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Written by Tilly Bagshawe

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Tilly
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THE INHERITANCE

HARPER

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PROLOGUE

Dawn broke late over the Swell Valley. The May sun rose sleepily into a cloudless sky, streaking it first red, then pink, then a gorgeous, deep, burnished orange, like melted rose gold. Bathed in this magical light, Furlings House shimmered above the village of Fittlescombe, tranquil and magnificent. The family seat of the Flint-Hamiltons for over three hundred years, Furlings was frequently referred to as the most beautiful estate in Sussex, if not the whole of England. Certainly it lived up to that accolade this morning, a study in Georgian splendour, with nothing to puncture the peace of its rolling parkland and idyllic views except the occasional whinny of a pony in the top fields, or plaintive bleat of a lost lamb somewhere on the Downs.

‘You fucker!’

A loudly slamming door sent a slumbering heron soaring into the air above the river.

‘You lying, shallow lowlife! Go to hell!’

Each word was screamed at deafening volume. It was a woman’s voice, delivered in a cut-glass accent, and it was followed seconds later by the woman herself, crunching

over the gravel. She was striking for two reasons. The first was that she was young, blonde and stunningly beautiful. And the second was that she was stark naked (unless one counted the pair of Wellington boots she'd slipped on as she exited the kitchen; or the heavy, cast-iron frying pan she was brandishing menacingly above her head, like a Zulu warrior with a machete).

'For God's sake, Tatiana, calm down. You'll wake up half the village.'

Her intended victim, a much older man with dishevelled salt-and-pepper hair, was half running, half limping towards his car. Barefoot, he'd only managed to partially dress himself before the Amazon had beaten him out of doors. In an unbuttoned evening shirt, with his suit trousers slipping repeatedly towards his knees, he cut a pathetic, cowering figure. Only the keenest of political observers would have recognized him as Sir Malcom Turnbull, Secretary of State for Trade & Industry, married father of three and tireless champion of family values.

'You think I give a flying fuck about the village?' the girl hissed at him like a snake. 'I'm Tatiana Flint-Hamilton. I *own* this village. Besides, why shouldn't people know what a lying, cheating scumbag you really are?'

Sir Malcom had only just managed to scramble into his Porsche when Tatiana caught up with him. Lifting the frying pan high above her head, she brought it down with a deafening *thwack* on the car's roof, leaving a dent the size of a small meteor strike and missing the minister's skull by inches.

'Jesus *Christ*.' Shaking, Sir Malcom rammed the key in the ignition and turned it, but the bloody thing was jammed. 'Have you lost your mind?' he stammered. 'You knew I had a wife.'

'Yes. And you told me you were going to leave her! At least twenty times.'

'My dear girl, I will. But it's not that simple. Henrietta's terribly fragile at the moment. And Nick's got his GCSEs this summer . . .'

'Spare me.' Tatiana Flint-Hamilton lifted the pan again, like a shot-putter about to let rip.

'No! Please. Perhaps after the next election . . .'

 Sir Malcom spluttered.

'The next election?' Tatiana laughed out loud. 'That's years away. What about the money?'

'Money?'

'The money I need to fight for my inheritance. The money you promised me, along with using your influence in the High Court. That was all bullshit too, wasn't it? You treacherous snake!'

Wham! The pan struck again.

Wham! And again.

At last the Porsche's engine roared into life and the panicked minister sped away. Thank God it was still early and Furlings was so remote. *Just imagine if I'd taken her to the London flat. The paparazzi would have seen us for sure.* Sir Malcom Turnbull shuddered at what might have been.

Tatiana Flint-Hamilton was an incredibly beautiful, sexy girl, but the tabloids were right when they referred to her as a 'wild child'.

Forget 'tigress'. The young lady was a velociraptor.

The minister wasn't a religious man but as he drove away he prayed fervently that he never saw Tatiana Flint-Hamilton again.

Tatiana stood and watched as the battered Porsche disappeared into the distance.

Like my future. Like my house. All of it's disappearing, she thought morosely. But she quickly pulled herself together.

What a bloody cliché to drive a red sports car in your fifties, anyway?

Tosser.

A cool dawn breeze made her shiver. Tatiana looked down at her own nakedness, and the frying pan hanging limply from her hand, and laughed. All of a sudden a pair of knickers, or even a dressing gown, had a certain appeal. Come to think of it, so did a bacon sandwich. The combination of sex and rage had made her ravenous.

