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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Gardens of Delight**

Written by Erica James

Published by Orion

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# *Gardens of Delight*

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ERICA JAMES



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*To Edward and Samuel,  
the best things I ever grew!*

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*A garden is a delight to the eye,  
and a solace to the soil;  
it soothes angry passions,  
and produces that pleasure which  
is a foretaste of Paradise*

SA'DI (1184-1291)

# *Swanmere*

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## Chapter One

Lucy's last job of the day was to water the plants. It was something she always enjoyed doing, not only because it brought out her nurturing instinct, but also because of the sense of power it gave her. Wielding a hose was a bit like holding a loaded gun – nobody, if they knew what was good for them, was going to argue with her.

This sense of power first came to her at the age of fifteen, when she was put in charge of the ramshackle greenhouse at school while their biology teacher, a nervous, stammering man who had been in the middle of explaining seed germination, was called to the telephone in the secretary's office. His parting words, as he scurried away – his pregnant wife was two weeks beyond her due date – were '*D-d-d-don't touch anything while I'm g-g-gone.*' He might just as well have said, '*F-f-f-feel free to t-t-t-trash the place.*' The first act of subordination came in the form of a group of Lucy's classmates unbuttoning their shirts, tying them to expose their midribs and going outside to lie on the sun-parched grass whilst sharing a cigarette. That left Lucy and the rest of the class looking for some way to amuse themselves. Having already spied the neatly coiled hose and tap, it was only a short leap to a masterstroke of an idea. Within minutes she had everyone positioning the empty plastic and clay flowerpots on the bench at the furthest end of the greenhouse into a makeshift coconut shy and was taking aim with the hose. The first clay pot to take a direct hit from the blast of water fell to the floor with a clattering smash. Another followed suit, then another. *Aha! Take that!* Shouts of encouragement urged her on and she turned up the power on the hose and



gave the plastic pots a real beating, sending them flying in all directions: they ricocheted off the glass panes like enormous bullets. Most spectacular of all was the clay pot that shot straight through a pane of glass in an explosion that would have passed muster as an action movie stunt. Way to go! She hadn't had so much fun in ages.

The girls who had been lying on the grass sunning themselves now came to see what all the noise was about. Their snooty, superior expressions brought out the worst in Lucy and without a thought for the consequences she turned the hose on the gang of girls whom she had never liked because they were always going on about their fathers and their generous wallets and how awful it must be for Lucy because her father didn't care about her any more. Not true. It was she who didn't care about him any more! The powerful jet of water soon took the sneering look off their faces; as they staggered backwards and everyone around Lucy let out awed gasps, Lucy felt an exhilarating surge of triumph. She was invincible! She was all-powerful! She was the business!

She was also up to her neck in trouble. The teacher who had been hastily despatched to replace Mr Forbes appeared in the doorway of the greenhouse to find a scene of what she later described to the headmistress – somewhat over-dramatically in Lucy's opinion – as Armageddon.

'Mrs Gray,' the headmistress had said, her face as prim as a tightly shut pine cone, when Lucy's mother was summoned the following day to account for her daughter's behaviour, 'this sort of hooliganism is simply not tolerated at our school. I'm afraid, as of now, I'm going to suspend Lucy for the rest of this term in the hope that it will give her time to consider what she's done and, more importantly, give her time to consider her future.'

'Her future?' Lucy's mother had repeated. 'What do you mean by that exactly?'

'I'm suggesting you might want to consider the possibility that the environment we foster here at Fair Lawns is not best suited to Lucy.'

The message was loud and clear. Lucy Gray, with her sloppy attitude to lessons, her insolence, her general indifference to authority and her unique approach to truth and honesty – ‘*Do I have to remind you, Mrs Gray, about that incident with the forged exeat note?*’ – wasn’t welcome to return to Fair Lawns.

‘I absolutely do not know why I bother,’ Fiona Gray had said when they were driving away with Lucy’s hastily packed trunk wedged into the boot of the car. ‘Why do you keep doing this to me?’

