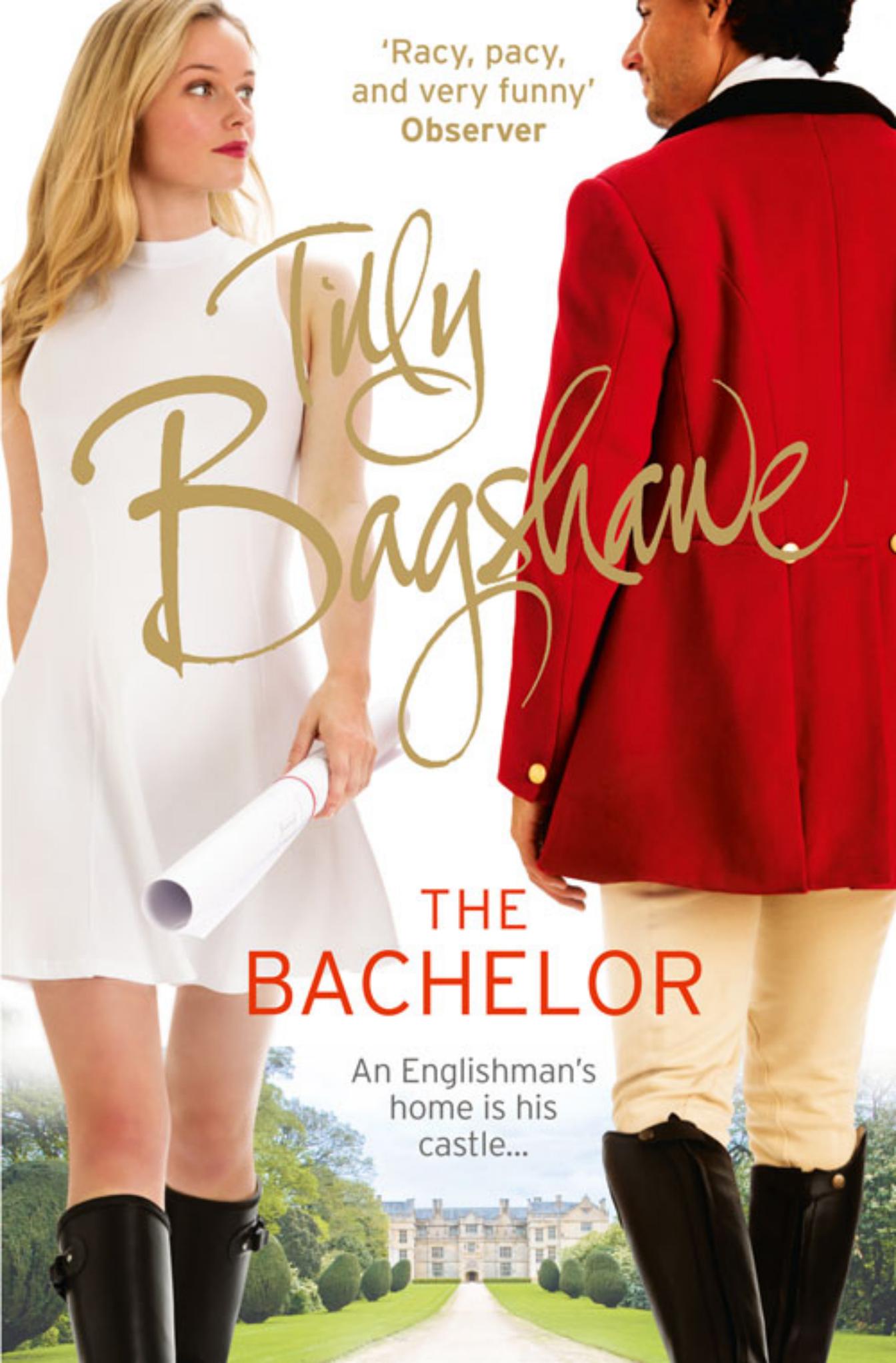


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and very funny'  
Observer

Tilly  
Bagshawe

THE  
BACHELOR

An Englishman's  
home is his  
castle...



