



Prologue

The taxi chugged across the water and the City grew larger and more beautiful. Passing through the islands in the lagoon, Atticus tried to imagine what travellers from many centuries ago would have felt, on seeing the same sights. It was familiar in one way, the stuff of chocolate boxes, postcards, a thousand photographs, and yet in reality it was very, marvellously, different. Close up, Venice was a stranger, a ghostly figure in a faded dress, irresistible, beckoning like a siren. If she had been leading him to his death he would not have been able to do anything but follow, and as the little boat with its reassuringly polished teak decks got closer, and eventually turned into the Grand Canal, deep in the heart of the City, Atticus shivered, though he was not cold.

Venice was indescribably beautiful, but somehow, it was not entirely benign.

Chapter One

Atticus Drake, five foot nine, almost forty, once dark hair now *unfairly* greying at the temples, but otherwise in reasonable shape, looked surreptitiously at his reflection in the huge mirror across the room. He had never been inside the Dorchester before, although he had loitered outside in Park Lane on many occasions, walking to or from a bus stop, or the Tube at Marble Arch, distracted from the seething traffic or the

inviting green of Hyde Park by a horde of photographers waiting for an A-List celebrity, or the sweep of a limousine with blacked-out windows. The Dorchester, rather like London itself, he had always felt, was for other people. People who had money to throw about and other people to be seen with.

But now, here he was, not only inside the gleaming brass-adorned doors, not only well past the marbled hall, the long, richly-carpeted drawing room where business meetings were held and ladies lunched, but in the world-famous restaurant. Sitting on one side of a vast expanse of white tablecloth, in the company of an extremely beautiful blonde.

Around him people talked in quiet voices, their cutlery chinking peacefully against the china, glasses dancing with lead crystal and valuable wine. Waiters and sommeliers glided about as if on invisible castors, appearing at the elbows of the diners without warning, whisking away a plate, replacing a starched napkin and vanishing again so quickly that one scarcely believed they had been there at all. They clearly didn't expect any acknowledgment, which was a source of great relief to Atticus, who, somewhere between his A levels and his frankly lucky, time at Cambridge, had once been a waiter for a season in another London hotel and had lived in fear of being recognised by a fellow servant ever since. At which point he would of course be denounced as a fraud, forced to give up any pretence of being a diner in such an elegant establishment, and banished to the kitchen to continue washing up in a waistcoat.

In front of him was a perfectly balanced flute of champagne, tall, cool, and inviting, tiny bubbles rising to its surface like silly girls running towards the dance floor at a party. And across the table, with an amused look on her face, was Laura Hutchinson, the girl who had made his life in the Sixth Form at St Joseph's Community College such utter, utter hell.

"I *know* Darling!" she was saying, her voice musical, with that enticing hint of laughter in it. "I can hardly believe it myself. Almost fifteen years! Although I would never admit that to anyone else. I can't possibly be *thirty five* can I?"

It had been twenty years, almost to the day, and Atticus had counted the days. And he had been in the year below Laura at St Joseph's. And he was within a sniff of forty. "Surely not," he said politely.

"Those were the days, weren't they?" Laura said, swishing her long shiny hair about like a horse in a field, aware that the eyes of the room were on her. "We had such a lot of fun. We were so cool back then, weren't we?"

Atticus took a long sip of his champagne not trusting himself to speak. He didn't believe he had ever been cool. Bryan Ferry was cool. David Bowie was cool. Atticus Drake was *nice*. Well brought up. A classic dresser without much interest in clothes, a useful sportsman if you were looking to make up a team, but never a goal scorer. A fan of a good book, a decent claret, a walk in the countryside on a cold day. A chap who fitted in anywhere but never really belonged.

"You were so - so -" Laura seemed to be searching for a word. He hoped it wasn't any of the words he was thinking of.

"Romantic!" she finished with a flourish. "Yes, that's it. I thought you were so Romantic."

That wasn't one of the words he had been thinking of. "*Romantic?*" he said, surprised. "Like Simon Le Bon. Or George Michael. Or Byron."