After leaning out of the window and waving goodbye to her friends, who had gathered at the end of the chestnut-tree-lined drive, Lucy settled back into her seat and toed off her gruesome school shoes. No need for those any more. With a quickness of hand her mother didn’t notice, she dropped them out of the window. Her equally hideous grey socks met the same fate. She put her bare feet up on the dashboard. ‘Enlighten me, Mum: what do I keep doing to you?’

‘Embarrassing me. Shaming me. As though your father hasn’t put me through enough. What did I ever do wrong? What did I do to deserve such treatment? And where on earth will I find a school that will take you on when they discover what you’re like?’

‘You could always take time out of your frantic round of shopping and social engagements and home-school me.’ The look of horror on her mother’s face was priceless. ‘Face it, Mum. I’m a problem child.’

‘You’re a feral child, more like it. The wonder is that you lasted as long as you did at Fair Lawns. It’s all your father’s fault. But who gets the blame? Yes, that’s right. Me! It’s me who’s accused of being a bad parent, when all I’ve done is my best. Do put your feet down. Try and act like a lady even if you can’t actually be one.’ She sighed heavily. ‘People have no idea how hard it is to be a good mother to a difficult child.’

It was a rant with which Lucy was all too familiar. Poor old Mum; she took everything so personally, as if every

disaster in the world was a way to get at her and sully her good name.

Fourteen years on, and her mother still occasionally acted as if Lucy's every waking moment was spent trying to invent some new way to vex and annoy her. No matter that Lucy was all grown up now, that she had celebrated her twenty-ninth birthday last week and was the epitome of good behaviour. To her long-suffering mother, she was the same obnoxious teenager who had made her life a living hell. Maturity had taught her that she probably had given her mother an unnecessarily hard time in the aftermath of her parents' divorce, and while she had more or less made her peace with Fiona, she had not done the same with her father. As far as she was concerned, he no longer existed. Nothing he could say or do would put right the harm he'd done to their family.

Although relations between Lucy and her mother were much improved these days, they had their differences, namely that Lucy *still* didn't have a proper job. Working in a garden centre did not, according to the Fiona Gray Career Handbook, constitute a proper career path. A going-nowhere garden path was what it was. As if her mother had ever had a career! Following hot on the heels of this complaint was another old standby: 'Why, oh why, do you *still* insist on dressing so unimaginatively? People will mistake you for an asylum seeker. It's such a crime not to make the most of yourself, darling. You're not a lesbian, are you?' But Fiona's biggest concern was that Lucy showed not the slightest inclination to settle down and marry. 'If you leave it too late all the best men will have been taken and you'll be left to scrape the marriage barrel and end up with a dud.'

Whenever this topic was raised, Lucy wanted to point out that marrying young hadn't saved Fiona from acquiring a dud husband – a man who had strayed into the arms of an Italian woman many years his junior – but she knew better than to stir up her mother on the legendary subject

of Marcus Gray. As it was, his presence, or rather his absence, had carved out a top-billing, all-starring role in their lives without giving him extra house room.

Ironically, despite her urgings for Lucy to find herself 'a nice young man,' Fiona hadn't been in any hurry to rush to the altar for a second time herself. But then twelve months ago along came Charles Carrington, a warm-hearted, kindly soul, and a one-time confirmed bachelor. He was possibly the bravest man alive, having the guts to take on Lucy's mother. Or maybe he just had the thickest skin. In a whirlwind romance, he whisked Fiona away from the village of Swanmere in south Cheshire to his splendid country house in Northamptonshire, leaving Lucy all alone. 'You don't mind, do you, Lucy?' her mother had asked when she was showing off the antique diamond ring Charles had given her and was explaining how their lives were going to change. As though it wasn't obvious.

'Mum, I'm a big girl now. You go and have fun. You've earned it.'

'Why don't you come and live with us? I'm sure Charles wouldn't object.'

'The last thing Charles needs is a stepdaughter mooching about the place. Besides, my job and friends are all here.'