Tilly  
Bagshawe

THE  
BACHELOR

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HarperCollinsPublishers  
The News Building  
1 London Bridge Street  
London SE1 9GF

[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

A paperback original 2016

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A catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-813281-1

Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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## PROLOGUE

Henry Saxton Brae was admiring his business partner's considerable assets.

'Harder!' she commanded. 'I'm almost there!'

Her eyes were closed and her breathing ragged. Her pretty, elfin face was twisted into an expression of intense concentration as she willed herself to orgasm.

Henry felt a moment's deep loathing, first for George and then for himself. Then he closed his own eyes and erupted inside her, his fingers digging painfully into the small of her back as they both came.

'Naughty,' Georgina chided him, turning to rub the bruises already forming above her buttocks as she dismounted, with an insufferably smug look on her face. Every time they did this, George had 'won' and Henry had 'lost'. She delighted in the power she had over him; her ability to goad him into sex, even though she knew deep down he despised her.

'Robert's bound to notice. What am I going to tell him?'

'I'm sure you'll think of something,' Henry muttered

bitterly, pulling up his jeans. 'Lying's never exactly been a problem for you.'

'Or you, darling,' George shot back.

They were lying on the floor of Gigtix.com's London offices, the internet box-office company that Henry Saxton Brae and Georgina Savile had founded together three years ago. It had made both of them fabulously wealthy, but it had also bound them together in what was becoming an increasingly toxic relationship. George's recently acquired husband Robert, a barrister of quite earth-shattering banality, was far too unimaginative ever to suspect anything might be going on behind his back. But Eva, Henry's girlfriend, was beginning to get suspicious.

*Not girlfriend*, Henry reminded himself guiltily. *Fiancée*.

Why had he given in to George again? Why? What compulsion kept driving him to cheat on the woman he loved, and who was a thousand times more beautiful than malicious, manipulative, spiteful George Savile, or any of his other meaningless flings?

'I'm serious,' George pouted, examining her bruises more closely. 'How would you like it if I sent you back to Ikea with scratches all over your back?'

'Don't call her that,' Henry snapped. 'Ikea' was Georgina's nickname for Eva, because she was Swedish and, in George's mind, disposable. Looking at his Patek Philippe watch, Henry felt his anxiety levels rise still further. 'I have to go. I'm going to be late.'

'For what? Your curfew?' Georgina taunted, slipping a ridiculously tight pink T-shirt over her nude push-up bra.

'For the village fete,' said Henry, grabbing his car keys from the desk. 'I'm supposed to be giving out prizes.'

George threw her slender neck back and laughed loudly.

'I'd forgotten you're playing the country gentleman now. How priceless!'

'I'm not playing,' said Henry.

Henry had bought Hanborough Castle, the Swell Valley's most idyllically romantic estate, six months ago, and now lived there full time with his bride-to-be. The whole thing was ridiculous. Taking Henry Saxton Brae out of London was like taking a killer whale out of the ocean. Henry was a predator, not a pet.

'Run along then,' George taunted. 'The lord of the manor mustn't be late for the fete.'

Henry stormed out, slamming the office door behind him.

Only once she was alone did George's triumphant smile fade and the familiar melancholy, deflated feeling take hold. Henry would come to his senses one day. George felt sure of it. But it was hard waiting sometimes.

She'd hoped her wedding to Robert would be the wake-up call Henry needed. But he'd seemed not to care at all. George was pretty sure he was faking his indifference. But it was still hard. Henry's engagement to the awful, vacuous, goody two-shoes Eva Gunnarson had been even harder. George had grown used to him screwing around. He was one of England's most eligible bachelors, after all. Rampant promiscuity went with the territory, and George knew that the one-night stands meant nothing to him. But Henry's new-found devotion to that Swedish bitch was different. That had changed everything.

Eva wouldn't win, though. Not in the long run. Henry would soon tire of country life, and of her. And when he did, Georgina Savile would be there to claim her prize.

*He still needs me,* George thought, caressing the bruises on her back again, but lovingly this time. *I'm his drug. We're each other's drug.*

## CHAPTER ONE

'I can't believe how many people turned up. In this weather! It's like a bloody monsoon.'