Only Laura could put those three in a single bracket.

"I was a little bit in love with you, you know," she said.

Now that *was* a surprise. All Atticus knew was that way back then, for some three years and about three months, and maybe a couple of weeks, one of them had been in love and it hadn't been Laura.

Laura Hutchinson had sent notes asking him to meet her in unlikely places and then sent half a dozen of her giggling friends to laugh at him. Laura Hutchinson had stolen his underpants when the class went swimming and attached them to the flagpole at the school's gates. Laura Hutchinson had told her *boyfriend*, Vince Peacock, that Atticus had made a pass at her in the library and Vince Peacock had locked him in the bogs overnight to teach him a lesson. Laura Hutchinson had written a poem in class about a hopeless loser who killed himself because he was in love with a beautiful girl who didn't even know he existed and called her poem *Atticus Drake*.

And it had been all the more terrible because no matter what she did, or how hard he tried to get over it, he had been completely, massively, and hopelessly in love with her. He had thought about her, day and night. He had imagined her, in a wedding dress, sailing up the aisle of the local church, framed by flowers, to meet him, her future husband. He had dreamt about the two of them, running through fields in the rain, or standing in meadows of wild flowers. In Assembly, he imagined her lovely silky hair slipping through his hands, and how it would feel to touch the beautiful toned brown skin of her legs where they met the hem of her illegally short school skirt.

And then, in a rush of burnt school books and flour bombing and empty promises, term and school were over, and she had gone, and Atticus was alone. Laura Hutchinson had been Atticus's first, totally unrequited, love.

Laura Hutchinson who had now tracked him down through St Joseph's proud list of Oxbridge alumni, and found his number, and asked him to go to lunch with her, in London, at the Dorchester. "My treat," she had said, and now she was sitting across a table from him in a tiny bright pink linen shift dress. Several considerable jewels hung about her like decorations on an interior designer's Christmas tree, and her long, long legs wound elegantly round each other before ending in the most marvellous pink suede sandals with heels that must have been six inches high. He was glad she had been sitting down when he arrived. He wondered vaguely how he would manage to get out of the Dorchester without standing up himself, and demonstrating how far short of Laura he fell in inches, never mind loveliness.

And now she was telling him she thought of him as *Byron*. The vision of his *Wacky Races* underpants, fluttering in the breeze above the Headmaster's head on School Open Day came hurtling back, and he felt his face go red.

"You're embarrassed," said Laura, reaching across the table and putting a beautifully manicured hand on his arm. "Oops. Didn't you *know*? I had *such* a crush on you!"

The starters arrived, tiny morsels of fish on vast plates, sprinkled with wild flowers and dotted about with green and yellow blobs of jelly. Atticus wondered how it would be possible to eat a mouthful of it, without accidentally eating all of it at once.

"*Gorge*," pronounced Laura, who had somehow managed it. He sat transfixed, as her lovely lips moved in ecstasy, her eyes closed, long lashes sweeping her cheeks. He sucked on a small nasturtium-like leaf. He imagined having sex with Laura, wild, sudden, passionate sex, probably standing up. In the coat cupboard right here in the foyer of this hotel, amongst furs and suede and cashmere jackets. What would Lord Byron do? Come to think of it, what would Simon Le Bon do?

"So Darling," she was saying, "What do you do with yourself these days? Are you *really* important?"

Atticus's days, all the ones before this one, stretched out behind him, a vast empty road with no redeeming features, no landmarks, no battle scars, not even a milestone to mark some kind of achievement. Then, as if

operating a 360 degree scroll on the Google Earth App, he swung round to look at all the tomorrows. And there was nothing there either.

"Oh, you know," he said, "This and that. I did some Land Management after Cambridge. Then I spent some time helping a mate run a hotel in Scotland. After that I went into the City. Money markets. All a long time ago obviously."

"How *clever!*" said Laura, looking interested, "And did you make *mountains* of lovely dosh?"

"Well a bit." said Atticus.

