

## *Call Me*

Pettigrew rarely deviated from a Friday night routine that included enjoying Sinatra songs while he dressed. He'd insert gold and black cufflinks through French cuffs and wrap his prize Baume & Mercier watch around his wrist, then wind a red silk tie into a perfect knot. With the press of a button on the closet wall, dozens of tailor-made suits would glide past for careful inspection. Tonight, when he pushed the button again, the parade stopped on a sharp navy-blue pinstripe. A black cashmere overcoat completed the ensemble. He flicked a small patch of white fuzz from his shoulder and scanned the room. The cat was nowhere in sight.

He spun the dial of a bedroom wall safe and retrieved a fistful of hundred-dollar bills, clamping them together inside a stylish silver money clip before stuffing them inside the left pocket of his jacket. The heels of his black wingtips clicked smartly on the polished wooden floor as he walked to his living room, stopped before a floor-to-ceiling window, and gazed out at snow-packed New York streets.

Pettigrew's weekends in the Sutton Place apartment had started the same way for as long as he could remember, giving him enough Friday night memories to fill the book he dreamed of writing. One such memory popped up into his head now. It was the time he escorted an aging British actress through a night on the town only to watch her collapse in a drunken heap at the foot of his bed. Her fans would have been appalled.

Inspecting his appearance one last time as he moved past the mirrors along the wall leading to the front door, he hopped into a waiting elevator and descended to the street.

“Evening, Mr. Pettigrew,” the apartment’s doorman said. Pettigrew responded with a perfunctory nod.

He surveyed the piles of snow on the sidewalk and adjusted his scarf against a gusting wind then ducked inside a waiting limousine and patted the driver on the shoulder. “Hector, my man, how’s it going tonight?”

“Splendid, Mr. Pettigrew, where’re we headed?”

Pettigrew nestled deep into the cushioned leather seat. “Charity ball at the Rainbow Room. How about a little music on the way?”

He never tired of riding through the city that had been his home for most of his adult life. He loved the synergy of the street, where skateboarders and bike taxis weaved adroitly between a glut of cars and busses. The diverse attire of the pedestrians on the crowded sidewalks was once again on display—from the glut of American pedestrians in jeans and sweatshirts to the hijabs of Muslim women, the kippahs of Jewish men, the rags of the homeless, and the formal attire of the well-to-do. Everyone seemed oblivious to those close by. Many non-residents viewed New York as cold and uncaring, but to Pettigrew New York was more alive than any city he had ever visited. There was collective heat here.

They arrived at the restaurant and the familiar face of the doorman greeted him. That was another thing he loved about New York—people kept their jobs long enough to build relationships. You knew them and they knew you.

He checked his coat and shook hands with Luigi, the restaurant's long-serving maître d'. "Is Serio here?" Pettigrew asked.

Luigi shrugged. "Mr. Marconi hasn't made it in yet, but I know he'll want to say hello when he arrives."

Pettigrew moved to the Gallery Bar and asked the bartender for a glass of the same sweet champagne he always ordered. As he sipped the drink, he listened to the sound of orchestra music coming through the open doors of the hall. He recognized the song—*Midnight, the Stars and You*. He'd danced to it a million times, twirling on dance floors all over the world.

He entered the circular shaped dining room a half-hour later and took a seat at his favorite table. It was then that his eyes came to rest on an elegant blonde beauty on the other side of the dance floor. She looked twenty-five, give or take a year or two. Her smile at a man across the table from her revived a memory of another night many years before in a bar on the other side of the world, where Pettigrew had connected with a beauty just like this one.

. . .

He had enjoyed two days of bullfights in Madrid's Puerta del Sol before heading to a fiesta in Seville. Once there he took in the city's colorful pageantry, drank Rebujitos, and practiced his Spanish.

On one warm early-summer evening, he made his way to the Café Suizo, stood in the cool bar, and studied a stunning sunset through the room's open windows. The sun itself was a presence in the room. A quartet of guitarists performed on the café's small stage.

Pettigrew's cream-colored suit, soft brown loafers, and open-collared powder blue shirt gave him a look of relaxed detachment. His arms and face were sun-darkened from the tennis he'd played, and the trademark Baume & Mercier watch—his lucky charm—glistened against his tanned wrist.