This, not surprisingly, elicited a dismissive click of the tongue. The extent of Fiona's disapproval for Lucy's job at Meadowlands Garden Centre was matched by her dislike of Lucy's friend Orlando. She held him personally responsible for holding her daughter back.

Orlando Fielding was Lucy's best friend and for five months now he'd been her lodger. He was a year younger than her and was her boss's son. They'd met when she was sixteen and had applied for a job working weekends and school holidays at his dad's garden centre. Orlando, who had been working part-time for his father since he was old enough to lift bags of compost and use a hose responsibly, had been instructed to show her the ropes, and they'd soon struck up a firm friendship. People often mistook them for

brother and sister, they got on so well.

Much to his father's disappointment, Orlando had turned his back on the family business and with a degree in botany already under his belt, he then did a one-year diploma course in garden design and recently started his own business as a garden designer. But money was tight and rather than see Orlando suffer the ignominy of having to move back home with his parents, Lucy said he could move in with her now that her mother wasn't around.

By the time she'd finished watering, nearly everyone else had gone home and the place felt deserted. She tidied away the hose, checked with Hugh there wasn't anything else he needed her to do, hoisted her small rucksack onto her back and climbed onto her bike. As she pedalled home in the evening sun, she wondered if she dare risk wearing shorts for work tomorrow. The weather forecast had given warm and sunny; as it would be the first day of May, and a bank holiday weekend to boot, she knew she would be rushed off her feet and warning customers till she was blue in the face that it was too early to put bedding plants out yet, that there was still a danger of ground frost. There was just no telling some people.

Before long she was freewheeling downhill towards the village of Swanmere, her long blonde hair streaming like ribbons behind her, her skin tingling from the wind on her cheeks. For the sheer hell of it, she stuck out her legs either side of the bike and relished the moment, basking in the delicious feeling that all was right in the world. After months of wind, rain and gloomy skies, spring was finally here. The hawthorn hedgerows were vibrant with unfurling leaves of lettuce-green freshness, and the fields of rape over to her right, where the sun was slowly dropping in the sky, were in full glorious bloom, the dazzling yellow flowers so bright they were almost luminous.

Hearing a car bearing down on her from behind, Lucy put her feet back on the pedals and steered closer to the grassy verge that was peppered with daisies and dandelions.

In a matter of days, there would be cow parsley springing up too. The car – a large black Mercedes with a personalized number plate – swept smoothly past her. They were two a penny round here. Swanmere was one of Cheshire's wealthiest hotspots, where old money mixed with new.

She and her mother had moved here from London when she was sixteen – when her parents' divorce had finally been settled. Before everything had gone wrong, Lucy's father had run his own advertising agency. They'd lived in Fulham and the way Lucy remembered it, it had been a perfect life. But then he'd ruined everything by having an affair. Stinging with hurt and fury, Fiona had employed the smartest divorce lawyer she could get her hands on and fought hard. She got the house and a considerable chunk of the business that Marcus decided to sell so that he could go and live in Italy with the Tiramisu Tart, as Lucy had always referred to his mistress. Fiona had grown up in Cheshire – her parents still lived there at the time, though they were both dead now – and she had sold the house in Fulham and bought Church View, a beautiful Grade II listed Queen Anne townhouse in the heart of the historic village of Swanmere, where pretty black-and-white half-timbered cottages abounded. Often it felt like they lived on a film set. Some years ago, the village had actually been used in a costume drama for the BBC. Everyone had wanted to get in on the act and be an extra.

Lucy couldn't think of anywhere she would rather live. When Charlie Carrington had appeared on the scene she had known a moment of dread and panic – would this mean she would have to move out of Church View? Would her mother want to sell it and expect Lucy to find a place of her own? She was, after all, at an age when she should at the very least be thinking about leaving home. Her fears were blessedly short-lived. Fiona had no intention of selling Church View, and amazingly went as far as to say that it was home to Lucy for as long as she wanted it to be. Being in love had turned Fiona into a magnanimous

woman Lucy hardly knew. She even grudgingly agreed that Orlando could move in.