Striding back into the kitchen, she pulled a Barbour jacket off a peg by the door and wrapped it round her. Opening the fridge to look for bacon, she discovered there wasn't any, so poured herself an ice-cold vodka instead and wandered through to the drawing room, taking the bottle with her.

She tried not to think about how much she was going to miss this place.

I mustn't give up. Not yet.

In a few hours, the entire population of Swell Valley would be milling around in Furlings' lower fields for Fittlescombe's annual May Day fete. *I can't face them,* thought Tati, slumping down onto her father's old sofa and knocking back four fingers of Stoli before refilling her mug. *I truly can't. They've all come to gloat.*

Glancing up, she saw her grandmother's portrait staring down at her disapprovingly from above the fireplace.

'What?' Tatiana challenged the canvas angrily, throwing open her jacket to reveal a perfect pair of round breasts, smooth, flat belly and glossy dark triangle of pubic hair. 'Didn't you always tell me to use my gifts. Well *these* are my gifts!'

THE INHERITANCE

She was drunk and angry, with herself more than anything. What on earth had possessed her to trust a slimy toad like Sir Malcom Turnbull? Everyone knew politicians were worse than drug dealers. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she didn't allow them to fall.

'I'm doing my best, Granny, OK?' she slurred. 'I am doing my fucking best.'

PART ONE

The Usurpers

CHAPTER ONE

‘Well I think it’s crap.’

Gabe Baxter, a blue eyed, broad-shouldered farmer and local Fittlescombe heart-throb, leaned forward over the table and took a long, cool sip of his Merrydown cider.

‘Tatiana Flint-Hamilton hasn’t bothered to show up for a village fete in five years. But now she wants local support to get her precious house back, suddenly she’s swanning in like Lady Muck offering to judge the cakes. It’s so contrived. She doesn’t give a shit about the community.’

‘That’s a bit harsh.’ Will Nutley, another local lad and a friend of Gabe’s from the village cricket team, stretched out his long legs contentedly. Will was drinking Abbey Dry, a local competitor to Merrydown. Gabe described it as ‘cat’s piss’, but this hadn’t deterred Will from ordering himself a third pint. ‘I think it takes guts to come back, under the circumstances.’

‘The circumstances,’ as the entire valley knew, were that the late Rory Flint-Hamilton, long-time lord of the manor at Fittlescombe and owner of Furlings, had sensationally disinherited his only child, his daughter Tatiana. Until now, Tatiana

Flint-Hamilton had been most famous for her model looks and her taste for scandal, both of which had made her a favourite with the tabloids. With her long, caramel-coloured hair, slender figure and angular, almost cartoon-like face – huge green eyes, high cheekbones, wide, impossibly sensual mouth – at twenty-four Tati Flint-Hamilton exuded not only sex appeal but class. Breeding. Like a racehorse, or a rare, perfectly cut diamond. Unfortunately she also had a penchant for powerful, high-profile, and often married men, not to mention a well-documented drug habit. What set Tati apart from other society ‘It girls’ was her intelligence, her wit (she could always be relied upon for a suitably pithy and amusing quote) and her refreshing lack of remorse about any of her wild antics. On the scale of Great British Don’t-Give-A-Shitness, she was right up there with Simon Cowell.

The media loved her for it. But her own father had spent his last years in a misery of embarrassment and despair over Tatiana’s behaviour and, in the end, the idea of handing over his beloved Furlings to his tearaway daughter had proved too much. Rory had changed his will, apparently without breathing a word to anyone. Rumour had it that Tatiana had turned up at the lawyers’ offices in high spirits, fully expecting to take possession of her inheritance. Only to be told by her godfather Edmund Ruck, senior partner at Jameson and Ruck, that a house that had been in Flint-Hamilton hands for over three hundred years had in fact been left to distant cousins, and she was out on her pretty little, diamond-studded ear.

‘Guts?’ Gabe spluttered. ‘Come off it.’

‘I’m serious,’ said Will. ‘It must be bloody humiliating, wandering around the village trying to act normally, when everyone knows her old man cut her off.’

Gabe grunted noncommittally.

'Imagine how you'd feel if your dad had disinherited you?' Will went on. 'If he'd left Wraggsbottom Farm to some random Aussie family.'

Brett Cranley, Rory Flint-Hamilton's appointed heir, was an Australian property magnate. Famous in his native Australia, he was evidently extremely wealthy in his own right. Somehow that made the whole inheriting Furlings thing worse, at least in Will Nutley's eyes.

