fairness? You dumped me because you didn't want to live in some tatty trailer.' His eyes hardened. He, on the other hand, would have been content to sleep under the stars if she was with him. Shaking his head, he gave a humourless laugh. 'How was that fair to me?'

Blood colouring her cheeks and collarbone, Prudence flinched, his bitterness driving the breath from her lungs. It was true—she *had* said words to that effect—but she hadn't meant them, and whatever Laszlo might think, she'd been so madly in love then that she would have lived in a ditch with him if he'd asked.

All she'd wanted was for him to repudiate her fears that he'd

lost interest in her or, worse, found someone else. Only he'd been so dismissive. And bored. As if she was a nagging child. So it had been impossible to tell him the truth, for that would have meant revealing the depth of her love. She'd been too upset to do that, but just angry enough to want to provoke him and hurt him for not loving her. And so instead she'd lashed out at him about the mess and the cold and the rain.

Prudence felt a trickle of misery run down her spine, but then, almost in the same moment, she shook her head, anger filling her. He was taking what she'd said out of context and—surprise, surprise—ignoring the part he'd played.

Damn it! Unlike her, he'd actually thought they were married! So why hadn't he done more to make it work between them? Did he think that relationships just sustained themselves? A lump formed in her throat. It certainly seemed that way. She'd gone to him for reassurance but he'd left her no choice but to walk away, and it had been the hardest choice she had ever made. Even talking about it now made her heart swell with grief.

She lifted her chin. 'We're not going to go there, Laszlo. I am not going to talk about the past with you any more.' Heart thumping, she took a breath. 'If you wanted to discuss our relationship you should have done so at the time. Frankly, now it's irrelevant.'

Her grip tightened on the chair as he stepped towards her. She felt her stomach swoop. Close up, his beauty was radiant and piercing—like a flaming arrow. His eyes were more golden, his

skin smoother, the angles and shading of his cheekbones almost too perfect to be real.

‘I don’t agree. I think it’s entirely relevant, given that you have brought our past back into my life.’

Her mouth trembled. ‘That’s not true, Laszlo. It was you who contacted Seymour’s.’

She stared at him indignantly. If he hadn’t wanted anything to do with her then why had he chosen to use her uncle’s firm? Only of course he didn’t *know* it was Edmund’s business. He didn’t even know her uncle’s name, let alone what he did for a living. She shivered. Somehow now didn’t seem like the best time to tell him.

Trying to ignore the pounding of her heart, she swallowed. ‘I know how you hate being responsible for anything, but this is *your* mess.’

‘And we both know how you hate mess, Prudence,’ he said smoothly.

‘I didn’t care about the stupid trailer!’ she snapped, her temper rising. ‘You just focused on that and wouldn’t listen to me. It wasn’t a criticism of you, or your precious Willerby Westmorland! It’s just who I am.’ Her heart was thumping so hard it hurt. ‘I don’t like mess. I like things tidy and in order and that’s why I’m good at my job. Maybe if you’d thought about that instead of sneering at me—’

‘I’m not sneering, *pireni*.’ His face shifted, and meeting her angry gaze, he shrugged. ‘And you’re right. Maybe I did focus

on that remark—’

He stopped and Prudence gaped at him speechlessly. Was that some kind of apology?

His eyes locked with hers and he sighed. ‘But I’m not going to change my mind, Prudence. You do understand that, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ she said stiffly. ‘But, given that it’s probably not just your decision to make, I’ve decided it doesn’t matter.’

Laszlo frowned. ‘You think there’s a higher authority than me?’

His eyes gleamed with sudden amusement and she felt her stomach flip over.

‘I hope so—for Mr de Zsadany’s sake.’ Wondering again if Janos knew of her relationship with László, she felt a stab of pain. He was such a fraud. Why, if he’d believed himself to be married, had he kept her existence secret?

Forcing herself to stay focused, she lifted her chin. ‘Seymour’s is the best there is. Giving this job to another firm would only demonstrate how unqualified you are to have anything to do with the cataloguing.’ Her eyes flashed challengingly at him. ‘I mean, you don’t even *like* art!’

‘I appreciate beauty as much as the next man,’ László said softly.

‘Really?’ Prudence retorted. ‘How do you work that out? The only time we went to see an exhibition together you spent your entire time in the café.’

László shrugged, his gaze sweeping slowly over her face until

heat suffused her skin.

‘I can think of better things to do in a darkened room. You, of all people, should know that.’

Prudence stared at him, trembling, dry-mouthed; her body suddenly a mass of hot, aching need. He let the silence lengthen, let the tension rise between them.

‘Or have you forgotten?’ he murmured finally. ‘Perhaps I should jog your memory.’

He watched her eyes widen and felt his groin tighten in response. But almost immediately he closed his mind to the tormenting tug of hunger.

‘But I digress. I don’t need to like art, Prudence. I just want to support my grandfather and be there for him—’

‘Good luck with that!’ Prudence interrupted him crossly. ‘*Being there* for someone generally requires an element of reliability or commitment, you know.’