Then a middle-aged beauty practically glided through the room. She was on the arm of an older man who wore his gray hair tightly curled. She moved with authority and purpose, her bronze skin revealing itself through a strapless gold dress. Reaching her table, she stopped and waited for her chair to be pulled out—expecting it yet showing no sign of appreciation. Pettigrew spotted a silver wedding band on her left hand.

He finished his drink and found an open table beside the couple. He sat down and crossed one leg over the other, made eye contact with the beauty, and refused to release her, his stare demonstrating both interest and intent. He leaned back and feasted on her every move: the fascinating way she held her cigarette, the way she placed it in the center of her lips, and how she caressed it as if she were making love to the thin white cylinder.

She turned toward him. "Is there something you want?" she said in a delectably soft and low Spanish voice. Her look of bewilderment amused him.

"I'm just admiring you," he said and moved closer, the legs of his chair scraping loudly against the floor.

She glanced toward her husband, then turned back to Pettigrew, holding him in a fierce gaze. The color grew high in her cheeks. "Senior, you are making me uncomfortable." She said it as if issuing a warning.

Pettigrew stood and bowed. “My apologies,” he said with a smile. Then he stepped away...but only as far as the bar, where he ordered another glass of champagne. And all the while he could feel her eyes on him.

He stayed there for the remainder of the evening, his eyes alternating between the beautiful Señora and a painting of a bullfighter on the wall behind the bar. He was fascinated by the expression on the matador’s face and the intimidating power of the bull. He imagined the sensations of the animal. Was it anticipating its demise? He looked back at the woman and wondered what sensations *she* was experiencing.

Later, he saw the couple at the door of the café engaged in an obvious argument. A flurry of heated words flew between them, and eventually the husband threw his hands up disgustedly and left. After watching him go, the woman turned her stare on Pettigrew. Showing her his back, he rested his elbows on the bar and stroked the stem of his glass. Then he felt her beside him, and when he heard her order a mint brandy, he turned back around. An unlit cigarette dangled from her lips.

“I expected you to work a little harder,” she said, her voice husky. “I prefer a persistent man.”

Pettigrew pulled a lighter from his pocket, lit her cigarette, and watched her blow a stream of smoke over his head. He placed his drink on the bar. “Persistence is the product of desperation,” he said. “Do I look desperate?”

When she smiled and let out a seductive chuckle, he knew he had her...and had her on his terms—terms that were expensive. But she paid. His women always paid. And when he boarded a plane on a rain-soaked afternoon, after providing her with a two-week fantasy, he had pocketed more money than most men acquire in an entire year of hard

labor. He wasn't surprised; he had come to expect such things. There were many women in the world from which to choose. Pettigrew's targets were rarely young, and most were not as beautiful as the woman in the Spanish bar, but they all had one thing in common—they had the means to support his lavish lifestyle.

. . .

The Seville memory faded and for the next ninety minutes, Pettigrew enjoyed watching the gorgeous blonde and her escort dance to the music of the orchestra, songs from Pettigrew's past—*Masquerade*, *The Very Thought of You*, *I Love You Truly*, and others. He ate his own meal slowly, savoring each bite in the same way he relished each glass of champagne. After he finished his last course, he ordered an after-dinner drink and sipped it as he watched the woman and her escort return to their table. She turned and looked across the dance floor at him, holding his stare until he smiled and turned away. There was little need to hurry.

. . .

When Pettigrew was much younger, he had a look of innocence—at least that's what one woman told him. Another said he seemed like a mystery that needed solving. His tall, naturally athletic build, open face, and olive skin had served to start many conversations. Women loved to brush the light brown hair on his forehead away from his eyes in a show of intimacy.

Young women had never held much attraction for him. He found their immaturity and shallowness off-putting. That's not to say he never dated anyone his age; he had brief flings early in his college years. But a near miss with a young girl that became

pregnant—he coaxed her into an abortion—convinced him that the risks associated with someone so young and penniless weren't worth the effort.

But older women—now they were another matter altogether. He'd learned much from them, and, more importantly, they had shown him the possibilities of living the life of a kept man. Most were willing—no, they were *anxious*—to pay for dinners and drinks, and the more they paid the more committed they became. Perhaps, he reasoned, it gave them a sense of ownership. Maybe it was their natural caring instincts; he couldn't be sure. All he knew was that there were plenty of women willing to pay for the opportunity to have him at their side. As a college freshman, he had affairs with members of the faculty. Before long he was covering his school costs through the open pocketbooks and credit cards of lonely female professors.

