

Claimed for the Italian's Revenge

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Extract

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BY
NATALIE RIVERS



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PROLOGUE

MARCO DE LUCA stood at the open window of the cottage, looking out into the clear, calm night. A full moon hung in the black sky and the sea stretched away into the darkness, lit only by the occasional silvery ripple of reflected moonlight.

For too many years he'd lived and worked in big cities, where the night sky was a hazy amber glow and the stars were virtually invisible. He'd driven himself so hard, building his business from scratch into the global enterprise that it was today, that he'd almost forgotten what it was like to slow down for a moment, to celebrate what he had achieved, or to appreciate the simple pleasures in his life.

There were no street-lamps here on this remote stretch of the Welsh coastline, filling the sky with their artificial light. And around the rugged bay where the cottage was nestled there were no other houses in sight.

It felt good to gaze out at the unblemished beauty of twinkling starlight in the inky black heavens, and at that moment the peaceful isolation seemed as far from the intensity of his business life as it was possible to be.

He was glad Claudia had brought him here.

It had meant a lot to him when she'd asked him to come

with her to the beautiful part of the world where her mother had grown up. Marco knew that her mother had died when she was just five years old—and that this place, with all its treasured memories, held a special place in Claudia's heart.

He turned away from the window to look down at her lying sleeping on the bed. Her long naked limbs were tangled in the sheets after hours of passionate lovemaking, and her hair was spread out in beautiful waves across the pillow. The gorgeous copper colour didn't show in the dark, but even in the moonlight her hair had a rich lustre and her perfect skin had a pearly luminescence.

As he gazed at Claudia, an unaccustomed feeling of warmth spread through him. They'd had a good day. It was an amazing place and Marco was touched that she'd wanted to share it with him—and that she'd already opened up her heart to him about something so personal and precious to her. And, although she was sad to have lost her mother when she was so young, it was wonderful to see the joy she was able to take from her memories.

Marco had not seen *his* mother for eight years—and his heart was full of anger and bitterness whenever he thought about her. She was a treacherous Jezebel who had allowed herself to be used against her own family, by a man called Primo Vasile—a corrupt and despicable con man of the very worst kind.

Then, after her treachery was complete—when the family had been utterly destroyed and Marco's father and grandfather were both dead—she had chosen to disappear. She had totally abandoned her eleven-year-old daughter, Marco's sister Bianca.

A band of tension tightened across Marco's chest, but he

shook his head sharply to clear his mind. He would *not* think about his mother and about what she had done eight years ago.

He would not let her ruin his perfect day with Claudia.

His mother's appalling betrayal had made it hard for him to completely trust anyone. And when his sister had introduced him to her new friend, Claudia, he had been wary of her at first.

Her family was involved with Primo Vasile—her father was one of Vasile's business partners—and that had been enough to make Marco suspicious. But, for his sister's sake, he'd taken the time to get to know her. And now he was glad that he had, because they had become so much more than just friends—more than the simple relationships he was used to with women.

As he looked down at her sleeping, he knew that the time he'd spent with Claudia was truly special.

Suddenly, the sound of his mobile phone vibrating on the bedside table broke into his thoughts. He sprang across the room and picked it up quickly so that it wouldn't disturb her.

'*Ciao*, Ricardo,' Marco said, slipping out of the small bedroom and walking down the narrow staircase to the living room below. 'Everything all right?'

It was very late at night, an unusual time for someone to call, and he'd felt an immediate rush of concern when he'd seen his friend's name on the caller display.

'Yes, everything's fine—at least it is now,' Ricardo said. 'But you should know, an hour ago I ran into Bianca at a party here in Turin. She was in trouble—'

'What happened? Is she all right?' Marco interrupted, fear for his now nineteen-year-old sister slamming into him like a sledgehammer.

'I hate to tell you this—but she was with Primo Vasile,' Ricardo said.

'Vasile!' Marco exclaimed, cursing savagely. What was *he* doing with his sister?

'She was very confused. I think he may have spiked her drink with something worse than alcohol.' Ricardo paused, clearly reluctant to say what he knew was going to cause his friend distress. 'When I came across them, he was asking her questions about your business and trying to get her to leave with him.'

Marco swore again, grinding his hand into a fist at his side.

'She's all right,' Ricardo reassured him. 'I got there in time.'

'Only just in time,' Marco bit out. 'That bastard's going to pay for this. Bianca is off limits—he should have known better than to try to get at me through her.'

'*I was* surprised to see her at a party organised by one of Vasile's PR agencies,' Ricardo said. 'I know how you feel about Vasile.'

'Are you telling me Vasile wasn't just a guest—that he was involved with the party?' Marco demanded, starting back up the stairs, two at a time, to the bedroom.