Orlando had proved to be the perfect housemate – he was clean, tidy and an excellent cook. What's more he wasn't one of those ghastly men who hogged the remote control then hid it down the back of the sofa when there was something girly on that she wanted to watch. In fact, the only thing they ever disagreed about was gardening, in particular the amount of time devoted to makeover gardening on the television. She was as big a purist as the next RHS member, but whereas she was prepared to let people have the choice of wrecking their gardens with decking and faddy ornamentation, Orlando was not. He held Alan Titchmarsh personally responsible for everything that was cheap and tacky in suburban gardens throughout the land. Orlando said that gardening was like porn: it was best left to professionals.

She pedalled along the main street of the village, passing the shops that, with the exception of Clayton's upmarket wine shop, were all closed for the day. Noticing Mac Truman coming out of Clayton's with a wrapped bottle tucked under his arm, she rang her bell and gave him a wave. He smiled and waved back at her. She liked Mac. And his nephew. Conrad Truman was officially the most eligible and hottest bachelor in the village. It was the combination of being drop dead gorgeous and a widower that did it. Nothing sexier than a heartbroken good-looking man, was the general consensus of opinion.

She pedalled on, passing the chemist, the newsagent and post office, and then just opposite the church she turned left into a cobbled lane scarcely more than a car's width. She jumped off her bike, pushed open a wrought iron gate and stepped into the calming oasis of a small courtyard garden. Home sweet home.

She let herself in at the back door and after calling out to Orlando and getting no response – she could hear the shower running upstairs – she checked the mail that he'd

left in a tidy pile on the kitchen table. Humming happily to herself, she flicked through the pile to see if there was anything of interest and stopped when she saw an envelope with an airmail sticker on it. Closer inspection revealed an Italian stamp and postmark. Judging from the thickness of it, and the timing of its arrival, it was a late birthday card from her father.

She dropped it into the bin without a second thought.



## *Chapter Two*

Helen wondered if the haughty, bucket-faced woman sitting opposite her would ever leave.

With her fearsomely bracing outdoorsy manner and sturdy old-moneyed vowels, Olivia Marchwood, sixty-something-spinster-of-this-parish, was just the kind of woman Helen usually took pains to avoid. And as the woman ground her not inconsiderable behind into the cream sofa, she gave off an air of permanency that made Helen want to fetch a crowbar and lever her off. The disagreeable guest had called on the off chance that Mrs Madison-Tyler might be at home (not 'in' but 'at home'), more than an hour ago and was showing absolutely no sign of bringing her visit to an end. She was clearly one of those insensitive, high-handed women who, even if Helen threw open the front door, wouldn't take the hint that it was time to leave.

The thrust of her visit was clearly to suss out the new owners of the Old Rectory – 'Two weeks have passed since you moved in and I thought it high time I personally welcomed you to Swanmere' – and to bring to Helen's attention the variety of good works, societies, clubs and groups on offer in the village. All of which Helen made a mental note to steer well clear of, especially the ones (underscored and in upper case) for which her visitor was on the committee. She had never been one of those hearty joining-in kind of people, preferring always to be on the periphery of what was going on. Experience had taught her it was the best way to keep out of trouble. Hunter said it was why she'd put off marriage for as long as she had. It was one of her husband's more perceptive observations. They

had been married for six months now, the wedding coming a week after her forty-fifth birthday, and following seven months of determined pursuit on Hunter's part. 'I'm not a man who changes his mind or makes compromises,' he'd told her five weeks after they'd met, 'so you might just as well get on and choose yourself a wedding dress.'

'Mm ... a man who doesn't change his mind, eh?' she'd mused. 'How do you account for the two ex-wives?'

'Ouch,' he'd said, 'that's a little below the belt, don't you think?'

'Not really. After all, I ought to know what I'm getting into.' Although she had a pretty good idea exactly what she was getting into. 'Would it be anything to do with you being unfaithful to them?'

'Yes,' he'd said baldly. 'Are you sure this is a subject you want to pursue?'