She glared at him as his gaze rested on her accusing face.

‘Meaning...?’ he asked slowly.

‘Meaning that *you* can’t commit to the next five minutes.’ She stared at him incredulously. ‘Don’t you know yourself at all? Trying to pin you down to a time and place is like asking you to give up your soul or something.’

A slight upturn of amusement tugged at the corner of his mouth. ‘Ah, but at least you admit I have a soul.’

And then suddenly he smiled, and it felt like the sun on her face. Despite her brain warning her not to, it was impossible not

to smile back—for it was a glimpse of the Laszlo she had loved so very much. The Laszlo who, when he chose, had been able to make her laugh until she cried. But then her smile faded and she reminded herself that *this* Laszlo had cold-heartedly used his power to avenge himself, regardless of the consequences to her or her family.

She frowned. ‘Life can’t always be improvised. Sometimes you have to do boring things too—like learn lines and turn up on set on time.’

Laszlo stared at her, a muscle working in his jaw. ‘You’re comparing our relationship to a film?’

‘Yes. I am.’ Prudence lifted her chin. ‘A very unmemorable silent film, with poor casting and no plot.’

She felt the hairs stand up on the back of her neck as he smiled again and shook his head slowly.

‘I think your memory is playing tricks on you, *pireni*. There were some very memorable scenes in our film. Steamy too. Award-winning, even.’

‘For the best short film?’ she snapped.

‘I was thinking more hair and make-up,’ he said, his eyes glittering.

She couldn’t resist. ‘Yours or mine?’

‘Oh, definitely mine,’ he whipped back.

There was a silence, and then both of them started to laugh.

Prudence stopped and bit her lip. ‘Can’t we stop this—please, Laszlo?’ She saw the indecision on his face and for a moment

she faltered, and then she said quickly, 'It's brutal. And senseless. We're just going round and round in circles, and all this name-calling isn't going to change the fact that your grandfather wants his collection catalogued and I'm here to do it. So let me do it, Laszlo: for him. For your grandfather.'

Their eyes locked: hers bright and desperate, his, dark and unreadable. She swallowed hard, trying to find the words to change his mind.

'If I lose this contract you won't just be punishing me,' she said steadily. 'Other people will suffer—people you've never met...people who've done you no harm.'

She held her breath and watched his face, trying not to let her desperation show.

'Please, Laszlo. Please don't make this personal. Just let me do my job and then I'll be out of your life for ever.'

There was a tense, expectant silence as he studied her face. She wanted this job, badly, and he wondered idly just how far she would go to get it back. Immediately prickling heat surged through him and his groin grew painfully hard. He gritted his teeth, shocked by the intensity of his body's response.

It would be easy to give her a chance. His chest tightened painfully. But why should he? After all, she had never given their marriage a chance, had she? His face hardened. Did she really think that she could somehow emotionally blackmail him into forgetting the past and the harm she had done to him? And what about his family? What about *their* pain?

He remembered the long days and nights spent watching his grandmother's health fade, the years spent living with the guilt of not having given her the great-grandchildren she'd so longed for.

Prudence held her breath, watching a sort of angry bewilderment fill his eyes. The tightness around her heart eased a little: maybe all was not lost yet.

'Can't we just forgive and forget?' she said softly. He looked up and she hesitated. 'Please, Laszlo. I don't believe you really want to do this.'

His face was stiff with tension. Slowly he shook his head. 'Then you clearly don't know me at all, Prudence.' His mouth was set in a grim line. 'I *want* to let you stay. For my grandfather's sake, you understand. But I can't,' he said simply. 'You see, I'm half Kalderash Roma. We don't forget or forgive.'

He paused and his voice, when he spoke again, was like the sound of a tomb sealing.

'And you're still fired.'

Prudence gazed at him in shock, her ragged breathing punctuating the silence in the room. A sense of impotent despair filled her and then something else: a hot and acrid frustration that burnt her stomach to ash.

'I see. So it's not your choice.' Her hands curled into fists. 'How convenient for you to be able to blame your stubbornness and your spite on genetics.'

His narrowed gaze held hers. 'I'm not blaming genetics. I'm blaming *you*.'

‘But not yourself?’ She stared deep into his eyes. ‘Nothing is ever your fault, is it, Laszlo?’ she asked flatly. ‘You just saunter through life, expecting everyone around you to take responsibility for the nasty, boring bits.’ Smiling bitterly, she shook her head. ‘I thought husbands and wives were supposed to give and take. Not in *our* marriage, though!’

She tensed as he stepped towards her, his eyes suddenly gleaming like wet metal.

‘So now you’re my wife? Interesting! As my charms clearly weren’t sufficient to persuade you of that fact seven years ago, I can only imagine that my grandfather’s wealth is a more compelling reason for you to belatedly acknowledge our marriage.’

Prudence glared at him. ‘How dare you? I couldn’t care less about your grandfather’s wealth.’

‘Just about my poverty?’ he said bleakly.

