

From the bestselling author of *The Beach Hut*

VERONICA HENRY

An Eligible
Bachelor

Upstairs, downstairs...
it's all going on at the manor!



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Veronica Henry



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One

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. 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 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.

He cleared his throat, then felt her hand with the incriminating heirloom slide up his thigh.

'I—' he started half-heartedly.

'Sssh,' she commanded softly, a mischievous twitch playing at the corners of that beautiful mouth. Then her head

disappeared under the blankets and Guy felt his resolve slither away. He tried wildly to grasp at reason, but reason was telling him he'd have to be mad to reject her now. There wasn't a man in the country who wouldn't swap places with him. She'd been voted the country's sexiest woman by a leading lad mag, and that was without revealing any more than the most discreet peep of her décolletage. Only Guy knew the truth about her breasts, the perfect little handfuls like Marie Antoinette's 'coups de champagne'. She was the success story of the year. Darling of the small screen, the gossip columns and the paparazzi. It was rumoured that she'd just signed a seven-figure golden handcuff deal with ITV.

And that was the sticking point. When you had a fifteenth-century manor house falling down around your ears, you didn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Afterwards, Guy could never be sure quite why it was he hesitated. Was it because he was a coward, too afraid to face up to her bitter recriminations? Was it because he was mercenary, and saw in her newly acquired wealth the answer to all his problems? Or was it because he felt as if he was about to explode into a million exquisite particles of fairy dust?

As he let out a groan that was part despair, part ecstasy, he knew he had lost his chance. He had to go along with it now. At least for the time being ...

Richenda protested as he slid out from between the blankets, but he patted her reassuringly.

'I'm going to bring you tea.'

He ran down the sweeping staircase to the hall, with its magnificent panelling and huge fireplace. He noted with

relief that the swords were in their place. The production team had been told that when they left Eversleigh Manor, it should be as if they had never been there. Someone must have been sober enough last night to put them back. No one wanted to incur the wrath of his mother, the formidable Madeleine.

He slipped along the corridor past the dining room and through the swinging baize door into the warmth of the kitchen, where he filled the kettle and placed it on the Aga hotplate. All the time he was mentally assessing what damage limitation could be done without coming across as a total bastard.

He'd tell her he wasn't good enough for her. That he wasn't ready to settle down. She needed stability: a supportive husband who could stand proudly by her side at award ceremonies, who understood the pressures and the stresses and the strains of celebritydom. Not someone who hadn't watched television for five years, for God's sake!

He could hear the telephone ringing in the passage outside. There was a little booth, with a shelf and an old-fashioned phone with a thick cord connecting it to the wall, and a proper ring that echoed through the corridors in the early morning quiet. He hurried to answer it.

'Eversleigh,' he announced.

'Morning.' A syrupy voice slid like molasses down the line. 'I wanted to be the first to congratulate you. Please tell me I am.'

Guy grasped the cord and wound it round his thumb.

'I'll tell you, if you tell me who you are,' he countered, oozing the equivalent amount of treacle. He was a great believer in treating like with like. There was no point in being defensive or aggressive or curt.

‘Cindy Marks. The Bird Inside Your Telly.’

Oh God. Even Guy knew who she was, as her name had been bandied round the set with reverence by all and sundry. Television critic for the *Daily Post*, she could make or break a series by her recommendation, and had been the greatest champion of *Lady Jane Investigates*. Cindy had branded it ‘the best reason to stay glued to your television since JR was shot. Correction, since JFK was shot.’

Guy smiled disarmingly, hoping that his charm would bounce back down the line.

‘And why do I deserve your congratulations?’

Cindy responded with a throaty gurgle of delight.

‘Your engagement, of course. I expect it’s a bit early for a comment from the future Mrs Portias. I presume she’s still ensconced in the old ancestral bedchamber. Just give her a big kiss from me, and tell her I expect an exclusive for Saturday’s supplement. And I’m dying to check out the rock. She’s a very lucky girly.’

The line went dead. Slightly nonplussed, Guy hung up, just as the front door bell jangled overhead. He opened the door to the most enormous bouquet of flowers he’d ever seen, a profusion of deep red roses and ivy intertwined with tiny twinkling fairy lights wrapped in gold organza.

The card read ‘Congratulations on a fairy tale come true, from Cindy and everyone at the *Daily Post*.’

Who had blabbed?

Who indeed? There had been upwards of two hundred people at the party last night. He had been completely blotto. Discretion had been thrown to the wind. For all he knew he’d knelt down and asked Richenda for her hand in marriage in front of the entire cast, crew and associated

hangers-on. It was hardly surprising if the press had got wind of it already.

Which meant that any hopes he had of damage limitation were well and truly scuppered.