"*Darling,*" said Laura, putting her hand over his and with a deeply sympathetic look on her lovely face, and looking him up and down, taking in his well-worn jacket and trousers. "And did you lose it *all?*"

"Well, actually...." Atticus said, "I didn't really have time to. One day I was at my desk, the next I was standing on the pavement holding a cardboard box with a spider plant in it. Nobody really discussed what was happening. Technically I was lucky. Luckier than the ones who stayed."

"Poor you," said Laura, "It must have been *vile.*"

Her words, pronounced so carefully, so soothingly, had an extraordinary effect on Atticus. He

suddenly felt completely, *actually* devastated.

"And now?" Laura seemed to be hanging on his every word. Waiters took away plates and Atticus realised that in the end he hadn't even eaten the fish. It was hardly going to make the difference between nutrition and starvation. Bigger plates loomed, like flying saucers, and landed in front of them. Laura nodded approvingly at the waiter who melted into a soft pulp in gratitude, as though the sun had been turned on him and he was made of chocolate.

"Well now, I suppose, I just do a bit of this and that," he said, lamely, knowing he did neither this nor that. "I'm learning to play the cello," he finished.

"How *fab,*" purred Laura. "How *clever.*"

"I'm not very good." said Atticus.

"I bet you are," Laura said smoothly, "I bet you're bloody brilliant." She beckoned to a waiter who brought new glasses, and poured wine.

"It's Merseault," Laura whispered. "I love Merseault, don't you?"

Atticus did love Merseault. But it was a long time since he had had any. Somehow it didn't seem right, drinking fine wine on your own. And they didn't serve it at the Rifleman's Arms, the faux- spit-and-sawdust pub on the corner of the new Docklands road in which he lived. The champagne had already started to go to his head, together with the atmosphere and the sheer unbelievable quality of the position he was in.

"Well, I think classical music's terribly important," he said boldly.

"Of *course* it is," said Laura.

Did she believe that? Atticus seemed to remember Laura being more of a disco and Ibiza girl. He found he was imagining sex again. This time on a beach, rolling surf crashing round them, Laura's incredible body wound round his own, which had somehow acquired rather more muscle and tone than it had boasted that morning.

Back at the Dorchester, his shirt was sticking to his back under the linen of his jacket. The main course had been delivered, almost without him noticing. He looked down at the plate, the tiny square of lamb glistening pinkly as it lay back on its green bed of wilted spinach, trailing its sinewy fingers lazily in the little stream of gravy which flowed past. A little hedgerow of what had been described as 'foraged vegetables' framed the scene. It was positively pastoral.

"So Laura," he said bravely. "What is it exactly, that *you* do these days? You look very, well...*well*."

If it had been possible to kick himself under the table he would have done it. Laura was laughing.

Oh, that laugh. Beautiful, and very slightly, even now, mocking. How was a man to differentiate between the two? Was it worth enduring the mockery to hear it? Having heard it again, could he imagine life without it?

"Do? well I don't really *do* anything. I don't really need to. I'm *desperately* idle. Although I suppose what I *actually* do, is arrange things."

"Arrange things? Flowers? Antiques?"

"People."

"People?"

"I arrange people. You think people meet each other, do business deals, fall in love, run countries, by accident? Of course they don't. They need to be advised, moved around, *introduced*."

"The right place at the right time, sort of thing?"

"Exactly. You see, I *knew* you were clever. You understand me perfectly." Laura sighed sadly. "So few people truly get me, you know Atticus? Oh I'm successful, rich, popular, of course I am. But sometimes, I just wish I was, oh well, you don't want to hear all that do you?"

I do, I do, I do, I do, I *do!* sang Atticus in his heart. What he actually said was,

"So do you, are you... you must ...have, well, someone? A husband perhaps?"

"A husband?" exclaimed Laura as if Atticus had suggested she had a rat in her handbag, "Good Lord no. I did have a husband once, and don't get me wrong, he was *very* good to me." She fingered the pear shaped pink diamond she was wearing on a fine chain round her neck, "But in the end, I just thought, Laura, you are too young and too full of life to be kept in a cage, even a golden one. You understand?"