‘No!’ Biting back the hundred and one caustic responses she might have made, she shook her head. ‘This isn’t about wealth or poverty. This is about what’s happening here and now. About how you’re prepared to make everyone suffer—me, Edmund and all the people who have worked so hard to make this happen.’ She ticked them off on her fingers. ‘All because you’re so blinkered by your stupid male pride that won’t see sense!’

‘And you’re so blinkered you couldn’t see beyond my trailer to the people living inside,’ snarled Laszlo.

‘That’s not true,’ Prudence said hotly. ‘If I didn’t see those

people it's because you would never introduce me to anyone.'

His eyes narrowed. 'You're such a hypocrite. You didn't want to be part of their lives any more than you really wanted to be part of mine.'

For a moment she didn't reply. It was true. She hadn't wanted to be part of his life: she'd wanted to be all of it. As he'd been all of hers.

She shook her head. 'You don't know what I wanted.' She shivered on the inside. He never had.

Feeling suddenly close to tears, she clenched her fists, struggling to find a way past her misery.

'Fine! Have it your way! I was everything you say and worse,' she said flatly. 'That doesn't mean I'm not good at my job. But if you fire me you'll never know. Until you're stuck with a second-rate replacement.' She paused and shot him a challenging glance. 'If you can find one, that is.'

'Oh, that shouldn't be a problem. I had no trouble replacing you last time,' he said softly. He watched the colour leave her face.

'I'm not surprised,' she said hotly. 'Being the grandson of a billionaire and owning a castle must have a lot of pulling power with a certain kind of woman.'

Watching his eyes narrow at her insult, she felt a flicker of triumph that blotted out the misery of his words.

'It's nice to know that you took your wedding vows so seriously,' she snapped. 'Having vilified *me* for not believing our

marriage was real. Who's the hypocrite now?' Breathing deeply, she let her eyes meet his—steel clashing with bronze. 'We could stand here trading insults all night, Laszlo, but this isn't about our personal qualities. It's not even about us. There are other people involved. Not just people, but family. Just remember how anxious your grandfather was to get started. Don't his feelings count?'

She paused as, with a jolt, she suddenly realised that Mr de Zsadany was sort of her family too. Shock swept over her in waves. She stared at him, legs shaking, stomach plummeting. Suddenly she had to know for certain.

'Is that why he chose Seymour's?' she blurted out. 'Because he thinks I'm your wife?'

Laszlo stared at her calmly. 'No. He doesn't know we're married. No one does except my cousin and my great-uncle. I didn't see the point in upsetting everyone.' His eyes hardened to stone. 'Especially not my grandfather. He wasn't strong enough to deal with it.'

She felt dizzy, sick with wretchedness. 'I'm sorry. I really am.' It sounded so inadequate, even to her. 'But surely that makes this easier? My staying, I mean?'

She took a step back from the white heat of his anger.

'*Nothing* about you being here is easy.'

'I just meant—'

'I know what you meant,' he said bleakly. 'I know you better than you know yourself.'

Her misery gave way to fury. ‘Stop being so sanctimonious. You’ve just spent the last half-hour telling me how contemptible I am for not believing in our marriage but you didn’t even tell anyone about us.’

She glowered at him.

‘You don’t actually feel any more married than I do, do you, Laszlo? What’s upsetting you is the fact that *I* didn’t think our marriage was real.’ Biting her lip, she pushed a strand of tousled blonde hair behind her ear. ‘That’s what this is really about. That’s why you’re punishing me. Not because you really care about our marriage. If you did then how could you treat me like this? I mean, do you honestly think that any *normal* man would fire his own wife?’

She flinched as he raised his eyebrows, his lips curling in disbelief and contempt.

‘That would depend on the wife...’ he said slowly.

He studied her face, noting the small frown between her eyes, the delicate flush colouring her cheeks. She was so disingenuous! His feelings about their marriage might not be consistent or rational, but at least he hadn’t deleted its very existence. He frowned. He should hate her—and he did. And yet his body was responding to her just as it had done in the past.

She shook her head. ‘You can’t use our marriage against me, Laszlo. Married or not, you never really let me in.’

She swallowed. Except when they’d made love. But there was more to a relationship than just lovemaking. Like trust and

honesty and a willingness to share.

Sighing, she shook her head. ‘I get that your life was complicated. I even sort of see why you didn’t tell me everything at the start. But nothing changed after we “married”. You still kept me on the outside.’

She met his gaze, her hurt and anger clearly visible in her eyes.

He felt his chest tighten painfully. ‘You didn’t give me a chance. You barely managed to stay around long enough to digest the bread and salt we shared at our wedding. Besides, you’re just talking about details.’

‘Details?’ Prudence stared at him incredulously. ‘*Details!* Your grandfather is a billionaire and you call that a *detail*.’

She shook her head. She felt light-headed—almost dizzy. How could he stand there with that contemptuous look on his face as if he was the one who’d been tricked?

‘You’re unbelievable! You deceived me. And you kept on deceiving me.’ Her voice sounded jagged. ‘Not just about some tiny, stupid detail but about who you *were*

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