Rightly or wrongly, Helen never did, and she married Hunter – sixteen years her senior – committed to the belief that the future was more important than the past.

She'd met him at a charity fundraising lunch for the local hospice in Crantsford. As one of its main sponsors, he'd given a brief but entertaining speech and it didn't slip Helen's notice that he was the focus of much attention from the predominantly female audience in the hotel dining room. Not overly tall, he was nonetheless a good-looking, charismatic man and Helen didn't doubt for a second that he knew the effect he had on people. He reminded her a little of one of her favourite actors, Michael Kitchen. When he'd stepped down from the podium and resumed his seat at a nearby table, Helen's friend Annabel, who had invited her to the lunch and was a patron of the hospice, had whispered in her ear, 'I'm going to introduce you when the gabbing's all over.'

'And why would you do that?'

'Because,' Annabel tilted her head meaningfully in Hunter's direction and lowered her voice yet further, 'he asked me to.'

'When?'

‘When you went to the cloakroom. He came over and asked very specifically who you were.’

But Annabel hadn’t needed to play the role of mediator; just as soon as the lunch was officially over, Hunter introduced himself and insisted on buying Helen a drink at the bar, forcibly leading her away from her friend. ‘I suppose you find this masterful approach usually gets you what you want,’ she’d said, bristling with furious indignation.

‘Never fails. What would you like to drink?’

‘Nothing. I’m not thirsty.’

‘Me neither. Let’s go somewhere we can talk.’

When she refused, he said, ‘Please don’t be churlish.’ Once more, and against her will, she was being propelled across the crowded room. Outside in the hotel gardens he said, ‘Will you have dinner with me?’

‘No thank you.’ She started to walk away. What a revoltingly arrogant man he was.

‘Please,’ he called out, but not moving to follow her. ‘Have dinner with me so I can prove to you I’m being serious.’

She stopped and turned to face him. ‘Serious about what?’

‘About you.’

‘I think you must be confusing me with someone else. A figment of your imagination, perhaps.’ And with that, she did walk away. And kept on walking until she was in the hotel car park and getting into her car. She was just putting the key into the ignition when her mobile trilled. Ever since her grandmother had suffered a fall and broken a hip eighteen months ago, an accident from which the old lady had never fully recovered, Helen was permanently on tenterhooks in case it was more bad news. She put the mobile to her ear and heard a voice say, ‘If not dinner, how about lunch?’

‘What the . . . ? How on earth did you know my number?’ She looked up and saw him standing on the steps of the hotel; he was staring straight at her.

‘Don’t be cross but I made your friend Annabel give it

to me. I told her it was a matter of life or death.'

'It'll be your death if you carry on hounding me like this.'

He laughed. An easy, assured laugh. 'You don't mean that. Come on, how much would it cost you to spend an hour or two with me over lunch?'

'I don't *do* lunch.'

'You did today.'

'That was a favour to Annabel.'

'Then how about doing me a favour? Maybe you'd feel happier just having a drink. Surely that wouldn't hurt too much.'

Thinking it would be easier to give in and let him have his own way, she agreed to meet him for a drink the following week. Chances were, he was one of those men for whom once the chase was over, boredom kicked in and he'd leave her alone. But she'd misjudged him and from then on, he romanced her hard. He bombarded her with gifts and flowers and even a new car after she'd turned up late for dinner one night because her ageing Peugeot had refused to start and she'd had to call out a taxi. Six months after that charity lunch, whilst on holiday in Egypt and flying over the Nile in a specially arranged hot-air-balloon flight, he presented her with a glass of champagne and an emerald ring, just as dawn was breaking. 'Helen Madison,' he'd said, 'I've pursued you every way I know how; will you stop prevaricating and agree to marry me?'

Glancing at the two young Egyptians who were piloting the balloon and trying to pretend they weren't present at so intimate a moment, she said, 'How can I refuse when you put it so romantically?'