"Oh of course," said Atticus, swiftly replacing the Laura of the village church and the wedding dress in his dream with a vision of the two of them speeding across a Mediterranean bay in a fast boat, hair flying behind, joy and freedom on their faces, love in their hearts, and the sun in their eyes.

"You," said Laura, breaking into his daydream, "Is there a little wife in your life?"

Atticus suddenly thought of Flora, cheerful, unspoilt, pretty like a rose in a country garden. He felt suddenly guilty, but Flora just wouldn't go into that imaginary speedboat, no matter how hard he tried to put her there.

"No. No-one." he said.

"Ah," said Laura, touching his arm again and sending an electric shock into the back of his head. "Do you know, I suspect you're not telling me the whole truth? But I shall let you get away with it, my lovely Lord Byron, because you are wicked and wonderful, and I suggest you have broken a whole string of hearts."

Atticus wondered for a moment when Laura had developed this poetic streak, and in fact, now he came to think of it, where she had got any idea of who Byron was. As far as he remembered, she had spent most English lessons either playing truant in the bus shelters at the bottom of the town, or, if forced to attend, drawing Vince Peacock's name and assorted intertwined love hearts, on pencilcases, desks and herself, with coloured felt pens.

Another waiter hovered delicately, waiting for a break in Laura's flow of floral language to clear the plates away. He looked up and with a shock realised he was staring into the face of one of the crew from the Bloomsbury Hilton, circa 1995. Geoff. Jim, Jules, something like that. Geoff-Jim- Jules winked as he leant forward to place the huge dessert menus in front of them. "*Pudding* sir," he said menacingly, into Atticus's ear.

Laura made a small excusing gesture and got up. "Don't go away Darling, I'll be right back," she said, and left the table. As she crossed the room, it was as though she was drawing a long thread behind her, on which were hooked the hopes and dreams of every man in the room. Atticus could still smell her perfume, as the lights went out in his heart.

What did she want? Why had she asked him here, after all this time? He so wanted to believe she really wanted him, that she had, as she assured him, really missed him. He tried to tell himself, he was a grown up now, someone with his own life, plenty to offer. But however he tried, he couldn't really believe it. Laura Hutchinson had always been out of his league. Now with her diamonds and her Mulberry handbag and her Dorchester, she was surely out of his reach.

But then again, he was the one sitting in the striped dining chair with the huge fabric bow on it, the one with the remaining half glass of an extremely good 1996 *Les Charmes* Merseault in front of him, and Geoff or Jim or whatever his name was, was the one now carrying a small dog out of the restaurant ahead of an imperious matron with a walking frame.

Atticus Drake was the man with the staggeringly beautiful girl at his table.

There was an audible gasp and he realised Laura was on her way back. He thought at one point there might actually be a round of applause. She sank elegantly into her chair, and leant across to him. "Did you miss me?" she whispered.

"Like the devil," he said.

She laughed, which was not the reaction he had been hoping for. "You *are* sweet," she said, which was even worse. God, this was almost more torture than the school stuff had been.

"Souffle," she said vaguely over her shoulder and in an instant the menus had disappeared again, and a flurry of spoons and plates and new napkins ensued. Atticus, who had been wondering whether to go for the melee of summer fruits or the frozen mocha parfait and weighing up which one was likely to be bigger, fought a small wave of disappointment.

"So Atticus," said Laura taking his head in her hands and turning his face so he was looking deep into her pale blue eyes. "I have just had a wonderful idea."

Was it too much to hope she had seen the coat cupboard too?

"Now that I have found you again, I don't intend to let you go."

"Fine by me," said a small slightly whiny voice from somewhere inside Atticus.

"And it just so happens....."

Geoff-Jim-Jules chose that precise moment to make his point. Forcibly separating them, he leant in between them, and placed a large fluffy, apricot-scented cloud of sugar on the table.