Max Bingley huddled under an oversized umbrella with Angela Cranley, surveying the rain-soaked quagmire that was this year's Fittlescombe Fete. Swell Valley's prettiest village always held its annual fete in the lower field at Furlings. The Georgian gem of a house had once been the family seat of the Flint-Hamiltons, but was now the home of Angela and Max, Fittlescombe's happiest unmarried couple, who were delighted to carry on the tradition.

'I know,' said Angela. 'How much of the turnout do you think is down to the lovely Ms Gunnarson?'

They both turned to look at this year's cake-baking marquee, already full to bursting and with a loud and rowdy queue huddled and dripping outside.

Max grinned. 'Somewhere in the ninety per cent range I'd say. We should rope in a supermodel to judge the cakes every year.'

Eva Gunnarson, the latest face (and body) of La Perla

lingerie and a regular on the pages of *Maxim* and *Sports Illustrated*, was the supermodel in question, recently engaged to the Honourable Henry Saxton Brae. A former Under-21s England tennis champion, Henry was considered almost as much of a pin-up as his girlfriend. He was as tall, dark and handsome as Eva was blonde, willowy and generally physically perfect. The combination of his good looks, charm, immense wealth and old, aristocratic family name saw Henry regularly named in *Tatler* as one of England's most eligible bachelors, and for the last five years he'd been renowned as a playboy on the London social scene.

But all that had changed since the couple's engagement, and with both of them moving to Hanborough and taking up country life. They had thrilled the entire Swell Valley this year by announcing their intention to restore Hanborough Castle as both a family home and working estate. Eva had made an effort to get involved in the village between her hectic international modelling jobs. But Henry Saxton Brae himself had been maddeningly elusive, and today seemed to be no exception.

Inside the marquee, temperatures were rising, not just because of the heaving mass of bodies straining to catch a glimpse of Eva Gunnarson looking effortlessly gorgeous in a pair of skinny jeans and a tank top.

'The cakes are going to get damaged. You must keep people *back*, Vicar. My spun-sugar daisies are extremely delicate. Icing like that doesn't make itself, you know.' One of the ladies from the WI was haranguing the vicar.

'No, of course not.' The Reverend Bill Clempson mopped his brow uncomfortably. Picking up a loudhailer he shouted ineffectually into the throng, 'If I could ask everybody to step back from the display itself . . .'

‘Would you like me to help, Vicar?’

Gabe Baxter, another local celebrity and Bill Clempson’s one-time arch nemesis in the village, pushed his way to the front of the crowd around the cake stall. Relations between Bill and Gabe had improved since Bill had married his wife Jenny, who used to work as a vet up at the Baxters’ farm and had always got along well with both Gabe and Laura, his wife. But the vicar still didn’t completely trust Fittlescombe’s most lusted-after farmer.

‘I think we’ve got things under control.’

Ignoring him, Gabe grabbed the loudhailer, handing the vicar his sticky plastic pint of warm beer.

‘Move *back*, please. Everyone move *right back* from the tables.’

Then he walked forwards with his arms outstretched. The crowds, who’d ignored Bill, immediately retreated a good five feet. It was like watching a slightly pissed Moses part the waves in the Red Sea.

‘Thank you! That was marvellous.’

Gabe looked up to see Eva Gunnarson standing before him.

‘I’m Eva.’

‘Gabe.’ With an effort he pulled himself together enough to shake her hand. Gabe was besotted with his wife, Laura, but Eva was disarmingly gorgeous, and he had had three beers. She had a lovely, natural face up close, Gabe noticed, the kind that looked more beautiful without much make-up. *Wholesome*. With her long tousled hair pushed back from her face in tumbling, golden waves, the future Mrs Saxton Brae looked younger than she did in her magazine pictures.

‘So is your fella going to put in an appearance today? You do realize half the women in this village are besotted

with him. I'm including my wife in that.' He didn't mention that Laura had also said of Eva, 'She's so gorgeous that you want to hate her but you can't. Which almost makes you want to hate her *more*.'