The marriage took place in a private chapel in the grounds of a country hotel in north Yorkshire. The only guests present were Annabel and her husband, and Hunter's oldest and closest friend, Frank Maguire. The one person Helen had wanted to be present couldn't make it – her only living relative: her precious grandmother, Emma Madison.

With a jolt, Helen realized that Olivia Marchwood had interrupted the tortuous flow of her monologue with a question. She was asking Helen if she knew what she was going to do with the garden at the Old Rectory. 'It shouldn't be neglected for much longer,' Olivia Marchwood was saying. 'A shame poor old Alice couldn't take it with her. Are you a gardener, Mrs Madison-Tyler? I'd advise against too much change too soon. You should live with a garden for a couple of seasons before pulling anything up.'

Seized with the urge to say she fully intended to rip out every single shrub and bush and then torch what was left, Helen said, 'Please, call me Helen. And regrettably I'm not much of a gardener. What with work, and ...' she cast her eyes round the drawing room at the carpet and fabric samples she had been sorting through before being interrupted, 'still having so much to do on the house, the garden will have to wait a little while, I'm afraid.'

'I'd be more than willing to offer you any help and advice. As I mentioned earlier, I am the chairwoman of the Garden Club. Perhaps you ought to think of joining us. We meet once a month and have always been extremely lucky with our visiting speakers. Last month we had a talk about—'

'Goodness, is that the time?' interrupted Helen as the clock on the mantelpiece conveniently chimed the hour – it was seven o'clock. Time for decisive action. 'I'm dreadfully sorry, but I have a couple of important phone calls I really must make.' She got to her feet.

Thankfully – *oh, miraculously!* – the other woman rose from the sofa and before she could embark on another lengthy discourse, Helen was steering her towards the drawing-room door, the hall, and finally the front door. Olivia Marchwood's parting words were: 'Remember what I said about getting stuck into the social scene here in Swanmere. Do you think your husband would be interested in putting himself forward for the PCC? I've just resigned after many years of service, so there is a vacancy.'

I told the vicar that I'd had enough, and that he could jolly well do without me from now on. I dread to think how he will cope.'

Trusting that the vicar would be quietly celebrating this stroke of good fortune, Helen waved her guest off and closed the door. She shook her head at the thought of Hunter being on the Parish Church Council and went through to the kitchen.

Like most of the rooms at the Old Rectory, this had been gutted and thoroughly brought up to date. The messiest of the work, at Hunter's insistence, had been carried out before they'd moved in; there were just two bedrooms and one bathroom left to decorate. The kitchen, when they first saw it, had been a cramped, poky affair and had boasted little more than the absolute basics, probably installed during the seventies. There had been a rusting free-standing cooker, cracked linoleum tiles, a stainless steel sink, a couple of cupboards and marble-effect Formica worktops that were burned and scarred. Now, after some judicious knocking through, it was a much larger and lighter room with cream-painted cupboards, granite work surfaces, a deep ceramic sink and the biggest Aga Helen had ever set eyes on. She had wanted a range-style cooker, but Hunter had said it was an Aga or nothing. 'But they're so expensive,' she'd argued. 'They cost nearly as much as a small house.'

'How many times do I have to tell you, Helen, money isn't a problem?'

She unlocked the French windows and stepped outside. Standing against the stone balustrade she took several deep breaths as if cleansing herself of Olivia Marchwood. It was a glorious evening. Bathed in a golden light from the dipping sun, the garden, even in its bedraggled state, filled Helen with immense joy. How she loved it! The lawns were more like meadows with dandelions and daisies sprinkled throughout. There were rhododendrons on the cusp of flowering, their blushing buds ready to burst. Unpruned bushes sagged wearily out of the borders. Bluebells

shimmered beneath shiny-leaved magnolias. Beyond all this, beyond the copse of silver birch and hawthorn trees and a sweep of chestnuts she could see the clock tower of the Norman church in the distance. She had discovered since moving in that Tuesday was bell-ringing practice night. She imagined balmy summer nights when the air would resonate with the sound of bells. She hadn't had time yet to explore, but she knew there was a twisting path that led down to the church from a gate at the bottom of the garden.

