

Daddy's Girls

Tasmina Perry

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Christmas Day – the present

He was late. The tick-tock of the ornate grandfather clock reminded them how late. The Balcon sisters were never kept waiting for anything. They glanced independently at their watches – Cartier, Rolex, Patek Phillippe – wondering if their visitor was ever going to show. The four girls all had better things to be doing with their time. Their father was dead, there was a funeral to arrange and they had lives – busy, glamorous lives.

Cate Balcon stared out of the French windows of Huntsford Castle, watching as shadows fell into the dark study, snow settling on the sills. Outside, she saw two orbs of light moving up the long gravel drive.

‘I think he’s here.’

A few moments later, the heavy oak door to the drawing room creaked open, and David Loftus, a slim, wiry man, with eyes slightly too close together, walked in.

‘Mr Loftus,’ said Cate, rising to shake his hand. It was cold and dry, with the yellow-stained fingertips of a smoker. ‘This is David Loftus, the friend of Daddy’s,’ she said to the other women. ‘Mr Loftus is a writer. Just moved into the

village, I believe. Please, David, take a seat.'

Ignoring her, Loftus moved to the huge open fire, rubbing his hands. 'Stinking weather out there,' he said, motioning his head towards the window. 'The car could hardly get down the drive. Do you know there's about a dozen photographers by the gates?'

Venetia Balcon nodded. 'For some reason the press seems to think our father's death constitutes news.'

'And you're surprised by that?' replied Loftus with a sarcastic look. 'You're celebrities. Every hack in the land wants to be in this room today.'

His smile was crooked as he took in the grandeur of the room. The ancient Welsh slate fireplace, the walls lined with leather-bound books. His eyes moved up to the ceiling, all veined like a vintage cheese under the paintwork. Cracked under the magnificent surface. He smiled sourly: just like the Balcon family.

'Well, now you're here, what do you want?' snapped Serena Balcon, who was feeling particularly impatient. Even for an actress, she'd had quite enough drama for one Christmas. She was the one who had found her father's body in the castle's moat the morning after the Christmas Eve party, mouth gaping open, skin frozen and spidered with purple veins. She shuddered at the memory as David Loftus watched her.

She was just as gorgeous in the flesh as on the screen, he thought. In fact, all four of Lord Oswald Balcon's daughters were exactly as he'd imagined them to be. Blonde and beautiful, privilege clinging to them like expensive scent. And that haughty way they carried themselves: they thought they were so special. But now he was the one with the trump card and he was going to savour every sweet minute of it.

Without being asked, he poured himself a Scotch from a

Murano glass decanter on the table and swirled it around the tumbler. As a barrister, Camilla Balcon recognized his technique. She'd used it in the courtroom a hundred times before: make your audience wait. Make them nervous.

'I suppose the police have been round?' Loftus asked, taking a swig of his drink.

'And why is it any of your business?' asked Camilla, her voice prickling with hostility.

'Oswald was my friend,' Loftus said. The whisky glistened on his upper lip.

'Oswald was our father,' replied Camilla firmly.

Loftus walked to the window, Huntsford's grounds now just a series of shapes and shadows in the dark.

'Accidental death? Is that what they're saying?'

The girls looked at each other, unsure of how much to tell him. 'Exactly,' Cate said finally, staring into the fire. 'He fell from the ramparts. He was watching the fireworks.'

'Fell?' said David, lifting one dark bushy eyebrow into a heavy arch.

Camilla flashed him a look. 'And you are implying . . .'

Loftus cut Camilla short. 'You do *know* that a lot of people wanted your father dead?'

'He could be a bit difficult,' responded Cate tartly. 'But it's hardly the same thing as being wanted dead.'

'Difficult? Is that what you call it?' he asked, tossing back the last of the whisky.

'Your father was despised by half the people who knew him. No, I don't think your father fell from the rooftop. I believe he was pushed. Deliberately.' He paused. 'I think your father was murdered.'