"Souffle," he said, menacingly, "Don't leave it a moment longer, it's perfect."

It had been. Almost. But now there was the souffle to contend with. And although it was utterly delicious, quite incredibly light and yet full of fruit, and even though sharing it meant their spoons were constantly touching, Atticus felt as though he could kill.

And although he waited, dropping gentle hints, until the last airy teaspoonful had disappeared into that perfect mouth, and the dish was cleared, and replaced by tiny expresso coffees in bone

china thimbles, accompanied by exquisite chocolates and striped candy, and brandy balloons in which a scarce millimetre of cognac shifted thickly and threatened him with an afternoon headache, Laura didn't mention her marvellous idea again.

They had stretched out the coffee and brandy as far as it would go. Around them the room had emptied, the waiting staff now faded into the

background, merging into the regency striped wallpaper, yet Atticus still felt watched. And exhausted. What had been the point? His world had been turned upside down, he had been reminded of things it had taken two decades for him to forget, and for what?

Laura was looking at him fondly. "Penny for them," she said.

Panicking, Atticus tried to think of something witty and interesting to say. Failing that, something which might remind her that she was about to suggest taking him upstairs to a fabulous suite and making love to him until the sun went down.

"Vince," he said without realising it. "What happened to Vince?"

"Vince?" said Laura, "Vince who?"

Atticus could hear a small but distinctive buzzing sound. Looking down at the small upholstered stool between them which had been provided for Laura's handbag, he realised it was moving.

"Sorry Darling," she said, "It's on silent, but you know how it is."

Reaching a long hand into the silky depths of the buttersoft Mulberry Classic, she pulled out a small white mobile phone. She look surreptitiously round with a wicked grin, and for a moment, Atticus saw the Laura Hutchinson of St Joseph's, the truant with the cigarettes in her bumbag, and the lipstick concealed in her bra. She looked intently at the screen for a moment, frowned and then laughed. Then she replaced the phone in her handbag. Then she said the words he realised he had been dreading since she arrived at the table, which seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Darling, I must go. Business to see to, you understand."

"People to arrange?" said Atticus, slightly peevishly. He knew he was in danger of behaving like a spoilt child. After all he had just had what was probably the most expensive lunch of his life, with the most beautiful woman in the world. Had he imagined that it was going to last for ever? That they would grow old together, flirting and imagining wild sex in exotic locations until they were both in their nineties (Laura no doubt still insisting she wasn't a day over fifty)?

"Indeed," said Laura, getting up. Immediately several waiters reappeared from the misty corners of the room to assist. None of them made any attempt to help Atticus, who struggled out from behind the table and tried

to smooth the creases out of his jacket before anybody noticed it looked as though he had slept in it.

The made their way out of the restaurant, and were halfway down the long carpeted hall before Atticus realised nobody had presented, or paid the bill. The staff were ritually nodding their heads respectfully, brandishing pashminas and offering umbrellas, leaping to open doors ahead of Laura, as Atticus trailed scruffily in her wake.

As they reached the steps and the noise and the dirt of Park Lane came towards them, Laura turned to Atticus and put a hand on his arm.

"Here's my idea," she said at last. "There's a party. It's tomorrow night. Not far, just round the corner from here. Some friends of mine. You must come. You will come, won't you? *Please?*"

She thrust a small white card in his hand, which he failed to register, as he looked into her lovely face, with its clear, pleading blue eyes. She sounded as though she really wanted him to be at that party.

"I should be delighted," he said.

Then Laura Hutchinson, goddess of the sixth form, leant slightly forward and kissed him. Absolutely and thoroughly, on the mouth. Coming up for air, Atticus could no longer see Park Lane nor feel the dust in the air. The Dorchester had disappeared, and all he was left with was a heavenly cloud of excitement, and lust, and pink linen, and glossy blonde hair, and the promise of a future.

There was a noise behind him and he turned to see the doorman, handing him his own, tatty telescopic umbrella, which had come apart from its cover and looked like a handful of dead crow.

Turning back, Laura had gone.

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