'I thought you knew—it was a publicity event for a new restaurant he's backing,' Ricardo said. 'I saw Claudia talking to him last week at the Miretti wedding.'

'What?' Marco stopped abruptly outside the bedroom door.

His blood ran cold and he felt the agonisingly familiar pain of betrayal slice into his guts like a vicious blade. His suspicions that Claudia might somehow be involved with the man who had destroyed his family had turned out to be true.

'I saw Claudia talking to Primo Vasile,' Ricardo said. 'I heard him tell her the time and place of tonight's party.'

For a moment Marco couldn't talk—he couldn't breathe.

The shattering truth of the situation knocked the breath right out of his body.

Claudia—his beautiful lover—had betrayed him. And her treachery had led Bianca into danger. Just like his mother, eight years ago, she had betrayed them both.

He pushed the door of the bedroom open and stared down at her. She was still sleeping—her face the image of angelic peace. Wasn't she at all concerned for her so-called friend—the girl who she'd sent into the jaws of the shark that evening?

'Marco, are you still there?' Ricardo asked.

'Yes, I'm here,' Marco said. 'I'm coming home at once—to take care of my sister.'

'What about Vasile?' Ricardo asked.

'I'll deal with him,' Marco said flatly. 'Thanks, Ricardo. You've been a good friend. I'll call you when I know what time I'll be back in Turin.'

He snapped his phone shut. It wasn't just Vasile who would feel the full force of his vengeance.

Claudia would also pay for what she had done—but not yet.

At that moment, his top priority was Bianca. He must make sure for himself that she was unharmed. He reached for his clothes and pulled them on. Then he put his wallet and his mobile phone in his pocket, picked up his bag and turned to leave.

He walked silently out of the room without a backwards glance.

CHAPTER ONE

Four years later

‘MARRY you!’ Claudia Hazelton gasped, too startled to mask her appalled reaction to the shocking proposal she’d just received. She set her cup down on her saucer with a clatter. ‘You’re not really asking me to marry you, are you?’

She was suddenly shaking like a leaf and her heart was pounding horribly, but she held her head high and forced herself to look straight across the beautifully laid table at the Ritz Hotel, into the face of the fifty-year-old man who had just proposed to her.

His name was Primo Vasile. He was her stepmother’s cousin and her father’s business partner. But, despite her family’s connection to him, he had always made her skin crawl. There was no way in a million years she would ever consider marrying him.

‘I’m not *asking* you,’ Vasile said quietly, a nauseatingly smug expression on his smooth Italian face, ‘I’m telling you. Or would you rather see your father face a criminal investigation and then go to prison for embezzlement of the company pension fund—if he even lives that long?’

Claudia stared at him in shock, horrified disbelief leaving her speechless for a moment. Surely Vasile could not really be saying that her father had stolen money from their joint business and that he expected Claudia to marry him, as a way of repaying that debt?

Suddenly, a painful image of her father lying critically ill in hospital flashed through her mind, pushing all other thoughts aside for a moment and making her throat constrict with grief. He was so frail and was already suffering terribly. She couldn't bear to think of him facing a criminal investigation or—even worse—prison.

But why was Vasile threatening that? She'd never liked him. But she couldn't believe he was actually trying to blackmail her into marriage.

'I don't understand why you are saying these awful things,' Claudia said. Her golden brown eyes were wide with confusion as she looked at him. 'Why would you want to hurt my father?'

'I don't *want* to hurt him,' Vasile said. 'But, if you don't accept my proposal, I may be forced to. He took a great deal of money, which needs to be repaid.'

'I can't believe my father would do something like that.' Claudia pushed her hair back from her stark white face with a jerky gesture and turned in appeal to her stepmother, who was sitting with them at the table.

They'd never been close. Francesca was not the type to let motherly responsibilities get in the way of her extravagant and self-indulgent lifestyle. But she must know the truth about the money—and surely even she wouldn't condone what her cousin was doing.

'I'm afraid it's true, darling. Marrying Primo is the only way to get us all out of this terrible mess,' Francesca said.

'When you are married, you will get access to your trust fund. We need that money to pay back what your father took from the company pension fund.'

Claudia bit her lip, trying to take in what they'd told her. The family business really must be in terrible trouble for things to have got this bad—bad enough for blackmail.

'There has to be another way,' Claudia said. 'I can help repay the debt.'

'Foolish girl!' Vasile scoffed. 'Apart from your trust fund—how could *you* ever raise the money needed?'

'I'll sell my flat and my car,' she replied. 'And maybe I could get a bank loan. I'll do whatever it takes—work as hard as I can to pay off the debt.'