The fire was spitting and crackling in the background as the sisters looked at him, not daring to speak.

'And I think that one of Daddy's little girls killed him.'

PART ONE

I

Ten months earlier

The Honourable Serena Balcon lay back on the top deck of the Egyptian sailboat, *La Mamounia*, wriggled out of her pink Dior hot pants, and congratulated herself with a lazy swig of a Mojito. *What a good decision*, she thought smugly, looking up to watch the white sails of the boat fan out like two huge butterfly wings. Back home in London's Chelsea, she hadn't been sure whether to accept fashion designer Roman LeFey's offer of a two-day cruise from Edfu to Luxor. As she received more than one hundred social invitations in the average week, she politely declined everything except the most public and most exclusive – or the odd charitable gesture. But this trip was looking very promising indeed. Only thirty of Roman's most fabulous friends had been invited to the strictly A-list jaunt and, not only had Serena been invited, she'd been assigned *La Mamounia's* Cleopatra Suite, a spacious, exotic cabin at the stern where you could open the shutters and enjoy the receding view from a claw-foot bath. She fished around for a phrase to describe the scene's subtle grandeur. She smiled. It was *appropriate*.

‘How incredible is this?’ said Tom Archer, Serena’s boyfriend, leaning over the boat’s railing to get a 360-degree view. One of Britain’s most successful, not to mention fabulously handsome actors, the backdrop of the Nile suited him to a T.

‘Yes, you look very Agatha Christie, darling,’ said Serena with a hint of sarcasm, peering up from under the wide brim of her sunhat. ‘But don’t lean so far out. There could be piranhas or anything in that filthy water and I’m not jumping in to get you.’

Tom had conditioned himself not to listen to Serena’s sniping. Instead he carried on looking at a water buffalo grazing on the opposite bank, next to which an old woman was doing her washing in the tobacco-coloured waters. ‘Look at it,’ he smiled, ‘it still looks so biblical. I keep thinking we’re going to see Moses sitting on the bank.’

Serena glanced up casually. ‘I thought he was dead.’

‘Who?’

‘Moses.’

Tom rolled his eyes and Serena caught the gesture. ‘I saw that,’ she said sourly.

He turned to face her. ‘What?’

‘You just rolled your eyes at me as if I was stupid.’

‘Well, you were being stupid. Of course Moses is dead.’

‘I was joking,’ she snapped, hiding her face with a copy of Italian *Vogue*. ‘But yes, you’re right. It is rather special.’

Tom gave his girlfriend a wry smile, predicting the answer to his next question. ‘In that case, are you coming with me to Karnak after lunch? Biggest group of temples in the world, apparently. Roman was asking who was up for it. Doubt there’ll be a good turn out from this lot, though,’ he said, motioning towards the mezzanine deck where the rest of Roman’s guests were draining the bar.

‘Don’t be daft, darling. What do you want to go there

for?’ asked Serena, dropping her magazine onto her bronzed knees. ‘It will be riddled with flies and tourists. And anyway,’ she sighed dramatically, ‘I’m too busy thinking about where we can have my birthday party. I mean – nowhere in London has a capacity of a thousand. It’s bloody ridiculous.’

‘A thousand people,’ said Tom, eyebrows raised. ‘Do we have that many friends?’

‘You don’t, no.’

Tom tutted.

‘You *don’t* have that many friends though, do you?’ she glared. ‘Then again, you don’t seem to like meeting people. You haven’t stopped complaining since you arrived and you haven’t made the slightest effort to talk to anyone, which is so rude because I could have invited dozens of friends in your place.’

‘Maybe you should have.’

‘Well, in future I will.’

‘Go on then.’

They glared at each other.

‘Look, just stop complaining and go and get me another drink from that turbanned chappie,’ said Serena finally. ‘I want Cristal. I’m parched.’

Tom strode over and snatched the magazine out of Serena’s hands. He brought his face down so she could see him under the brim of her hat. ‘Well there he is,’ he spat, pointing at a dark-skinned man with a tray of drinks. ‘Get off your backside and go ask him yourself.’