'I can't blame people for fancying Henry,' she said good-naturedly. 'He's gorgeous. And yes, I *hope* he's coming today.' She looked at her watch anxiously. 'Timekeeping's not his strongest suit. But he did promise me.'

'Don't waste your time talking to this guy.' Santiago de la Cruz – Sussex cricketing hero and a good friend of Gabe's – suddenly appeared, inserting himself between Gabe and Eva and kissing the latter on both cheeks as if they were old friends. Dark-skinned and blue-eyed, with just a hint of grey creeping in at the temples of his oil-black hair, Santiago had once been something of a player himself, in a past life, before he met and married his angelic wife Penny. 'He barely even lives here any more, you know. Spends half his time in London.'

'That is not true!' Gabe protested, although it was. Laura's TV production company had really taken off in the last two years, and they didn't spend as much time in the valley as they used to. 'I was bloody born here, unlike some Johnny-come-latelies I could mention.'

'Penny was born here,' Santiago countered.

'Penny de la Cruz? Are you her husband?' Eva smiled, delighted to have made the connection.

Santiago nodded. 'You've met?'

'Just briefly. She mentioned she's an artist and that she's got some sketches of the castle she did ages ago. She very kindly offered to frame one for us as a moving-in present.'

'That sounds like Penny.' Santiago positively glowed with pride. The de la Cruz marriage was a very happy one.

*People are so nice here*, thought Eva, watching Gabe and

Santiago cackle away at each other's jokes like two naughty schoolboys. Angela Cranley had been lovely to her earlier too, telling her funny anecdotes about Graydon James, the designer Henry had hired to work on Hanborough, and who had once built a house for Angela's ex-husband Brett.

'He used to shimmer about the house like Liberace, in trousers so tight they were more like ballet dancer's tights. In the end Brett couldn't take it any more. He asked him if he wouldn't mind covering up a bit, or words to that effect. Graydon just looked at him and said, deadly serious, "For your information, Mr Cranley, *the cluster* is being worn much further forward this year." It took a lot to shut my ex-husband up, I can tell you, but that did it.' Angela wiped away tears of mirth.

Eva already felt sure that the move to the Swell Valley was going to be the start of a new life, a much happier life, for her and Henry.

She pictured the two of them at this same village fete five years from now – married by then, of course – and perhaps even with a child running around. A gorgeous little boy, just like Henry . . .

Eva looked at her watch again.

'We'll have to start without him,' Max Bingley complained to Richard Smart, an old prep-school friend of Henry's and another new local face. Richard had recently accepted the position as Fittlescombe's new GP, and with his wife Lucy was renting Riverside Hall in Brockhurst from Sir Eddie and Lady Wellesley, who were spending the year abroad.

'I know. And I agree,' he told Max. 'Henry does have a lot of brilliant qualities, honestly. But I'm afraid punctuality's never been one of them.'

'Who do you suggest we rope in to give out the prizes?' Max asked.

Richard looked around, scanning the muddy field for inspiration.

‘What about Seb?’

Both men looked across at Henry’s elder brother Sebastian. Squat, fat and balding, with a voice so offensively upper class he sounded as if he had an entire plum tree crammed into his mouth, Seb Saxton Brae was as well meaning as he was dull.

‘He is a lord. And master of the Swell Valley Hunt,’ Richard reminded Max.

Seb and Henry’s father, Harold, had died unexpectedly last year, making Sebastian the youngest Lord Saxton in four generations. He and his wife Kate had moved into Hatchings, the family’s impressive estate (though not in Hanborough Castle’s league), the day after the funeral.

‘Oh, go on,’ said Richard. ‘Ask him. He’d love to do it.’

Max sighed. Beggars really couldn’t be choosers. And, at the end of the day, it was only the raffle prizes.

Picking his way through the mud, Max waved at Seb. ‘Lord Saxton? I wonder if I might have a word?’

## CHAPTER TWO

'I don't understand. I *want* a pool. I am damn well *having* a pool. What kind of a goddamn summer house doesn't have a goddamn swimming pool?'