'The Cranleys aren't random,' said Gabe. 'They're relatives.'

'Barely,' said Will. 'I heard Rory never even met them before he carked it. They're total strangers.'

'Yeah, well, whatever,' said Gabe. 'It wouldn't have happened to me because I'm not a vacuous socialite with no sense of responsibility who'd let the whole estate go to hell in a handbasket before you could say "pass the cocaine".'

Gabe and Will were sitting in the beer tent at the annual Fittlescombe village fete on what had blossomed into a blisteringly hot May morning. Always held on May Day and in Furlings' sprawling lower meadow, this year's fete had been given an added frisson of excitement thanks to the gossip surrounding Tatiana Flint-Hamilton's disinheritance. The latest word was that Tatiana had decided to take Furlings' new owners to court over it. Apparently she had some scheme brewing to have her father's will declared invalid. Although nobody seemed clear quite how such a challenge might succeed. Rory Flint-Hamilton was old but quite sane when he died. And by all accounts the Cranleys were as surprised by the contents of his will as his daughter was, so they could hardly be said to have coerced him.

In any event, the case had split the village, and the entire Swell Valley, down the middle. There were some who approved of Rory's decision to leave his ancient family estate in safer hands than those of his feckless, scandal-prone

daughter. But many others felt aggrieved on Tatiana's behalf. After all, it wasn't as if all her Flint-Hamilton forefathers had been saints and angels, especially in their youth. Tati should be given a chance to grow up and prove herself. The fact that Rory's appointed heirs, the Cranleys, were not only card-carrying naves but, worse, Australian, only served to fan the flames of local ire.

Of course, no one had actually met Furlings' new owners yet. The Cranleys were due to arrive next week. But that hadn't stopped the rumour mill from going into overdrive. Mrs Worsley, Rory Flint-Hamilton's old housekeeper, was the only person with first-hand information, having apparently Skyped with Brett Cranley and his wife on numerous occasions. On the basis of these conversations, the housekeeper pronounced her new employers 'charming' and 'terribly down to earth'. Of course Fiona Worsley had more reason than most to support Rory's Australian heirs over his daughter. Mrs Worsley had been there through the very worst excesses of Tati's teenage years and had seen first hand just how spoiled, destructive and Machiavellian she could be. She was fond of Tatiana deep down, but the thought of working for her, not to mention sitting back and watching helplessly while she and her rich, druggie London friends turned Furlings into some sort of party-house, was more than the old woman could have borne.

On Mrs Worsley's advice, Brett Cranley had already won over a few cynics by giving permission from Sydney for the village fete to go ahead as usual, and for the meadow to be used.

'You see what I mean?' Furlings' housekeeper had purred. 'He's as nice as pie and generous with it.'

What Furlings' new owner hadn't anticipated was that his absence had left a window for his cousin Tatiana to

swoop in unannounced and effectively take over proceedings. She'd even demanded that Mrs Worsley put her up in her old room at Furlings for the week of the fete.

'I presume I'm welcome as a guest, at least? In my own bloody home,' she fumed.

Once installed, Tati had begun the Herculean task of trying to win over the locals. Her challenge to her father's will was based on the premise that Furlings had never really been Rory's to leave. That there was an effective entailment, inferred from generations of local practice. It was a shaky case, to say the least, but it was all she had. In order for it to stand a snowball's chance in hell of succeeding in court, she would need extensive local support. Hence, in Gabe Baxter's view, her cynical 'sudden interest' in the village.

'You have to admit, she's done a good job running the fete committee,' said Will Nutley, draining the dregs of his cider and wiping his mouth on his sleeve. 'This must be the best turnout we've had in a decade. Loads of celebs have shown up because of her.'

'So?'

'So it's all money for the village, isn't it? I saw Kate Moss earlier at the craft stall. And Seb Harwich said Hugh Grant was milling around somewhere.'

'Probably complaining,' said Gabe, downing the rest of his Merrydown in a single gulp. 'He's such a miserable git.'

Will grinned. 'Sure you're not just jealous because he's getting all the female attention?'

Gabe gave his trademark, arrogant laugh. 'Jealous? Please. Anyway, he's not getting Laura's attention,' he added proudly. 'That's the only female I'm interested in.'