Serena Balcon and Tom Archer’s relationship was in the stage that most therapists refer to as terminal. Held together by familiarity and convenience, even the most innocent conversation quickly became a nettle patch of hostile banter. For Serena, the hostility was brought on by festering disappointment. Tom Archer had started off as a novelty

boyfriend; he was cute and uncomplicated, and the complete opposite of the long procession of Serena's former boyfriends – ex-Etonians, Hugh Grant-alikes and floppy-haired trust-fund banker boys. At first, it didn't matter that Tom didn't have *pedigree* – his mother worked in a factory, his father was a gardener: not a hint of good breeding anywhere in that family tree. But he was hot, the sexiest British film star since Jude Law, and he had increased Serena's celebrity stock immeasurably.

Before she had met him on the set of a tiny British indie movie five years ago, Serena had been just a posh blonde who dabbled in modelling and importing pashminas. She was famous in the society pages for being one of the fabulous Balcon girls, but who wanted to be stuck in *Tatler* forever? She wanted a bigger stage, and at Tom's side she got it. The media loved them – the unlikely but classy combination of Tom, the British-born movie star, and Serena, the sexy daughter of a baron, was potent and irresistible. Her impeccable sense of style wasn't lost on the fashion press either. Within weeks of their party debut as a couple, she was US *Vogue's* 'Girl of the Month' and within the year they were a huge Tom & Serena franchise that was like a golden VIP pass into the world of fame.

Five years later, it wasn't enough. Yes, her family were titled, but much to Serena's annoyance, the Balcons weren't a grand English family like the Marlboroughs, the Wellingtons or the Balfours. Serena wanted a home to rival Blenheim, she wanted the tiny ducal crown on her headed notepaper and the state wedding with an engagement ring in the colours of her national flag, just like the one that Prince Rainier had once presented to Grace Kelly. And the fact that her bloody sister Venetia had managed to marry into semi-royalty tormented her even more. Put simply, Serena wanted more than Tom could give her.

She stretched out her long aristocratic legs on her sun-lounger and turned to look at Tom fuming at the rail on the far side of the deck. She smirked. It wasn't all bad. There was no denying he was gorgeous. That square jaw, the cobalt blue eyes framed by jet black lashes, the mussed-up crop of dark hair and that incredible body peeking out from his open white Turnbull & Asser shirt. Tom's good looks could blend into any social situation. In a pub, he exuded a handsome-boy-next-door ordinariness. At a country house dinner with her father, Tom's fine English features took on a rather noble, *Brideshead Revisited* quality. And put him on an LA film set and he glowed with that indefinable X-factor that agents the world over wished they could bottle.

Maybe he wasn't so bad . . .

'Sorry for being a bit cranky,' she said softly, curving her pillow-soft lips into a pout. 'Come here . . .'

Despite himself, Tom could not resist the sight of her stretched out suggestively in her Missoni string bikini. He moved sulkily to the sun-lounger. She straddled him, pulling off her bikini top and pressing her naked breasts against his chest. Tom groaned as she tightened her thighs against his.

'How about we go back in the cabin and make up properly . . . ?' she purred in his ear.

'Oh Serena,' he said, struggling between two emotions – lust and anger.

'Serena, Tom. Here you are, you lovebirds!' Roman LeFey's singsong voice pierced the silence. The biggest French designer since Yves Saint Laurent, he was a tall, black man with skin the colour of cocoa, his large belly hidden by a dark green kaftan. 'What are you doing on the top deck in the mid-day sun? Mad cats and the English, hey?'

'Mad cats exactly, Roman,' said Tom, slightly abashed as

Serena swung her feet onto the deck and slipped a tanned foot into a Manolo Blahnik flip-flop, tying up her bikini top without the slightest hint of embarrassment.

‘Roman, darling,’ she purred, kissing him on both cheeks. ‘I was just persuading Tom to be a bit more sociable.’

