

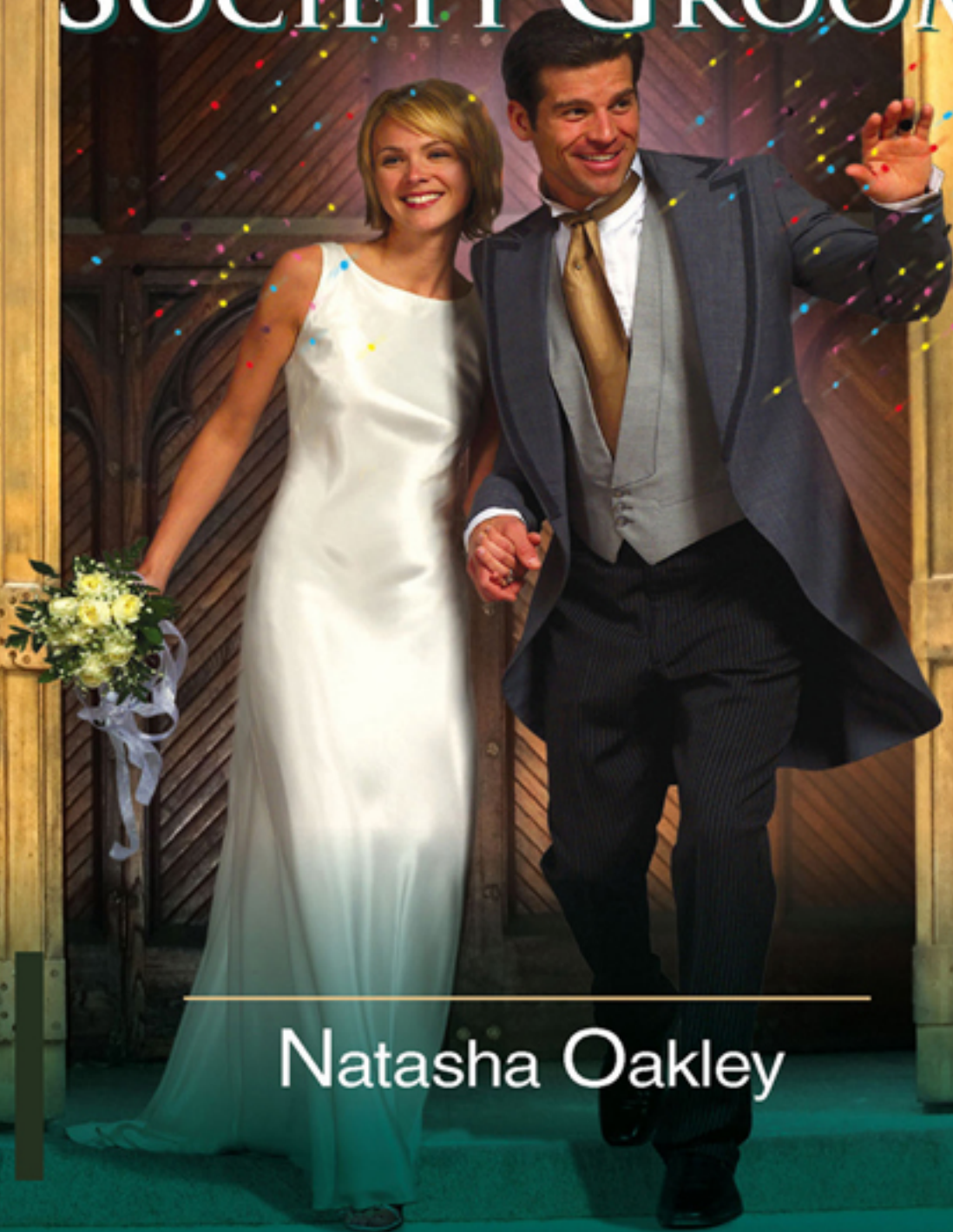


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HARLEQUIN ROMANCE®

ORDINARY GIRL, SOCIETY GROOM



Natasha Oakley

NATASHA OAKLEY

Ordinary Girl, Society Groom

«HarperCollins»

OAKLEY N.

Ordinary Girl, Society Groom / N. OAKLEY — «HarperCollins»,

Eloise Lawton has finally found the family she's never known. But now she's cast adrift in the high-society world where there's only one person Eloise can depend on: broodingly handsome Jeremy Norland. As family loyalties and secrets unravel, Eloise realizes that if she falls in love with Jeremy she's in danger of losing everything she's fought so hard to find. Will Eloise have the courage to risk it all?