At the top of the meadow, Laura Baxter, Gabe's pretty young wife, mopped her brow with a handkerchief. Christ it was

hot today! The weather at least seemed to be on Tatiana Flint-Hamilton's side. At this rate the fete would raise a fortune, and Tati would get all the credit.

'I'll 'ave five tickets for a pound, please.' Mr Preedy, the proprietor of Fittlecombe Village Stores, gazed appreciatively at Laura's breasts, straining for escape from her pale pink linen shirt-dress.

In the grip of some temporary fever, Laura had agreed weeks ago to man the tombola, without doubt the most boring job at the entire fete. She passed a handful of tickets to the little bald shopkeeper and watched as he carefully unfolded and examined each one.

'Look at that! I've got a winner!' Practically hopping with excitement, Mr Preedy handed his last ticket back to Laura. 'Five hundred and ten. Winners end in a zero, right?'

'That's right.'

'Well, what've I won, then? Don't keep me in suspense.'

Laura looked along the table. She found the appropriate ticket taped to a peeling packet of Yardley bath salts.

'Erm . . . these?' She handed them over apologetically.

Unperturbed, Mr Preedy beamed as if he'd just won a luxury cruise. It was so sweet, Laura quite forgave him his earlier breast-ogle.

'Smashing! I never win anything, me. You must be my lucky charm. I'll give 'em to the wife,' he said, clutching the salts to his chest. 'Earn meself some brownie points. You can't put a price on that now, can you?'

'Indeed you can't.'

Laura smiled as he disappeared into the crowd. She loved the way that such small things seemed to give people here pleasure. Especially on days like today. The Fittlescombe fete really was a throwback to another, gentler, happier world. And what a wonderful turnout this year, thanks to the

combination of the glorious bank holiday weather and the undoubted star power of Miss Flint-Hamilton, returned from her jet-setting life in London to 'recommit' to the village.

Not that Laura, of all people, had a right to judge Tati for that. This time two years ago, Laura had been living in London herself, working all hours as a television writer, completely immersed in city life as she climbed the greasy pole. But she too had returned to the Swell Valley, the place where she'd been happiest as a child, at a low point in her life. And now here she was, utterly immersed in the rhythms of the countryside, married to Gabe – a farmer's wife, no less – and happier than ever. It was incredible how quickly, and totally, life could change.

Of course, she and Gabe had their moments. He could be a terrible flirt sometimes, but Laura wasn't really worried by it. She knew he loved her, and was faithful. It was annoying though, especially after he'd had one too many drinks at The Fox. Then there was his ambition, which for some reason always surprised her. He'd already started talking about trying to buy some of Furlings' farmland from the new owners.

'Rory Flint-Hamilton swore blind he'd never sell a single blade of grass. But he mismanaged that estate something terrible. Maybe the new bloke'll be more amenable? Just think what we could do if we owned all that land along the valley.'

'Go bankrupt?' offered Laura.

The unfortunately named Wraggsbottom Farm had been in Gabe's family for almost as long as Furlings had been in the Flint-Hamiltons' hands, and was just as beautiful in its own way. It was, however, altogether a more modest enterprise. Like all the working farming families they knew, Gabe and Laura struggled financially, a fact that Gabe conveniently forgot during his fantasies of empire-building.

'We're barely breaking even as it is,' she reminded him. 'You're talking about doubling the size of the farm.'

'I know,' Gabe grinned. 'We'd be a real estate. If I can only convince this Aussie to let me buy those fields . . .'

'With what money?' Laura asked, exasperated.

'Mortgage.'

The nonchalant shrug with which Gabe offered this solution sent chills down her spine.

'I don't want to be lady of the manor, darling.' She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. 'I just want a lovely, quiet life here. With you. Preferably not in a debtors' prison.'

They'd dropped the subject before it turned into a proper row. But it was only a matter of time before it reared its ugly head again. Laura adored Gabe, but it did sometimes get tiring, always having to be the boring grown-up in the family.

Down the hill from the tombola, Tatiana Flint-Hamilton was chatting up villagers waiting in line at the coconut shy. She'd swept down from the house earlier, making sure that everyone knew she'd been staying at Furlings – staking her claim – and looking more beautiful than ever in a demure, pale buttermilk shift dress, with her long blonde hair tied up with a whimsical blue ribbon. It was a far cry from the raunchy, barely-there outfits with sky-high stilettos she was known for in her tabloid days. But, of course, a lot had changed since then.