He had mastered the piano to the extent that he could sit coolly at a keyboard and play popular hits and Broadway songs. The graceful manner by which he ran his hands nonchalantly over a keyboard gave him a seductive aura. All that, along with his air of quiet confidence, made him the perfect date for women of a certain age.

Officially, he was pursuing a career as an investment counselor, but the only actual investments he managed were his own and those of the women who put their wealth in his hands. Within a few years, he had met some of the richest women in the world—all had been arranged by nothing more than word of mouth—and lived comfortably off their millions. It was almost a rule: the older the woman, the more generous the woman. Some were attractive. Some were not. Some were bored wives. Most had experienced marriage more than once. Whatever their story, it was their wealth that motivated him.

Friday nights became showtime. It was then that he would visit one of his favorite New York restaurants, scope out the possibilities, and decide on a target. Some nights were shut outs, of course, but such nights were few and far between.

. . .

Serio Marconi, the Rainbow Room's general manager, withdrew a chair from the opposite side of Pettigrew's table and sat down. He was heavysset with flowing gray hair. "Everything to your liking?" he asked. He held a glass of champagne and flashed a warm smile.

Pettigrew nodded his approval. "Perfect." He looked past Serio toward the blonde sitting nearby.

Serio turned to examine the woman. Then his smile widened, and he turned back. "You have good taste, my friend." He leaned an elbow on the table. "Tell me something, what motivates you more—the sex or the money?"

Pettigrew pursed his lips. "If forced to choose—well, I guess it would be the money. Women come and go, but money comes and stays." He tipped his head to the side. "Does that disappoint you, Serio? Do you want to think of me as a romantic?"

Serio laughed. "I'm a businessman, Mr. Pettigrew. What I value most is good business sense." He stood. "And now I must get back to *my* business." He looked again at the woman and sighed. "Your profession is so much more appealing."

This talk of business and beautiful women made Pettigrew think of Milena Ivanovna. She had been seventy-two when they first met, Pettigrew thirty-three. It was Milena who had moved him into the major leagues of the escort world. She supported him in style for three years until she died suddenly of an aneurism...and then she kept on

giving. Three days after her funeral he received a phone call from her attorney, summoning him to Atlanta. Milena had left him something, the attorney said, and it would be in Pettigrew's interest to make the trip. The attorney didn't have to ask twice. Pettigrew flew to Georgia the next day.

The trip was a life-changer. He learned that he was now wealthier than he could have ever imagined. Milena, the attorney explained, was rich. That came as no surprise, but what the attorney said next came as a shock. She had no family with which to share her wealth. As Pettigrew sat in stunned silence, the attorney read Milena's will. The woman Pettigrew had known only briefly referred to him as the "love of her life" and left him the staggering sum of fifty-six million dollars, along with her home in La Jolla and a beautiful apartment in New York City. She had only one requirement, that Pettigrew allow her cat, Trotsky, to live with him. The slinky white feline would be the first in a succession of white cats, all sharing the same name.

Pettigrew assumed the role of rich New York playboy with ease. He joined exclusive clubs, spent lavishly on food and clothing, and became known as a leading philanthropist. He even discarded his chosen vocation for a brief spell, until boredom set in, and he revived the Friday-night dates. He had told Serio a little white lie. Making money was no longer the objective. Now he craved the feeling of romance on a Friday evening. The years passed and he filled his Friday nights with new conquests. But as he grew older, the stream of women slowed, then stopped. He wasn't ready for retirement, but his body told him it was time.

. . .

Pettigrew ordered another drink, then leaned back in his chair and locked his eyes on his target. He watched her say something to her date, who seemed taken aback by her words. Red faced, he stormed between the tables and out the door of the restaurant. Pettigrew watched him leave, then swiveled back toward the woman who was now walking his way. She pulled out the chair on the opposite side of his table and sat down.

“You know,” she said with a laugh, “I get the impression that you’ve been stalking me the entire night.” She looked at his empty glass and nodded toward a waiter who approached the table. “Another drink?”

He shook his head. “I’ve had enough for one night.” He cocked his head toward the waiter. “She’ll take the tab,” he said, his voice flat. The waiter smiled as if the order was expected and placed the bill in front of the woman. She paid with cash, leaving a sizeable tip.

