
An Eligible Bachelor

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Guy Portias knew the hangover from hell when he felt it.

He lay as still as he could and tried to rate it on a scale of one to ten.

As he couldn't even lift his head off the pillow it had to be at least an eight. The tight band around the back of his skull confirmed a port hangover, which was bad — that could possibly mean vomiting, followed by the shakes, depending on what he'd mixed it with. He tried to remember the night before. Hazy images came back to him, in no particular order.

He remembered the wrap party, to celebrate the end of filming at Eversleigh Manor.

He remembered suckling pig and syllabub and goblets of claret being raised in endless toasts in the huge marquee.

He remembered a mock sword fight on the lawn with the leading man. And being trounced - he wasn't to know that fencing was a prerequisite at drama school. Shit - he'd better make sure the swords had been put back safely in their place over the fireplace in the hall before his mother noticed they were missing.

He remembered Richenda, radiant in a white chiffon dress with a handkerchief hem, her glossy dark curls tumbling over her shoulders, looking as enchanting as some elfin ...

Bride.

Why did that word strike a note of recognition? Why did he get a sense of discomfort and alarm? With a growing unease, he lifted his eyelids to see if he could gain a clue.

The first sign that things had got seriously out of control was the tapestry hangings round the bed. They could only mean one thing. He was in the master bedroom, in the master's bed - the bed that hadn't been slept in since his father had died in it four years ago. Guy groaned. That was sacrilege.

The second sign was the arm stretched across his chest. It was long and elegant, as slender and white as a swan's neck. His eye ran down its length to the wrist, on which was hung a pretty little diamond watch. Then he looked at the hand, his heart beating with trepidation. He had a shrewd suspicion of what he might see there, but was hoping against hope that it was the remnant of an alcohol-infused dream that was feeding his premonition.

But no. There it was, on the ring finger of her left hand. A whopping great ruby, as deep and dark a red as the port he'd been drinking, surrounded by a sprinkling of

diamonds. His grandmother's engagement ring. The one that had, until last night, been incarcerated in the Portias safe awaiting a suitable recipient.

Beside him, Richenda stirred. Their eyes met. He knew without looking that his would be shot with tiny veins. Hers, by contrast, were clear: bright whites surrounding the mesmerizing green orbs that had been partially responsible for her meteoric rise to fame. Eyes you could drown in, agreed the press, rather unimaginatively. Eyes that could drive you mad and make you lose all reason, thought Guy. Eyes the colour of absinthe, that insidious liquor that had driven so many men to the brink of insanity. And like Toulouse, Vincent and Paul before him, he'd lost the fucking plot.

Her mouth curved into a smile. The full bottom lip and the pronounced bow above combined to give her a permanent moue that promised kisses of incredible softness; kisses that Guy knew kept their promise. But that wasn't the point. You didn't propose to a girl just because she kissed like an angel.

Richenda lifted her hand and ran her finger across his cheek.

'My nearly husband,' she murmured.

Guy gulped. Now was the moment he should retract his proposal. Put it down to a surfeit of Taylor's; explain that he was prone to acts of foolhardiness and impulsiveness when he overdid it. It was practically his party piece, proposing to girls when he was drunk. He never expected them to take him seriously. But Richenda obviously had.

He knew there would be a high price to pay if he backtracked. There wasn't a woman on the planet who would take kindly to a man reneging on his demands for her hand in marriage. It was, after all, the highest insult, the ultimate rejection. He imagined there would be hysterics, recriminations, tantrums, possible physical violence. But how long could that reasonably last? If she had any pride she'd take the first available train back to London. So he would have to tolerate two hours of torture at the most.

Compared to a possible lifetime.