'Don't be so naive!' The contempt in Vasile's voice clawed viciously across her nerves. 'We're talking about the pension fund here. Even *I* can't raise the amount of money needed. Hundreds of workers have paid contributions into that fund for years—and, if the money isn't replaced, they'll all lose their pensions.'

'How long will it be until the money is missed?' Claudia asked. She felt sick at the thought of all those loyal employees losing the income they were counting on for their retirement. She was sure her father could never have intended that innocent people should suffer—they had to find a way to put things right. 'What did my father do with the money? Surely we can get at least some of it back.'

'It's gone,' Francesca said. 'You must understand, darling—this really is the only way. You must marry Primo.'

'If we are not married by Christmas,' Vasile said, 'I'll be forced to go to the police.'

'Christmas!' Claudia gasped. 'It's already mid-December.'

Why does it have to be so sudden? Why would you want to go to the police so quickly—surely you have some loyalty to my father after all this time?’

‘Embezzlement is a serious crime,’ Vasile said. ‘If I’m not careful I’ll be implicated too. I won’t sacrifice myself to save your father.’

‘You mean *you’ll* have nothing left if my father’s business goes under,’ Claudia said. ‘You’re just trying to save your own skin.’

‘It wouldn’t be necessary if your father hadn’t stolen the money,’ Vasile sneered.

‘I just can’t believe my father could do such a thing,’ Claudia repeated. She lifted her hands to cover her face for a second and let her long hair fall forward over her eyes. She closed them momentarily—still trying to come to terms with the fact that her father might have taken money that wasn’t his.

‘It’s a bitter pill to swallow,’ Vasile’s heavily accented voice jarred intrusively in her ears, dripping with self-satisfaction. ‘Your precious father is not so perfect after all.’

‘I want to see proof. See the figures for myself,’ Claudia said resolutely. It was unbearable that Primo Vasile was gloating over her father’s mistake.

‘No,’ Vasile’s voice was hard. ‘There’s no time for that.’

‘Then I won’t go through with it—not without proof that it’s definitely necessary,’ Claudia said. A wave of desperation rose up through her as she realised she might really have to marry Vasile to save her father from prison.

‘Don’t push your luck,’ Vasile said, but he picked up his briefcase and pulled out a wad of documents. ‘Here’s your evidence—proof that your father ordered the money transfers into various private accounts.’

Claudia took the papers with a sinking heart. There, right in front of her eyes, were the documents to prove that her father had transferred company money into his own accounts. The numbers were huge—and there was a whole pile of transfer orders, each with her father's characteristic signature at the bottom.

'You're asking too much of me,' Claudia protested.

'No. Your father took too much,' Vasile said. 'And now *you* must give up the money he put in trust for you—if you want to save him from prison.'

'I don't care about the money!' Claudia brought her hands down to the table with a bang and her eyes snapped back up to Vasile's hateful face.

It was true that she didn't care about it. In her mind she had always associated the family wealth with personal loss—first the death of her real mother when she was just five years old and then her grandmother.

She'd never looked forward to her thirtieth birthday, when she was due to receive the money from her trust fund. It seemed so far away that she rarely thought about it. It had been her father's intention that by then she would have found her own way in the world. She would only receive the money earlier if she married. That was her father's way of providing for his grandchildren.

'Lower your voice,' Francesca hissed. 'Remember where we are.'

Claudia glared across the table at her stepmother. She looked so poised and confident.

A sudden, irrational jolt of irritation jarred through her. At that moment she hated Francesca's chic Italian style. Even now, when they were discussing something so important,

Francesca still looked as if she had stepped out of the latest edition of *Vogue*.

‘Only *you* would bring us here,’ Claudia said crossly, glancing round at the opulent cream and gold room. She knew Francesca felt at home surrounded by the sophisticated splendour of the Ritz Hotel—the clink of silver teaspoons against bone china and the gentle hum of conversation was comforting to her. ‘Only you could blackmail your stepdaughter over afternoon tea at the Ritz!’

She looked down at the white tablecloth, wishing for the millionth time that her father had never married Francesca. But it wasn’t his fault. He had been devastated by the death of Claudia’s real mother and had been easy prey for the gold-digging Italian.

Even at seven years old, Claudia had not been fooled by Francesca. She’d instinctively seen through the Italian woman’s fake charm and two-faced behaviour. But her father had been blinded by grief. Out of desire for companionship, and to provide a mother for his daughter, he had fallen into Francesca’s trap. And with Francesca came her cousin, Primo Vasile, an unscrupulous businessman, keen to use Claudia’s father—and his money—in any way he could.