Lisa Kent's over-plumped, chipmunk-cheeked face positively twitched with anger. The ex-wife of billionaire hedge fund-founder Steve Kent, Lisa was used to getting her own way. Indeed, ever since her husband traded her in for a (much) younger model, getting her own way had become something of a *raison d'être* for the former Mrs Kent. If Lisa weren't so utterly obnoxious, Flora Fitzwilliam would almost have felt sorry for her. As it was, however, Flora felt sorry for herself. Being Lisa Kent's interior designer was about as much fun as having a dentist's drill slowly inserted into a rotten tooth. The fact that Lisa was building her house on Nantucket Island off Cape Cod, Massachusetts, during the coldest, wettest May that anybody could remember, didn't help matters.

*How do people live here?* Flora wondered. *I'd kill myself.*

Luckily her prison sentence on the Cape was almost at

an end. This time next month Flora would be in England, thank God, working on the job of her dreams. She held on to that fact like a drowning man to a raft, as Lisa ranted on.

‘The thing is,’ Flora explained patiently, once she could get a word in edgeways, ‘you’re right on the cliff here. Erosion up on Baxter Road is a huge issue, as you know. Digging foundations for a pool would seriously compromise . . .’

‘I don’t *care* what it would compromise! I’m paying you to fix these problems.’

*Actually you’re paying Graydon James, my boss, Flora thought. You probably have dry-cleaning tickets worth more than my wages on this project.*

But she kept this thought to herself, sticking doggedly to the facts at hand.

She tried a blunter approach.

‘If you try to dig a pool, Lisa, your house will fall into the ocean. I’m sorry, but that’s what will happen. You knew this when you bought up here. That’s why we never drew up plans for a pool when we did the garden design.’

Lisa’s pretty green eyes narrowed. ‘Karen Bishop has a pool.’

Flora sighed.

Her wealthy client had been a theatre actress in her youth, a great beauty by all accounts. She still maintained a lithe, yoga-toned figure, and her blonde highlighted bob brought out the fine bone structure that no amount of fillers could ruin completely. But these days Lisa Kent looked expensive rather than beautiful. Well put together. *Groomed.*

*Like a dog,* Flora thought, a little unkindly.

It would help a lot if she smiled from time to time.

‘Karen Bishop lives on Lincoln Circle,’ Flora explained.

‘Exactly. Right on the cliff.’

‘It’s a different cliff, Lisa.’ Really, it was like trying to reason with a tantruming toddler. ‘Different geography. Different building codes.’

‘I don’t care! Karen always thought she was better than me, even before the divorce. I won’t have her and William lording it over me at the Westmoor Club because my stupid designers couldn’t build me a stupid swimming pool. I mean it, Flora. Fix this. Fix it!’

Lisa Kent jabbed a diamond-encrusted finger in Flora’s general direction and stormed back into her half-built house.

Flora bit her lower lip and counted to ten.

*Don’t take it personally. Do not take it personally.*

The reality was, Lisa Kent was an unhappy, embittered woman. She’d given the best years of her life to a man who’d discarded her like a used condom at the first signs of ageing, moving on with his new wife and new life without a backward glance. No house, no pool, no diamonds would ever make up for that humiliation.

Flora Fitzwilliam, on the other hand, was engaged to be married to a wonderful, kind, handsome, intelligent, rich man. Mason Parker was the best thing that had ever happened to her, period. The second best thing was her job. At only twenty-three, straight out of design school in Rhode Island, Flora had landed her dream job, *the* dream job in interior design, working for the great Graydon James in Manhattan.

Graydon James, designer of the new Gagosian Gallery in San Francisco and the stunning limestone and curved glass Centre des Arts in Paris. Graydon James, who had built New York’s ‘Nexus’, a neoclassical hotel voted ‘Most Beautiful New Building in America’ by *InStyle* magazine and

*World of Interiors*' 'Top Luxury Hotel' for three years in a row. Graydon James, whose vision could vary wildly from project to project, but always within the context of clean lines and a famously pared-down aesthetic, an alchemy that no other living designer could ever quite seem to match. From private homes to libraries, from Spanish nightclubs to Middle Eastern palaces, Graydon was a design master long before his lifestyle brand propelled him into the ranks of the super-rich and made him a household name from Dubrovnik to Dubai.