‘Looks like it,’ smiled Roman playfully. ‘Now lunch is about to be served, so stop hiding yourself and come downstairs,’ he said, leading them both towards the spiral stairs which snaked down to the boat’s mezzanine area.

‘Oh, I can’t go down in this tiny thing,’ moaned Serena. ‘I must go and change.’

She tip-toed across the top deck and slipped into her cabin, the welcome whirl of the ceiling fan cooling her skin and her mood. She threw open the wooden shutters of her closet and began flipping through a rack of chiffon, linen and silk clothes, thinking how exhausting it was to be known for your taste. An ill-considered outfit at even the most casual of gatherings – well, she shuddered to think about it.

Deciding on a tiny white Marni sundress, she stripped naked and pulled the thin fabric up over her long, lean, tanned body, accessorizing with a huge quartz ring and a copper bangle pushed high up her bronzed arm. She scooped her long layered honey-blonde hair up into a top-knot, patted her face with a towel and dabbed her cheekbones with a light, rose-coloured blush that accentuated her big aqua-marine eyes. At twenty-six she knew she was at the peak of her physical beauty: understated, stylish, stunning. Very Julie-Christie-on-holiday, she thought, looking at her reflection in the glass.

She fixed a pair of Ray-Ban Aviators over the bridge of her nose and walked to the mezzanine deck, taking slow, deliberate steps so that her entrance would be fully noted. She paused for a minute, taking in the scene. A crowd of people were drinking flutes of champagne and nibbling at

canapés. The air smelt of cumin; a small band in fezzes played traditional Egyptian music by the bar. She moved through the crowd, away from where Tom was talking to a laughing crowd, and grabbed a martini.

‘What do you think of the dahabeah?’ asked Roman who had appeared by her side and taken her hand.

‘The what?’

‘My baby!’ he laughed. ‘A dahabeah is an Egyptian sailboat.’

‘It’s amazing,’ she said, giving him a playful kiss on the cheek and leaving a ring of pale pink gloss on his skin. ‘And I love our suite.’

‘I thought you’d like the Cleopatra Suite,’ he smiled knowingly, picking up a fig from an overloaded plate. ‘I should be in the studio finishing off the collection for Milan,’ he added, ‘but I can’t help being naughty.’

‘You’re so decadent, darling. That’s why I love you,’ sighed Serena generously, then instantly became businesslike. ‘Now tell me who’s here,’ she said, craning her long neck to survey the crowd. ‘I haven’t really been introduced to anyone yet.’

‘Well, let’s do that now,’ he whispered conspiratorially. ‘Who would you like to meet?’

She scanned the deck, looking for familiar faces or interesting people with whom to network. Someone had told her Leo DiCaprio was coming but she couldn’t see him anywhere. Roman could be so random with his invitations, she thought. She spotted a photographer from US *Vogue*, a media mogul’s daughter, a Victoria’s Secret model. Perhaps it wasn’t as AAA-List as she’d been led to believe.

‘I don’t really recognize anyone,’ she smiled, trying to hide her disappointment.

Roman stepped up onto a little platform and looked across the deck, lifting a podgy little finger to identify his guests.

‘On this trip, I wanted to invite friends who would appreciate Egypt,’ said Roman seriously.

Serena smiled, trying to look grateful.

Roman went through his guests one by one, giving a potted history on each. The Russian princess, the gay interior designer, New York’s top session hairdresser, a society florist and a three-Michelin-starred chef from Barcelona. In the centre was Michael Sarkis, the billionaire hotelier. ‘Here with the girlfriend,’ whispered Roman.

Her interest was waning.

‘Now there is Rachel Barnaby,’ said Roman, clapping his hands together and pointing to a luscious-looking girl by the bar. ‘She’s going to be huge. Did you read the cover story in this month’s *Vogue*?’