Содержание

“I’m sorry—” she began, but he interrupted swiftly.	6
Ordinary Girl, Society Groom	7
CONTENTS	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	18
CHAPTER THREE	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

Dear Reader,

Have you ever experienced the shock of discovering someone close to you has done something you'd have sworn blind they'd never do?

Jem and Eloise in my story have to deal with the fallout of just such a discovery. It's an emotional journey for both of them, but by the end of this book they've a new compassion for human frailty and an understanding of how small decisions can have big consequences. Of course, they've also fallen in love, which is always fun to write!

I don't know about you, but the idea of marrying into the landed gentry is a very beguiling idea. The United Kingdom is peppered with the kind of historic stately homes that would make any sensible girl drool.

Coldwaltham Abbey is entirely fictional, but the village of Coldwaltham is tucked away in the Sussex countryside. Nearby there's the medieval town of Petworth and its late seventeenth-century mansion of the same name. It was while I was walking in the 700 acres of deer park landscaped by "Capability" Brown that this story was born.

Now, if only Jem Norland had been walking the other way....

With love,

Natasha

“I’m sorry—” she began, but he interrupted swiftly.

“Don’t.”

It held her silent. She knew exactly what he meant. They’d come too far together for any apology to be necessary. He knew so much of her journey...because he’d walked it with her.

A deeply compassionate, empathetic man. From the very first he’d made her feel safe. He did that now. She felt safe. Protected. Loved.

Loved. The truth imploded in her head. Laurence’s words echoed in her head, “a thousand small decisions” and then “as important as breathing.”

Ordinary Girl, Society Groom Natasha Oakley



www.millsandboon.co.uk

NATASHA OAKLEY told everyone at her primary school she wanted to be an author when she grew up. Her plan was to stay at home and have her mom bring her coffee at regular intervals—a drink she didn't like then. The coffee addiction became reality and the love of storytelling stayed with her. A professional actress, Natasha began writing when her fifth child started to sleep through the night. Born in London, she now lives in Bedfordshire, England, with her husband and young family. When not writing, or needed for “crowd control,” she loves to escape to antique fairs and auctions.

Like Jem Norland in this book, Natasha owns a much-loved pewter-colored Aga stove. She's a passionate cook and all the recipes from this book are on www.natashaoakley.com.

Books by Natasha Oakley:

HARLEQUIN ROMANCE®

3838—FOR OUR CHILDREN'S SAKE

3854—THE BUSINESS ARRANGEMENT

3878—A FAMILY TO BELONG TO

CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)
[CHAPTER TWO](#)
[CHAPTER THREE](#)
[CHAPTER FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER SIX](#)
[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER NINE](#)
[CHAPTER TEN](#)
[EPILOGUE](#)

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS true what people said—you were more alone in a crowd than any other place on earth. Eloise Lawton felt as lonely tonight as she ever had.

All she wanted to do was go home, run a bath and soak away her troubles. Instead she was here, making social small talk and avoiding the barbs of people who were fearful of what she might say about their dress sense. As well they might; she'd become more vitriolic of late. She couldn't seem to help it.

Eloise shifted her weight from one leg to the other, acutely aware of the way her Eduardo Munno sandals cut into the sides of her feet. Stunning to look at, but desperately uncomfortable when they were a size too small. Borrowed plumes for a woman who didn't fit in. Not with these people.

Everyone was vying for position, all judging the others on what they owned and who they were connected to. It was pitiful. Except it wasn't pity she felt. It was a deep, sickening sort of loathing. The kind that made her feel she needed to stand under the shower for half an hour to rid herself of the contamination.

But it was work. It paid the mortgage—and she didn't have the luxury of a handsome trust fund or an inherited ancestral pile. Unlike every second person here.

Eloise gave her wrist-watch a surreptitious glance and calculated how long she'd have to stick it out before she could make her excuses to Cassie. Not so long ago this kind of event would have filled her with excitement, but now...

Well, now things were different. A spontaneous decision to take her mother's belongings out of storage had changed everything.

It had seemed such a sensible thing to do. After six years it was certainly past time. She'd completed all the release paperwork without the slightest presentiment that she was opening a Pandora's box of emotions.