Upstairs, Richenda was mentally redecorating the master bedroom. The tapestry hangings would have to go. Too heavy and ugly for words. She shook one experimentally and gave a tiny, ladylike sneeze as years of dust flew out. French grey silk, she decided. It was light, elegant and would hang beautifully.

She stretched herself luxuriously, and admired the glint of the ruby on her hand. She examined the ring more closely, unable to keep the smile off her face. Her engagement was the climax of what had undoubtedly been her *annus mirabilis*. It had started the previous September, when she had been cast as Lady Jane for ITV's glittering new series. The first episode had gone out before they'd even finished filming the series, and had been an instant hit. No sooner had the series wrapped than the cast and crew were pulled back to make a two-hour Christmas special. Filming had finished the day before. Richenda had known that time was running out; that she had to ensnare Guy while she still had a built-in excuse to be under his roof. And at the eleventh hour, he'd proposed!

She remembered the first time she had seen him, back in March. He was stripped to the waist, hacking at a sycamore which was overhanging the glass roof of the orangery, blocking out the light. She had held her breath as he dangled precariously from a rope and sliced seemingly recklessly through the offending branches with a chainsaw. She didn't think she'd ever seen such an overt display of masculinity:

his apparent disregard for his own safety, his confidence as he slackened the hoist to lower himself down the tree. She'd presumed he was a gardener, or a tree surgeon.

Eventually, satisfied with his handiwork, he lowered himself to the ground and she was able to get a better look at him. His thick brown hair was tousled; his skin weather-beaten. She watched as he lifted a bottle of mineral water to his lips and drank thirstily, then tipped the rest of the bottle over his head to cool down. Little rivulets ran over his torso, sliding over the corded knots of his muscles.

He looked up and their eyes met. Richenda blushed, realizing she was gawping at him.

'Hot work?' she offered, her voice weak with embarrassment and longing.

'Yeah,' he nodded. 'Had to get rid of them, though. We're due some high winds next week – don't want them crashing through the roof.'

For a moment, Richenda was puzzled. She'd expected a country burr. His voice was slightly husky, the accent clipped, careless. And he had an air of confidence you didn't usually get with hired help.

He picked up a faded blue sweatshirt and wiped it over his chest to remove the residues of water and sweat. Then he shivered.

'Actually, it's chilly when you stop.' He tugged the sweatshirt on over his head. Richenda swallowed, thinking hard.

'Would you like a hot chocolate, to warm you up?' she offered. 'I was just about to get myself one.'

This was a monumental fib – she'd battled all week to resist the hot chocolate that the caterers were dishing up by the gallon. But she didn't want this vision to escape. She was intrigued.

Actors bored her rigid. They were self-obsessed, vain and insecure with only one subject of conversation – themselves. And even if they managed to achieve a perfect physique, they weren't real men. Richenda couldn't imagine any of the actors she was working with going anywhere near a chainsaw, let alone risking life and limb to climb a tree with it.

'I was about to go to the summer house and learn my lines for this afternoon.'

'Oh, right. So you're one of the actresses?' His eyes flickered over her with only a modicum of interest as he gathered up his paraphernalia.

Richenda was momentarily speechless. For the past three months she hadn't been able to walk out of the house without being recognized. She was practically a household name. The seminal photograph of her in nothing but a belted white trench coat, barefoot and sprawled on a tiger-skin rug, was hung in every garage and workshop in the country. Men drank out of mugs imprinted with her image; had her as their screensaver on their computers.

'Yes,' she replied faintly.

'Sorry, I should probably recognize you.' He gave her a fleetingly apologetic smile, accompanied by a cursory glance of appraisal. His eyes were navy blue, long-lashed, with deep lines that spoke of sunshine and laughter. 'I don't really watch the telly. Only the six o'clock news. Anyway, I've been out of the country.'

That would account for the tan, thought Richenda.

'Really? Where?'

'Cuba. I've just spent six months there. Riding and diving. Before it gets totally ruined. Have you ever been?'

'No.'

'You should. Before it's too late.'

He was gathering up his things, ready to go. Richenda knew she had to pounce quickly. She held out her hand.

‘I’m Richenda Fox.’

She tried to recollect the last time she’d actually had to tell someone her name. He took her hand in his – it was surprisingly warm and dry, not clammy as one might expect after all that exertion.

‘Guy Portias.’

‘Portias?’ She couldn’t keep the surprise out of her voice. ‘As in ...?’

She waved an all-encompassing hand at the house and grounds.

‘Yep. Couldn’t ignore the irate emails from Mother any longer. I had to come home and do my duty. We’re opening for business as soon as you lot have gone.’

‘What sort of business?’

Guy made a face.

‘Country house weekends. For people with more money than sense.’ For a moment his blue eyes looked bleak. ‘You can’t keep a place like this running without selling out.’

‘It must be awful.’

‘Yep.’