Serena smiled. Of course she had. The dazzling Welsh girl with her long raven hair, alabaster skin and pillowy lips had been touted as the next big thing. Huge talent. Beyond glamorous. Her jaw stiffened just thinking about it.

‘Well, everybody’s the next big thing in *Vogue*, aren’t they,’ she replied archly. ‘So many people don’t quite make it though, do they?’

Roman tapped her on the bottom. ‘Don’t be unkind,’ he smiled. ‘You have nothing to fear. She hasn’t even got a proper publicist yet – I had to ring her mother to invite her on the cruise.’

Serena smiled broadly. Of course she had nothing to worry about from a pretty, bland teenager. So Rachel Barnaby had snagged a *Vogue* cover. Someone must have dropped out. Serena, on the other hand, had the front-row seat at the shows, the two-million-pound cosmetics contract. And OK, so she hadn’t quite scooped a big Hollywood role yet, but those kinky, overweight Hollywood producers preferred malleable trailer-park trash to someone with genuine class and manners. And anyway, she was Serena Balcon. Every

move she and Tom made – the holiday frolic, the Ivy supper, the last-minute dash to Harrods for Christmas presents – all made front-page news. Beat that, you Welsh oik, she thought smugly.

Recovering her poise, Serena decided that Michael Sarkis was the best of numerous evils on *La Mamounia*. She didn't know much about him, other than that he was born in Beirut – of an American mum and a Lebanese father, so she had once read – and raised in the Bronx. One of the world's most successful hoteliers, he was a real rags-to-riches entrepreneur who had made a great deal of money peddling gaudy holidays to super-rich Arabs. His hotels were hall-marked by casinos in the lobby, shark tanks in the gardens and gold leaf everywhere; vulgar little places that Serena wouldn't be seen dead in. But still . . . he was filthy rich and he was talking to Rachel Barnaby.

She walked over to where Michael was standing by a long table piled high with Egyptian delicacies. There were tiny honey-glazed baklava, twists of pistachio-infused pastries, piles of white peaches and bowls of flat bread cut into rough chunks. It looked like the Last Supper.

'I hope you're hungry,' smiled Serena, popping a plump, dark-green olive into her mouth and unleashing her most dazzling smile on Michael.

'I hope you're thirsty,' he replied, picking up a bottle of wine and pouring Serena a glass. 'I'm Michael.'

'Serena. Pleased to meet you.'

Michael put out a tanned hand to shake hers. As he gripped her fingers, she noticed what extraordinarily sexy hands they were. Big and tanned with an artisan's squareness about them, the fingertips were smooth and manicured – and the chunky expensive gold watch on his wrist didn't hurt either.

Michael seemed to notice Serena's interest and allowed himself a smile. 'Do you like the wine?' he asked.

'The wine?' repeated Serena. 'Gorgeous. Pétrus, the forty-seven, I think?'

Michael twisted the bottle to read its label. 'You know your stuff.'

'Well, the forty-seven was one of the best vintages of the century for the vineyard. It's even better than the seventy, I think. Really rather wonderful.' She turned to face Rachel Barnaby. 'What do you think? The forty-seven or the seventy?' she asked.

Rachel flushed. 'I can only just about tell the difference between red and white, let alone anything else,' she laughed politely.

'How sweet,' smiled Serena, flashing her a patronizing look. 'Still, you're an actress, not a sommelier.'

Rachel Barnaby suddenly needed the ladies' room and Serena watched her go.

'Nice girl,' said Michael.

'Very sweet and *simple*,' smiled Serena.

Michael looked her up and down with a deep penetrating stare that unnerved her. Slowly running one finger up and down the stem of his glass, he gave her a slow, flirtatious smile. 'So, how are you such an expert on wine?' he asked, taking a sip of his drink.

'My father's a wine buff,' said Serena, unconsciously tracing her lip with her finger.

'Lord Balcon?' asked Michael, lifting a bushy black eyebrow into a scruffy arch.

'That's right, do you know him?'

'Not really,' replied Michael, his brow furrowing. 'He's on the committee of a club in London that just turned me down.'