She wants people to like her so badly, thought Laura, pityingly. This time two years ago, she had it all. And now look at her, a guest at her own house.

Unlike Gabe, Laura Baxter felt sorry for Tati. She didn't blame her for fighting her father's will. *If I grew up in a house like Furlings, I'd fight like hell to keep it too,* she thought, glancing

over her shoulder at the Queen Anne mansion perched serenely at the top of the hill.

The house looked more gorgeous than ever today, dazzling in the May sunshine with its sash windows dripping in wisteria and its lawns criss-crossed by box hedges and winding gravel paths, dotted with elaborate topiary. How awful to think of it being lived in by strangers! And how hard for Tati to have to stay there now as a guest, even before her hated cousins had arrived. Secretly Laura was rather rooting for Tati to turf the interlopers out, although that was highly unlikely. The bylaw that Tatiana was hoping to invoke was properly ancient. As for convincing the naysayers in the village that she was suitable lady of the manor material? With her history, that was going to be a tall order. It would certainly take a lot more than a Julie Andrews dress and a hair ribbon.

‘It’s impossible,’ Tatiana complained good-naturedly to the woman standing next to her at the coconut shy. ‘I’m sure it wasn’t this hard when I was a girl. Are you sure it’s not rigged?’

‘Pretty sure,’ the woman laughed.

‘I reckon they’ve glued them onto the stands.’

‘Nonsense.’

A wildly attractive Latin-looking man whom Tati dimly recognized appeared at her elbow. ‘You just need the right technique.’

In chinos and a blue linen shirt that matched his eyes and perfectly offset his olive skin, the man was easily the best-looking specimen Tati had seen since her return to Fittlescombe. With the Cranleys due to arrive in a week, she would soon be kicked out of Furlings and have to find herself more modest accommodation in the village while

she put together her legal case against her disinheritance. The prospect of months spent living in some dismal local hovel had been filling Tati's heart with gloom for weeks now. As had the idea of begging for a job as a lowly teacher at the village primary school.

The real kicker in Rory's will, the part that no one in the village even knew about yet, were the conditions the old man had placed on Tatiana's trust fund. Not content with robbing her of Furlings, he'd effectively taken steps to cut her off from all family money unless she, as he put it, 'got her life in order.'

With this in mind, the old man had stipulated that if Tati agreed to take a teaching job at St Hilda's Primary School in the village, he would authorize the trust to release a 'modest' monthly stipend. Even then, the money would only ever be released to her in the form of regular income payments. At no point would Tatiana receive a large lump sum of money.

For Tati, this had been the final twist of the knife. She recalled the scene in her godfather's London office as if it were yesterday.

'You're telling me I'm penniless?' She'd glared at Edmund Ruck accusingly.

'Hardly,' London's most eminent solicitor responded evenly. 'You have the equivalent of a modest trust fund for the time being. As long as your life remains stable, the monthly payments will go up considerably every year. Any capital remaining at the end of your life will pass to your children.'

'It's a fucking pittance!' spat Tatiana.

'It's more than most people earn in a lifetime, Tati.'

'I don't care what "most people" earn. I am *not* "most people".' Tati's arrogance hid her fear and profound shock.

‘And I won’t get any money coming in at all till I’m thirty-five. Thirty-fucking-five! I might as well be dead.’

Edmund Ruck suppressed a wry smile. He’d known Tatiana all her life and was fond of her, but he understood why Rory had declined to trust her with the family fortune, still less with the magical historic seat at Furlings. Even so, leaving the estate to a distant cousin he’d never met had been a surprising move on the old man’s part. The will had raised Edmund Ruck’s eyebrows, so he could hardly expect it not to raise his goddaughter’s.

‘Some money can be released to you earlier,’ he explained, ‘as long as you comply with the conditions set out in your father’s letter of wishes.’

Tati let out a short, derisive laugh. ‘As long as I go back to Fittlescombe and become a schoolteacher, you mean? Don’t be ridiculous, Edmund.’

‘Why is that ridiculous?’

Tati looked at him witheringly, but Edmund pressed on.

‘You trained as a teacher, didn’t you?’

It was true that Tatiana had studied, abortively, for a teaching degree at Oxford Brookes, before dropping out. She’d always been incredibly bright, especially at maths, but had never worked hard at school, or cared about her grades. The world of yachts and private jets and wealthy lovers, of winters in Kitzbühel and St Barth’s and summers in St Tropez and Sardinia, had exerted an irresistible pull. Besides, why bother with university when one was never going to need to get a job?