Pettigrew examined his polished and perfectly manicured nails. “And now?” he said.

Her lips parted in a teasing smile. “How about a nightcap back at your place?”

He remained silent, waiting for something more while she fidgeted with a button on her sleeve. “How much would that cost me?” she asked.

Pettigrew shrugged. “Depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“On how much you think I’m worth.”

She made a show of looking him over while he sat back and folded his hands in his lap. “I’d say you’re probably worth at least a thousand for the night,” she said with a wider smile.

He turned and stared over the top of the dancing heads beside them.

“I said *at least* one thousand,” she added quickly. “Why don’t we say two?”

Pettigrew gave a brief nod and watched her retrieve more cash from her purse.

She counted out twenty bills, and leaning across the table, placed the money on the tablecloth in front of him.

“By the way,” she said, “my name’s Sandra.”

“Okay, Sandra, why don’t we take a ride in my limo?”

...

“Where to, boss?” Hector said, staring at the couple’s reflection in his rearview mirror.

“The apartment,” said Pettigrew. “It’s been a long night.” He closed his eyes and got lost in the rhythm of the wipers clearing new snow from the wet windshield. He felt Sandra’s head on his shoulder and listened to her soft breathing. There had been a million nights like this when he had felt the softness of a woman’s hands and sniffed her perfume as she snuggled close.

He felt a jolt as the limo pulled to the curb in front of his apartment. Putting his fingers under Sandra’s chin, he tilted her head up. “Hey, pretty lady, this is where I get off.”

She looked up. “I’m sorry. I can’t believe I fell asleep.”

He smiled and stroked the side of her face, her skin like that of a baby, so young and wrinkle free.

“Did I do okay?” she asked.

“You were perfect.” He pulled his billfold from a pocket and returned the cash she had given him in the restaurant—the cash he had handed her earlier that day when she dropped by his apartment. “You couldn’t have done better.”

“Would it be okay if I called you sometime?” she asked in a delicious voice.

He kissed her lightly on the forehead, then on her lips. “Of course,” he said. “Call me. Call me anytime.”

. . .

The snowfall was thicker now as he stood on the sidewalk outside the limo and watched Hector steer the limo away. He felt a sinking sensation. Ducking his head, he walked slowly through the doors of his apartment complex.

Trotsky appeared like a ghost the minute he closed the apartment door. He picked the cat up and slid his hand softly across its smooth back and tail. Then he walked to the bedroom, tossed the white ball of fur gently onto his bed, and moved to his closet, where he reversed the early evening routine, placing his coat and suit on their proper hangers, putting away his tie, and storing the shiny cufflinks. Pulling on a soft white robe, he entered the bathroom.

The steaming hot shower running over his head and down his back was invigorating, and as he relaxed under the soothing water, more memories of previous evenings raced through his mind. There had been countless nights when he performed without sleep and countless mornings after, when he fixed a bountiful breakfast while his latest conquest slept late. Nowadays his nights ended early. And they ended alone.

Turning off the shower, he wiped his body dry, then moved in front of a mirror. He dropped the towel and stood erect, his arms falling to his sides. The wear and tear of

his chosen career had taken a toll on a once beautiful body. Where muscles had once rippled through bronze skin, they now sagged and clung to fragile bones. He inhaled deeply, letting his chest expand, then stepped toward the mirror and closely examined his face. “Skin as pretty as a girl’s,” a date had once told him. That was then. This was now.

He patted the top of his head, where the thick hair was mostly gone, and for a moment he felt a sense of loss...but only for an instant. His body had served him well, so he would not disparage it now. Not after all this time. Besides, the years had provided wisdom. He understood women as few other men did.

He was three weeks shy of qualifying for Social Security, but a light sigh was his only concession to any sense of regret. There would be no lamenting his age. If he closed his eyes and used his imagination, he could still see himself as a much younger heartthrob.

Entering his bedroom, he saw that Trotsky had moved to the pillow on his side of the bed. Pettigrew crawled between soft, designer sheets and stroked the animal for a few seconds before turning out the lamp. Then he lay on his back and stared at the dark ceiling, replaying the evening in his mind. Trotsky purred softly beside him while a brisk wind pounded the windows of the room. Getting old was a bitch, but there was still much to look forward to. He had plenty of memories to fall back on. And he had the money.