‘Blackmail?’ Francesca echoed, looking almost genuinely bemused. ‘No, no...it’s nothing like that. It’s just an arrangement that Primo has suggested in the interests of your father’s health.’

‘It’s blackmail,’ Claudia said frostily. ‘Don’t try to pretend it isn’t.’

‘No—’ Francesca protested.

But Vasile lifted a hand to silence her. ‘Claudia understands the situation,’ he said, fixing her with his shrewd black eyes.

She shuddered. The sound of him saying her name and the way that he smiled at her made her stomach clench in revulsion.

'I will provide all the necessary paperwork,' Vasile continued. 'You just need to come to the Caribbean for our wedding and sign the documents that will keep your father from prison. Allow him to end his days peacefully in hospital.'

Claudia stared at Vasile in disgust, hardly able to believe the situation she had found herself in.

'There is one more thing,' Vasile added. 'Given the fact that your father is far too ill to talk, it's scarcely necessary to say this, but I must be absolutely clear on this point. You are never to discuss our arrangement with your father—or with anyone else. If you do, I will cut my losses by going to the police immediately.'

A flash of anger flared through Claudia at the cold-hearted way Vasile dismissed her father and at this extra barb he'd added to his blackmail—as if it wasn't hateful enough already.

Then, suddenly, all she could think about was how much her father was suffering. Her anger evaporated and her eyes filled with tears as she pictured him—his face a pallid grey next to the starched white hospital sheets as he drifted in and out of consciousness, his terrible pain and pitiful frailty showing whenever he was awake.

'It will be all right, darling,' Francesca said, startling Claudia by covering her hand with her own. 'There's no need to get upset.'

'My father is dying.' She paused, struggling to speak past the sadness that was closing her throat. 'How can you say it will be all right?'

'I meant we can keep him happy and comfortable,' Francesca said. 'Protect him from any more worries.'

Claudia pressed her teeth gently into her quivering lip, momentarily overwhelmed by a barrage of conflicting emotions.

She'd spent most of her life longing for a loving mother who could take care of her and comfort her when she was upset.

Now, for the first time she could remember, Francesca was trying to offer comfort. But, coming straight after joining forces with a man Claudia despised, with the purpose of blackmailing her into marriage, it was a hollow pretence.

'You don't care about him,' Claudia cried. 'You've never cared about him—you've only ever been interested in his money.'

Francesca withdrew her hand stiffly, but she did not respond to Claudia's impassioned comment.

'This will cheer you up,' she said, pulling a wedding dress brochure out of her designer bag. 'Just for inspiration, of course. After tea let's pop down to Harrods and see what they have.'

'I'm not going to Harrods to choose my wedding dress.' All Claudia wanted to do was get away on her own.

'Just for inspiration,' her stepmother repeated. 'Nothing off-the-peg for you, darling, but what do you think about something like this?'

Claudia looked at the fur trimmed December bride gracing the cover of the brochure.

'It's not exactly suitable for the Caribbean, is it?' She picked up her bag and was on her feet before she fully realised what she was doing. She couldn't bear to think of flying to the Tropics to present herself as a trophy bride to the despicable and vile Primo Vasile.

But the thought of her father ending his days in prison was absolutely unbearable. She would do whatever it took to spare him pain in his last few months of life.

'Where are you going?' Francesca asked. 'We have plans to make.'

'You don't need me to make plans,' Claudia said as she turned to leave. 'You just need me to carry them out for you.'

They said that revenge was a dish best served cold. And, as Marco De Luca waited outside the Ritz Hotel for Claudia Hazelton to appear, his heart felt as cold and hard as steel.

He stared straight ahead, oblivious to the hordes of Christmas shoppers thronging the streets in London's fashionable West End. He was completely disinterested in the Christmas lights that sparkled everywhere because, at any moment, Claudia would leave the hotel.

It was more than four years since he'd seen her, but he could still picture her face perfectly. Porcelain fair skin with a dusting of freckles. Fine bone structure and delicate features, framed by rich coppery hair that tumbled past her shoulders. Those large eyes that gave the appearance of angelic innocence.

But Marco knew Claudia was far from innocent. She had betrayed him and she'd made the unforgivable mistake of conspiring to hurt his sister.

And now, unbelievably, she planned to marry Primo Vasile—the man who had viciously ripped Marco's family to shreds twelve years earlier.

A knot twisted nastily in his stomach as he thought about Claudia and Vasile together. Their forthcoming marriage was utterly repellent to him—but it proved just how low Claudia was prepared to stoop. The only possible reason she could have for marrying a man like Vasile was to get her hands on her trust fund early.

Marco would make sure that marriage never happened.

A movement from the hotel's entrance caught his eye.

It was Claudia.