He replaced the safety guard carefully on the blade. When he looked up, his demeanour seemed more cheerful.

‘So – where’s this hot chocolate, then?’

That had been nearly six months ago. And of course, once Richenda had made up her mind that this was the man for her, there was little that Guy could do.

She slid out of bed and into the adjoining bathroom. There was just time to make herself look presentable before Guy came back with the tea. She spent two minutes with her whitening toothpaste, cleansed her face, applied a hint

of mascara and lip gloss and ran some serum through her hair. Then she flipped out her contact lenses, studiously ignoring her reflection while she applied some drops. She could never bear to see those myopic, watery pale-blue eyes staring back at her. She stuck her lenses back in hastily and double-checked the results.

Perfect. She finished with a squirt of Bulgari to her cleavage then, satisfied that she had perfected that just-got-out-of-bed-but-utterly-irresistible look, slipped back between the sheets to wait for her fiancé.

The florist's van had woken Madeleine Portias. She peered out of the window of her flat in the coach house and saw it disappearing through the gates. The little green van with its distinctive logo, 'Twig', had been a familiar sight at Eversleigh Manor over the past few months. They'd done very well out of the recent filming, as they'd supplied all the floral arrangements for *Lady Jane Investigates* which, being a lavish period piece, had been many.

In fact, the whole community had done well. The inhabitants had moaned and groaned when the streets were blocked off for filming, but the truth is the local economy had boomed. Hotels, B&Bs, pubs and restaurants had enjoyed maximum bookings all year, whether through cast and crew or curious tourists. Now it was coming to an end, though Madeleine had been assured by the producer that *Lady Jane* was certain to be recommissioned for another series.

When the location manager had come knocking at the door eighteen months ago, Madeleine had been initially horrified at the suggestion that Eversleigh Manor be used for filming. Until the fee was mentioned, and it began to

dawn on her that this would be the ideal way of financing her pet project.

After her husband's death four years before, it had soon become apparent to Madeleine that keeping Eversleigh Manor running just for herself was quite ridiculous. With Tony alive, there had been some point. But now her charming, absent-minded, genius of a husband had gone, the house felt as redundant and useless as she herself did. Its rooms echoed with emptiness. But Madeleine wasn't one to be defeated. She was determined to find some way to suppress the dreariness of grief. It was that or a bottle of paracetamol, and although sometimes she went to bed with a dread of waking up, she wasn't one for melodramatic gestures. She was a coper; a doer. She needed a challenge, a purpose, for herself and the house, something that would bring them both back to life.

Friends urged her to do bed and breakfast. People would fall over themselves to stay the night in a manor, they insisted. But for Madeleine this didn't have quite enough glamour or cachet. It smacked of drudgery, watery poached eggs and bed-changing and having to be polite to people you couldn't stand the sight of. She had in mind something with more impact; something with a bit of style. After much deliberation, she hit on the idea of country house weekends. It was the perfect compromise, allowing her to live unhindered during the week and then pull out all the stops for forty-eight hours. Guests – a maximum of twelve – would arrive on the Friday night and enjoy a simple kitchen supper. The men would spend Saturday shooting, fishing or at the races. The ladies would spend the day shopping in Cheltenham or being pampered at a local day spa. Saturday evening would be a magnificent five-course dinner in the

dining room, with fine wines and Havana cigars, and guests entering into the spirit of the occasion, with the men in black tie and the women in evening dresses. The very best of everything would be served, from Loch Fyne oysters to Prestat after-dinner chocolates. The shirring mahogany table in the dining room would be laden with gleaming silver, glittering glass, the huge five-armed candelabra dripping beeswax, Waterford rosebowls stuffed with magnificent blooms, their scent mingling with the smoke from the fireplace. Then on Sunday, the guests would be gently nursed back to reality with a late breakfast, the newspapers, a roaring fire and the offer of a place in the family pew if any of them were in need of salvation before taking their departure.

Simple but opulent. Unashamed but tasteful luxury. Live like a lord for a weekend. A taste of the life that people craved, that they'd read about in Wodehouse and Mitford and seen in *Downton Abbey*. It was an ideal fortieth birthday celebration, or anniversary, or an excuse for well-off thirty-something couples to escape their responsibilities for the weekend and totally indulge. Of course, it wouldn't come cheap, but Madeleine had a shrewd idea that she could get away with charging outrageous prices, as the sort of people she was likely to attract got a kick out of being thoroughly profligate. She knew it was new money she was going to be entertaining, and that more likely than not they wouldn't be sure which of the knives and forks they should be using, but she didn't mind exploiting the nouveaux riches, not at all.