All Flora's classmates at RISD had been spitting with envy when she'd landed the job with Graydon James.

Of course, most of them envied Flora anyway. Not only was she uniquely talented as a designer, with a true artist's eye, but she was also the most lusted-after girl on campus. Which wasn't to say she was necessarily the most beautiful. At only five foot two, with her Puerto Rican mother's curvaceous figure – tiny waist, big boobs, big bum – and her English father's blond colouring, Flora was more of a Fifties pin-up than a modern-day model. Plenty of girls at RISD were taller, thinner and more classically pretty. But Flora's brand of seaside-postcard sauciness was a huge hit with all the men. One ex-boyfriend observed that Flora always looked as if she should be winking, sitting on a sailor's lap and wearing his cap at a jaunty angle (with not much else on underneath).

There were always malicious rumours flying around during her college years, that Flora had flirted with her RISD professors to achieve her top scores. But at least no one could accuse her of flirting her way to the top with the famously gay Graydon James. Only last year James had been quoted in *Vanity Fair* talking about his 'vagina allergy' and

the fact that ninety per cent of his workforce were very young, very handsome men.

When Graydon looked at Flora Fitzwilliam, all he saw was talent.

True, the pay was terrible, barely a living wage. And true, the hours were endless, and many of the clients were abusive and unreasonable, just like Lisa Kent. But Flora was working with Graydon James. *The* Graydon James, design genius and now heir apparent to Ralph Lauren's taste and lifestyle empire, thanks to an aesthetic as chic and classically understated as Graydon himself was flamboyant and loud. Many people found it bizarre that someone as flamingly gay, extravagant and attention-seeking as Graydon, with his penchant for Cavalli silk shirts, heavy eyeliner and preposterously young lovers, could produce houses and hotels and museums of such breathtaking simplicity and *class*. But Flora understood perfectly. Through his art, Graydon fulfilled a yearning that he could never satisfy in his own real life. There was a peace to Graydon's designs, however grand, a calm constancy that spoke of history and permanence and beauty and *depth*. The spaces Graydon designed were the antidote to his shallow, excessive, restless party life.

His art was his escape. Flora, of all people, could understand that.

Now, three years into the job, she had become Graydon's right-hand woman. Now Graydon James asked *her*, Flora Fitzwilliam, for advice on designs. He relied on her, entrusting her with major projects like Lisa Kent's thirty-million-dollar Siasconset beach house. And next month Flora would be starting work on probably the single most coveted job in international interior design: the restoration of the idyllic Hanborough Castle in England's famously beautiful Swell

Valley. Professionally, artistically, the Hanborough job was a dream come true.

At least it would be, just as soon as her Nantucket nightmare was over.

*I must not complain*, Flora thought, gazing out across the Siasconset bluffs at the roiling grey waters of Nantucket Sound.

She'd been here a week now, staying at a quaint little guesthouse in town, but Nantucket's famous charm seemed to have eluded her. In fact Flora found the island deeply depressing, with its grey, clapboard houses, cranberry bogs and miles of windswept beaches, not to mention the sour-faced locals, who always seemed to glare at you as you passed, as if you were engaged in some deeply personal dispute with them, but no one had bothered to tell you what it was. Everyone here seemed to be at war with everyone else. The über-rich residents of Baxter Road, like Lisa Kent, were daggers drawn with the local fishermen and year-round islanders, who resented them shipping in tons of sand, at vast expense, to try to shore up their crumbling properties. Flora couldn't imagine living in such a poisonous atmosphere of envy and loathing every day. It seemed to her as if the grey clouds gathering in the May skies were heavy not with rain, but with the islanders' petty resentments and grievances. A thunderstorm would do all of them good.

The situation with the 'Sconset bluffs would be funny if it weren't so tragic – the arrogance of rich New Yorkers believing they could hold back the mighty Atlantic Ocean. That a big enough cheque would stop global warming in its tracks and save them and their precious beach houses from inevitable disaster. Talk about the foolish man building his house upon the sand! You couldn't make this stuff up.