Serena watched a dark cloud cross his face and realized

instantly that Michael Sarkis was a man not used to being turned down for anything. 'Which one? White's? Annabel's?'

'Hamilton's, actually.'

She picked up a canapé and laughed out loud. 'What do you want to go there for? Full of stiff my father knows from school. I had you down as a Bungalow 8 or Billionaire kind of guy.'

'I have my own clubs, too,' he smiled, 'but sometimes you want to try something new.'

He moved nearer to her and rested his hand on her hip. It was a sudden and intimate gesture that sparked a jolt of desire through her. Unsettled, she struggled to rationalize it. Wasn't he too old? It was hard to place an age on the dark-haired man. He could be forty, maybe even fifty. She'd hardly call him good looking: the hooked nose was too long, the dark eyes narrow and beady, his head too small for his body; but like so many older, more powerful men she had met through her father, he oozed an arrogant, almost dangerous allure that was definitely sexy.

'Where are you going after the cruise?' he asked in a way that suggested an imminent offer.

'It's not as hectic as usual,' she smiled coyly, trying to leave herself open. 'Got to do some press for *To Catch a Thief* but, other than that, the world is my oyster.'

'Oh, I heard you were doing that remake.' He smiled appreciatively. 'The Grace Kelly role, of course.'

'Of course,' smiled Serena, flattered that he knew about her work. 'And David Clooney as Roby the handsome jewel thief. It's a great cast.'

'Where are the junkets?'

'Oh, it's tedious. London, New York, LA,' she said, showing a fashionable lack of interest at being flown privately all around the world and having half the world's press fawn at her feet.

‘When you’re in LA, give me a ring so we can hook up. Where do you live?’

Serena flushed slightly and pushed a stray tendril of hair behind her ear. ‘Actually I live in London at the moment. But I’m thinking of getting a couple of other places: go bi-coastal. In the meantime I’m staying at The Viceroy.’

She looked up at his face, which lay somewhere between disappointment and puzzlement.

‘What’s the matter?’

He smiled. ‘It’s nothing.’

‘No, what?’ she repeated almost petulantly.

‘I just wondered why you still live in London.’

‘What’s wrong with that? I live just off Cheyne Walk.’

His look bordered on bemusement. ‘I thought a woman like you would be thinking bigger.’

Her brow fell into a sharp crease. ‘I don’t quite understand.’

Michael paused. His head was bowed and he was smiling to himself, as if in an internal dialogue he was telling a joke.

‘I was at dinner last week in LA. My friend Lawrence owns Clerc, the jeweller’s. Do you know them?’

She nodded. They had lent her a pair of yellow diamond drop earrings for last year’s Oscars.

‘They’re looking for a “face”, a spokesperson, whatever you want to call it. They’re talking about the obvious names: Julia, Gwyneth, Catherine. Someone mentioned you and, having met you now, I would say you’d be the perfect choice.’ He stroked her cheek lightly. ‘You are incredibly beautiful.’

Serena looked away.

‘But . . . your name was dismissed for not having – ah, shall we say – international appeal.’

Her mouth immediately curled into a wounded, pained expression. ‘For your information I have a lot of visibility

in the States,' she retorted, straightening her back. '*Vanity Fair* are desperate to do a profile. I'd hardly say that was parochial.'

Michael spread his hands in a gesture of appeasement. 'My mistake, I just thought you'd like to know.'

'Well, thank you for your opinion,' said Serena frostily. 'Now, I think I'd better go and see Roman.' She turned away, suddenly consumed with a fury about Tom's irrational obsession: to stay living in London. And how dare she be overlooked for a major advertising campaign? She was a huge star. She had breeding – didn't the Americans love all that 'lady of the manor' stuff?

A dark flicker of insecurity exploded in her consciousness.

Serena moved purposefully through the crowd, her mind already working on meetings with agents, real-estate buyers and publicists, her ambition to conquer Hollywood completely refuelled.