‘Did my father seriously think, even for a moment, that I was going to agree to become a village school ma’am? That I would be content to live in some poxy cottage, while Furlings – *my* house, my bloody *birthright* – was occupied by some jumped-up bloody Australian and his family, the *Cranfords*?’

‘Cranleys,’ her godfather corrected, patiently.
‘Whatever.’

Tatiana had been full of fight that awful day in Edmund Ruck’s offices. And yet she *had* returned to Fittlescombe, just as her father had demanded. And she *would* take the job at the school, because she needed that money. But anyone who interpreted those things as her acceptance of Rory’s will would be making a grave mistake. Tatiana was here for one reason and one reason only: to fight for her real inheritance.

The Adonis standing next to her at the coconut shy might at least provide a welcome distraction while she did what had to be done.

‘You hold the ball like this.’ He slipped one arm confidently around Tati’s waist, placing the ball in her hand. ‘And throw overarm, aiming downwards. Like so.’

‘I see,’ said Tati, inhaling the delicious, lemony scent of his aftershave as she released the ball into the air. She looked on as it sailed skywards in a perfect arc before dipping to strike the coconut clean onto the ground.

‘That’s amazing,’ she said delightedly, spinning around to face her instructor. ‘Thank you. I’m Tatiana, by the way.’

The handsome man smiled and shook her hand.

‘I know who you are, Miss Flint-Hamilton. Santiago de la Cruz. A pleasure to meet you.’

De la Cruz. The cricketer. Of course! Santiago played for Sussex. Tati had heard he’d moved to the valley last year. After a week holed up at Furlings with nothing but Mrs Worsley’s scowling face for company, or trapped in deathly dull fete committee meetings with the church flowers brigade, it felt wonderful to be flirted with again. Tati tried to remember the last time she’d had enjoyable sex or even been on a date with an attractive man – she didn’t count

this morning's disastrous encounter with the semi-fossilized Minister for Trade and Industry – and drew a complete blank. It must have been before that awful day in Edmund Ruck's office. Before the world stopped spinning and her life fell apart. She smiled at Santiago coquettishly, tossing back her long ponytail of honey-blonde hair. 'Santiago,' she purred. 'What a glorious name.'

'And this is my fiancée, Penny.'

A middle-aged woman wearing a hideous gypsy skirt and a T-shirt covered in paint splatters had appeared at Santiago's side. Tati's smile wilted. From the look of pride on Santiago's face, you'd think he'd just introduced her to Gisele Bündchen. *Talk about love being blind*, thought Tati. Still, ever mindful of her charm offensive, she shook Penny's hand warmly.

'Lovely to meet you.'

'We've met before,' Penny Harwich reminded her, although it was said without reproach. 'I'm Penny Harwich. Emma's mother.'

Oh yes. Emma Harwich. The model. Tati vaguely remembered the family, although not particularly the ragamuffin of a mother.

'Of course. How silly of me.' Her smile didn't waver. 'Your fiancé just won me a coconut.'

'Did you, darling? How sweet.' Slipping her arms around Santiago's neck and standing up on tiptoes, Penny Harwich kissed him blissfully. Tatiana felt the envy as a physical pain, like a cricket ball lodged in her chest. Not because she fancied Santiago. Although of course she did. But because she didn't have anyone herself. She was alone, now more than ever. Other people's happiness felt like a personal affront.

'Is that the time?' She glanced at her Patek Philippe watch, an eighteenth birthday present from her father. 'You must excuse me. I think I'm wanted at the duck racing.'

Turning away, Tati walked towards the pond, nodding and smiling at villagers as she went till her jaw and neck both ached. There was old Frank Bannister, the church organist, and the Reverend Slaughter who'd been the vicar of St Hilda's Church in Fittlescombe for as long as Tati could remember. There were new faces too, scores of them, whole families that Tati didn't recognize. It was so long since she'd spent any time here, she thought, a trifle guiltily. Although really her father ought to bear some responsibility for that. In the last five years of his life, Rory had been so disapproving, so resolutely unwelcoming.

He practically drove me away. And now he wants to punish me for it from beyond the grave.