Despite what she'd told Olivia Marchwood, she wasn't as inept a gardener as she'd implied. Her enthusiasm outweighed any real skill, but she knew enough to know that this garden was going to need a lot of tender loving care to bring it back to its former glory. She would have to find a gardener; it was too large to manage on her own. She had no idea how much gardeners charged, never having employed one before, but Hunter had told her to pay whatever it took. 'No bean counting,' he'd teased her. 'Just get the best man for the job.'

Her 'bean counting' as Hunter called it was a habit she was trying to kick, but it wasn't easy. Scrimping and saving came as naturally to her as breathing. For the last six years she had run her own travel company, specializing in cultural tours of the British Isles and Europe. Whilst it had adequately kept the wolf from the door, it had never been a big money spinner, and with a dependent grandmother to take care of, her finances were always stretched. To make matters worse, 9/11 had hit her badly. A large percentage of her business had been aimed at American tourists and when they stopped travelling, money became tighter still.

Then, to top it all, it became all too apparent that her grandmother needed more care. Helen had done her best to look after her, but they both knew that a nursing home was the only realistic solution. Emma's modest house was sold and the money invested so that the interest would pay for the kind of nursing home Helen felt confident would look after her grandmother. But the nursing home turned

out to be a disaster and Emma's mental and physical health deteriorated fast. Seeing the sadness – and fear – in Emma's face when she left her after each visit tore at Helen's heart. If this wasn't enough, the investment Helen had made with the proceeds from her grandmother's house sale wasn't the sound proposition she'd been led to believe it would be and given the current climate of poor returns, she was losing money faster than water leaking from a sieve. It was a catastrophe. All she had left was her home, a modest three-bedroom terraced house with a tiny sheltered garden. And then, out of the blue, along came Hunter and her life was changed.

Only once they were seriously involved did Helen grasp the extent of his wealth. The arrival of a brand new Mercedes coupé outside her house with a pink ribbon tied to the bonnet gave her cause to review matters. Before then, having listened to Annabel's tales and seen him in the society pages of *Cheshire Life*, as well as an article about him being North West Businessman of the Year, she'd thought that he was what one would call 'reasonably well-off'. When she realized she'd wildly underestimated his bank balance, she refused to see him any more. When he pressed her for a reason, she admitted that she didn't feel comfortable with the disparity in their financial situation. 'People will think I'm only involved with you because of your money,' she told him.

'And people will say I'm involved with you because you're young and look bloody good on my arm. Come on, Helen, sod what anyone else thinks. So what if I'm a millionaire many times over; I want to share my success with you. Is that so wrong? Should I be penalized for knowing my arse from my elbow?'

Knowing his arse from his elbow had given him the ability to set up his own warehousing and storage business, in his twenties, offering fully secure storage for domestic and office use, and then to go on expanding it until it became the largest storage company in the UK. Meanwhile, with his son Clancy doing the everyday running of the



business, he'd moved into the overseas property market, in particular holiday apartments and second homes in the Caribbean, Florida, Spain, and more recently Dubai. He was quoted in the business pages of *The Times* recently as saying, 'I don't believe in the meek inheriting the earth. If it was left to the meek, the world would be in an untenable sorry state.'

It was a typically brash no-nonsense comment from Hunter. But there was the other side to him, too: the abundantly generous side. Without his financial support, the hospice in Crantsford would undoubtedly close down. His engagement present to Helen, along with the emerald ring he'd surprised her with in the hot-air balloon, and which she always wore slightly self-consciously, was something that meant more to Helen than anything else. He paid for Emma to be moved to the best private nursing home money could buy. It meant she didn't have to sell her little house in Crantsford. Hunter had told her to get rid of it, saying that she didn't need it any more. But reluctant to part with her old home, she'd rented it out to a young professional couple.

Helen knew that she would spend the rest of her life thanking Hunter for what he'd done. Nothing she ever did would come close to repaying the debt she felt she owed him.

It didn't take her long to realize that this was exactly how Hunter liked things to be.