The site foreman turned to Flora. 'What do you want me to do? We can't start digging a pool. The town hall will shut us down in a heartbeat.'

'Of course you can't,' Flora agreed. 'I'll talk some sense into her.'

The foreman raised an eyebrow. He liked Flora. She worked hard and got on with it, not like most of the poncey designers out here. Of course, it didn't hurt that she looked like Marilyn Monroe. But she'd clearly bitten off more than she could chew with this Kent bitch.

'Good luck with that,' he said to Flora. 'And until you get her to change her mind? What should I tell my guys?'

'Tell them they can take the day off. As many days as it takes, in fact. Mrs Kent will pay for their time. She can afford it.'

## CHAPTER THREE

Snaking his way through rain-slicked country lanes, Henry smiled as he eased his foot down on the accelerator of his new Bugatti Veyron, delighting in the roar of the engine as the car surged forwards. The Veyron was the man-made equivalent of a leopard, he decided. Or perhaps a black panther was a better analogy. Dark, sleek, elegant and insanely powerful. Henry loved it.

He felt the last flutterings of guilt in his chest over his latest slip-up with Georgina. But they soon faded, like the dying wingbeats of a trapped butterfly. Guilt was a waste of time. Eva didn't know, and what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

He would do better next time.

He *did* feel bad about missing the fete, mostly because he knew Eva really cared about all that 'community spirit' bollocks. Traffic out of London had been so horrendous that not even the mighty Veyron could have got Henry to Fittlescombe on time. But Seb had already texted to say he'd filled in with the raffle prizes. So all was well that ended well.

At thirty, Henry had the world at his feet. He was successful, rich, intelligent, handsome and charming – when he wanted to be. He was engaged to be married to one of the most desirable women in the world, who also happened to be deeply kind and loyal, two qualities Henry himself had been known to lack. And then there was Hanborough, the icing on the already mouthwatering cake that was Henry Saxton Brae's life.

Despite all his success, there was still a part of Henry that felt like the younger son. Growing up, he had always known it would be Seb who would inherit the family estate in its entirety; Seb who would one day become Lord Saxton. Henry was fond of his elder brother. It was hard not to be. For all his outward pomposity, Sebastian didn't have a mean bone in his body. But on some deep, subconscious level, it was important to Henry to own a house that was better than his brother's, better than Hatchings. And not just a house. An estate. Something with land and a future, that could be left to future generations.

The problem was that this dream home had to be in the Swell Valley, the most beautiful part of England, in Henry's opinion, and the part of the country where the Saxton Braes had lived for generations. That left precious few options, and although some were on a par with Hatchings, none really outshone it in terms of grandeur.

Hanborough Castle was easily the most impressive house in the county. Moated, and of Norman origin, with extensive medieval additions, it sat atop the South Downs at the end of a mile-long drive, with incredible views that stretched from the sea to the south right across the entire Swell Valley to the north. There were oak trees in Hanborough's vast swathes of parkland that were believed to date back to the

Conquest. Unfortunately, the entire estate had been gifted to the nation in 1920. As far as anybody knew, there was no mechanism for the house ever to return to private hands.

But Henry Saxton Brae rarely took 'no' for an answer. Somehow, nobody quite knew exactly how he did it, but apparently it involved an offshore trust and a large chunk of Gigtix's shares as collateral, he had pulled strings with English Heritage and the relevant government department, and emerged as Hanborough's new owner and saviour. Budget cuts had seen the property fall into serious disrepair over the last twenty years. Henry was one of the few individuals with both the money and the inclination to bring Hanborough back to life.

The rain had finally stopped and twilight was softly falling over the Sussex countryside as Hanborough shimmered into view.

*God, it's beautiful,* Henry thought, gazing at the shadowy turrets, like something out of a fairy tale. Graydon James, the designer, was arriving next week to begin the restoration. The plan was that next summer, after a traditional church wedding at St Hilda's, Henry and Eva would host a star-studded reception up at Hanborough, to officially launch the castle as a family home, and to begin their lives as man and wife.

It would be a new start for the estate, and for Henry.

He would be responsible. Faithful. Married.

The end of his bachelor days.

And only a year to go . . .