She'd known it was a mistake almost instantly. So many memories had rushed to crowd around her. Barely healed wounds had been ripped open and they felt as fresh and raw as when a lorry driver falling asleep at the wheel had altered everything.

She'd re-read the letter her mum had so carefully tucked inside her will and, six years on, she'd read it with a slightly different perspective.

Eloise let her eyes wander around the galleried grand hall. Enormous chandeliers hung down from the cavernous ceiling and huge displays of arum lilies, white orchids and tiny rosebuds had been tortured into works of art. No expense had been spared. Everything was perfectly beautiful.

A magical setting—but it felt like purgatory. How could it not? An ostentatious display of wealth for no apparent purpose. And her role in all this?

She no longer cared what colour anyone should be wearing or whether silk was the fabric of the season. When she sat at her keyboard tomorrow she'd summon up enough enthusiasm to get the article done but tonight it left her cold.

There was too much on her mind. Too much anger. Too much resentment.

'Mutton dressed as lamb,' Cassie hissed above the top of her champagne flute. 'Over there. At three o'clock.'

Eloise jerked to attention and swivelled round to look at the woman her boss was referring to in such disparaging terms.

'No, darling.' The editor of Image magazine tapped her arm. 'That's nine o'clock. I said three. Bernadette Ryland. By the alabaster pillar. Under that portrait of the hideously obese general.'

Obligingly, Eloise twisted the other way.

'In the yellow. Well, almost in the yellow. What was her stylist thinking of? The woman looks like some kind of strangulated chicken.'

Cassie wasn't kidding. It was a shame because the actress had been a strikingly beautiful woman before she'd succumbed to the lure of the surgeon's knife. It gave her face a perpetually surprised look. And that dress... It almost defied description. Certainly defied gravity.

Cassie took another sip of champagne. 'And Lady Amelia Monroe ought to rethink that haircut, don't you think? It makes her face look very jowly. Oh—' she broke off '—oh, my goodness... There's Jeremy Norland. And with Sophia Westbrooke. Now... that's the first interesting thing that's happened this evening. I wonder...'

'Jeremy Norland?' Eloise asked quickly, even as her eyes effortlessly fixed themselves on his tall, dark figure.

She'd seen a couple of photographs of him, one taken when he'd been playing polo and the other at a society wedding, but he was smoother-looking than she'd expected. Chocolate box handsome.

'By the door. Know him?'

'No.' Eloise's fingers closed convulsively round her glass. 'I don't know him. I heard his name mentioned, that's all,' she managed, her voice a little flat.

'Haven't we all, darling?' Cassie Sinclair lifted one manicured hand and waved it at a lady in grey chiffon who'd been trying to attract her attention. 'That's the sister of the Duke of Odell,' she explained in a quiet undertone Eloise scarcely heard. 'Married a mere mister. Kept the title of Lady, of course, and makes sure everyone knows it.' She swung round to exchange her empty glass for a full one.

Eloise stood transfixed. Jeremy Norland. Here. Her mind didn't seem capable of processing any other thought.

Viscount Pulborough's stepson was here. In London. He was standing by the heavy oak door, his face alight with laughter. Not a care in the world.

But then why should he have? He was living a charmed life.

Cassie followed the line of her gaze. 'Gorgeous, isn't he? All that muscle's been honed by hours on horseback. And that suit is fabulous. Look at his bum in those trousers. The man's sexy... very sexy.'

'And doesn't he just know it?' Eloise returned dryly, watching the way he glinted down at Sophia Westbrooke.

'Can't blame the man for knowing the effect he has on women, darling. Looks. Money. Connections. Pretty lethal combination, I'd say.'

Eloise forced a smile. 'I thought he didn't like London.'

'He doesn't. He stays down in Sussex on his stepfather's estate. Makes tables, chairs, that kind of thing.'

'Fine cabinetry. Yes, I know.' Eloise sipped her own champagne. 'I read something about that.'

'You need a second mortgage to buy the leg of a footstool,' Cassie agreed. 'Sophia's dress too, I imagine. Do you know who made it?'

'Yusef Atta. Up-and-coming designer. Specialising in embroidery on chiffon,' Eloise answered automatically. 'Very romantic silhouettes. That kind of thing.'

'Worth a feature?'