'Tatiana!' Harry Hotham, Tati's old headmaster at St Hilda's Primary School and a lifelong friend of her father's, waved from the gate that linked Furlings' lower meadow to the village green. It was less than two years since Tati had last seen Harry, at the same Hunt Ball where she'd infamously run off with Laura Tiverton's boyfriend, but he'd aged two decades in that short time. Stooped and frail, leaning on a walking stick, his remaining wisps of hair now totally white and blowing in the breeze like tufts of dandelion seeds, he tottered towards her.

'How marvellous to see you. And how divine you look, my dear. Yellow is definitely your colour. I'd heard you were back in the village. Do tell me you're staying?'

Harry's enthusiasm, like his smile, was utterly genuine. Tati was touched.

'That rather depends,' she said, kissing him warmly on both cheeks. 'You heard about Daddy's will?'

'Yes.' Harry nodded gravely. 'Bad business, that.'

'Well I'm not giving up,' said Tati, jutting her chin forward defiantly. Harry Hotham remembered the look well from

Tatiana's days as his pupil, a tearaway even then but charming with it, at least in Harry's eyes. 'I'm contesting it.'

Harry frowned. 'Yes. I heard that too. Are you sure that's wise, Tatiana?'

'What do you mean?'

'Only that, knowing your father as I did, I imagine he took very thorough legal advice. I'd hate to see you ripped off by some ghastly lawyer.'

Tati waved a hand dismissively. 'Every lawyer has a different opinion. And I'm already *being* ripped off. I don't see that it can get much worse.'

'That's because you're young, my dear,' said Harry, patting her hand affectionately. 'It can. Believe me.'

'Well, it's early days yet but I need funds to pursue my case,' Tati went on, ignoring Harry Hotham's warnings. 'A war chest, if you will. I wanted to talk to you about that actually.'

'My dear Tatiana, I'd happily give you my last farthing, but I'm afraid you are looking at a very poor man,' Harry said matter-of-factly. 'There's no money in teaching, you see. Not a bean.'

'Oh, no!' Tati laughed, embarrassed. 'I wasn't asking you for money. It's a bit of an odd request, but I . . . I was hoping for a job.'

'A job?'

'Yes. Did Daddy not say anything to you before he died?'

'Say something?' Harry looked confused.

'It would just be for a few months, while I sort out my legal situation,' said Tati. She explained about her trust fund, and the codicil in Rory's will that would release money to her but only on the condition that she move back to Fittlescombe and work as a teacher at St Hilda's.

'Dad always had a ridiculous fantasy about me settling

down and teaching one day. Ever since I did that awful course at Oxford Brookes.' Misinterpreting Harry Hotham's pained face, she added, 'Look, I know it's madness. But you'd be doing me a huge favour. When I get my inheritance restored to me, I promise to fund a new school building and anything else you want.'

'It's not that my dear,' said Harry. 'The job would be yours if it were mine to give. But I'm afraid I retired.'

'What?' Tati frowned. 'When?'

'At Christmas. I had a fall and I . . . well, I realized I wasn't up to snuff any more. Physically, I mean. I recovered and all that. But I still need this blasted thing.' He shook his walking stick reproachfully. 'Running a school is a younger man's game.'

'Oh, Harry. I'm so sorry,' said Tati, truthfully. 'I can't imagine St Hilda's without you.'

'Yes, well, things move on. And the new chap's terribly good,' said Harry, graciously. 'Bingley, his name is. He's a widower and rather a dish, so I'm told. All the yummy mummies are after him. He could probably use one of these himself,' he waved his walking stick laughingly, 'to beat them all off with!'

Tati forced a smile, but this was not good news. Working at St Hilda's would always have been tough, a desperate measure for desperate times. But at least with Harry Hotham she'd have known where she stood. They'd have worked out some arrangement to satisfy her trustees – a few hours volunteering in the library or helping the girls play netball – and no one would have been any the wiser.

But this new fellow, Bingley, was an unknown entity. No doubt he'd already heard all kinds of bad things about her from village gossip, if not from the *Daily Mail's* society pages.

THE INHERITANCE

‘Cheer up,’ said Harry Hotham, taking her arm. ‘You look like you’ve lost a shilling and found sixpence.’

‘Do I, Harry?’ Tati laughed. Somehow being around Harry Hotham reminded her of all the good things about her father and the past. Harry was part of her history, of Furlings, of all the things she was fighting for. ‘I’m off to judge the duck races. Would you like to come with me?’

‘*Dearest Tatiana,*’ enthused the old man. ‘I’m sure I can think of nothing I would like more.’