So when the location manager sat down in the kitchen at Eversleigh and outlined exactly how much she stood to make, Madeleine grasped the opportunity with both hands. It was serendipitous. While *Lady Jane Investigates* was being filmed, the rest of the house could undergo a refurbishment

financed by the hefty location fee. The film crew only wanted to utilize the exterior and the main reception rooms – the magnificent hall and stairs, the drawing room, the dining room and, for each episode’s denouement, the library – and part of the deal was that they would decorate those to Madeleine’s order, as well as leaving the curtains and furniture specially commissioned for the drama. The existing curtains were far too dull and faded and wouldn’t show up well on television, so sumptuous, rich drapes were hung, and fat, velvet-covered sofas brought in. Meanwhile, six of the bedrooms upstairs were repainted – in some cases replastered – and thick, luxurious carpet was laid in a tawny, old gold the colour of a lion’s mane. A joiner fitted wardrobes into awkward nooks and crannies along with discreet cabinets – televisions and sound systems with hidden speakers were essential if she was going to get the price she was planning on charging.

Thank God Guy had come back in the middle of it. She loved her son dearly, but he exasperated her. He was always off on some madcap adventure, subsidizing his travels by writing articles for newspapers and magazines about his experiences, as bonkers and irresponsible as his father had once been. She’d finally mastered the computer in Tony’s study, sending Guy subtle emails via his Hotmail account that hinted he was neglecting his filial duty; his two sisters had homes and families of their own to run, and couldn’t really be expected to pitch in. He’d reappeared eventually, deeply tanned and dishevelled, and together with Malachi, her gardener-cum-handyman, he’d been bringing the house and grounds up to scratch. It was incredible how quickly things deteriorated without a man about the place.

Madeleine drew on her dressing gown and went out into

her little kitchen to make tea. When she'd first moved into the flat above the coach house, she'd thought she would hate it, and assumed she would move straight back into the main house as soon as the production team moved out. But now she'd decided she'd stay. The flat was warm and cosy and, above all, manageable, and she could keep an eye on proceedings while having her own space.

She realized she was feeling quite excited. Filming was finished; the production team were going to spend the next couple of days restoring order and then the Portias family would have Eversleigh to themselves. They then had a week to kick things into touch before the first of their weekends took place. Madeleine had scarcely needed to advertise. The success of *Lady Jane Investigates* had taken care of that – there had been no less than six articles in the weekend papers which meant they had a raft of bookings already between now and next April, when the film crew was provisionally scheduled to film another series.

Madeleine was under no illusion that the next few months were going to be anything other than jolly hard work. But that had been the whole point of the project – to have something to throw herself into. Anyway, she wasn't afraid of getting her hands dirty. She did, however, need Guy's full attention. He'd been somewhat distracted lately by that girl. Madeleine thought Richenda was perfectly sweet, but was glad that after today they'd be seeing the back of her.

She poured herself a mug of strong tea and began to write a list.

A squeaking floorboard in the corridor outside alerted Richenda to Guy's return, and she snuggled back down under

the covers, spreading her long, dark hair out on the pillow around her head and shutting her eyes.

He came in behind an enormous bouquet.

‘Darling, you shouldn’t have.’

‘I didn’t,’ he replied. ‘They’re from Cindy Marks.’

Richenda sat up, batting her lashes in bewilderment as she read the tag.

‘However did she find out?’

Guy sighed.

‘I don’t know,’ he answered. ‘I would have liked a couple of days to get used to the idea myself.’

Richenda buried her nose in the roses, hoping that the greenery would hide any hint of a blush on her cheeks. She might be an actress, but she wasn’t all that used to deception. She’d already deleted any evidence of the call she’d made to Cindy at four o’clock that morning from the confines of the bathroom. Not that Guy had a suspicious nature, or would have a clue how to check what calls she’d made – he was the only man she’d ever met who didn’t know how to use a mobile phone – but it was better to cover your tracks when the stakes were this high.

She sighed.

‘I suppose we’d better do a photocall. They won’t leave us alone until we do.’

Guy was filled with panic.

‘Not today. I’ll need a shave. And a clean shirt. And ...’

Richenda wound her arms around his neck.

‘No, darling. Not today. Anyway, I want the world to see you as you really are. That’s the whole point. That’s why I love you. Because you don’t pretend.’

‘So what will the headline be? Beauty and the Beast?’

He scraped his stubble against her cleavage. She squealed

with delight, then took his head between her hands, forcing him to look at her.

‘Seriously. We need to do something official or there’ll be photographers crawling all over the place.’

Guy’s face clouded over.

‘OK, But do me a favour. Can we wait until I talk to my mother? I don’t want her finding out we’re engaged when the hired help comes in brandishing the *Daily Mail*.’

‘Not the *Daily Mail*,’ corrected Richenda. ‘The *Daily Post*. Cindy will have an exclusive.’

‘Whatever,’ said Guy, with a slightly sinking heart, and swearing inwardly that he would never touch Taylor’s again.