'Perhaps,' Eloise agreed, watching the way the teenager gazed up adoringly. Sophia Westbrooke couldn't be older than nineteen. Could she? Whereas Jeremy was thirty-four. Thirty-five, perhaps—she couldn't quite remember from the Internet article she'd read two nights ago.

Cassie seemed in tune with her thoughts. 'Just back from Switzerland. Not a day over nineteen. And with a man like Jem Norland. Lucky cow.'

'There's no luck about it. It's all part of the in-breeding programme. Like marries like, don't you know?' she said in her best parody of an up-market accent.

Cassie gave a delighted chuckle, her acrylic-tipped nails clinking against her champagne flute. 'Wicked child. Now circulate, darling. Get me the gossip and no more ogling the natives. They bite.'

How true. It was a pity no one had mentioned that to her mother twenty-eight years ago when she'd first started work at Coldwaltham Abbey, not much older than Sophia Westbrooke—but Eloise would lay money on their fates being completely different.

Eloise watched her boss network her way back through the crowded room. Cassie didn't fit in any more than she did, but you'd never know it from her demeanour. She just owned the space, dared anyone to reject her.

Eloise had used to be like that, ambitious to the core—but things had changed in the past fourteen weeks. Fourteen weeks and three days, to be precise. The day she'd brought home those two crates. Who would ever have thought such a short space of time could make such an incalculable difference? Her eyes flicked back to Jeremy Norland, universally known as Jem.

He was the epitome of upper class living. His suit was fabulous. Hand-stitched, no doubt. Criminally expensive.

Money and opportunity had been poured on him from the hour of his birth. He'd the bone-deep confidence of a man who'd been to the best schools and who knew the old boy network would support him in comfort till the day he died.

And she resented him with a vehemence that surprised even her.

He reached across to kiss the cheek of the effervescent Sophia, who giggled appreciatively. He was so arrogant—it shone from the top of his dark expensively cut hair right down to his handmade Italian leather shoes. He knew exactly what he was doing—and the effect he was having on his youthful companion. Eloise just longed for her to rear up and tell him to get lost.

It didn't happen, though. Sophia smiled coquettishly and rested a hand on his shoulder. Eloise couldn't honestly blame her. She wasn't to know. It was years of sitting in a ringside seat seeing someone else's unhappiness that meant she would never be so stupid as to fall for a man like Jem Norland.

Anger and hatred had been building up inside her ever since she'd re-read her mother's letter and now she couldn't bear to be near these self-absorbed people who'd destroyed her mother's life so completely.

Her life.

With their grand houses, their horses and their public school accents. She hated them all.

A few short weeks ago she'd been fascinated by them. A detached and slightly amused observer. But now...

Now she had nothing but contempt for them.

For Jem Norland. The privileged stepson of the man she really loathed—Laurence Alexander Milton, Viscount Pulborough.

Her father.

Father!

That was a joke. He'd been no more than the sperm donor.

Six years ago, when she'd first read that letter, she'd been too numbed by shock to really take it all in. The sudden loss of her mum had been trauma enough and she almost hadn't had the emotional space to register what she now knew to be the identity of the man whose gene pool she shared.

Viscount Pulborough wasn't part of her life. He'd meant less than nothing to her. It was her mum missing her graduation ceremony that had filled her mind and twisted the screw of pain a little tighter.

So she'd packed all her mum's things away and scarcely thought about it...for six years.

Six years. Time had passed so fast. Life had been busy. There'd been so much to do—building her career, saving for her deposit, trying to pretend she didn't feel so incredibly alone in a big, frightening world.

There'd always been plenty of excuses as to why her mum's belongings should stay safely locked away. She'd had a small bedsit...She'd be moving on soon, so what was the point...?

The excuses stopped when she'd bought her flat. Her own home. It was time to finally sort out the last of her mum's possessions. All those things she'd put in box files and refused to think about.

The letter.

It had always been there. A time bomb ticking away—only she hadn't realised it.

Re-reading her mum's words six years later, she had found her emotions were different. She had a new, fresh perspective and, as she read, her antipathy had turned to anger.

It had been so easy to imagine what had happened that summer. Young, naïve, desperately in love, her mother had been swept up into a beautiful fairy tale—except for the fact that her prince had turned out to be married. More frog than prince. There'd even been a castle...of a kind. A brief spell of happiness and...what?

The rest of her short life alone. Struggling to bring up her daughter by herself. Crying over bills and juggling two badly paid jobs to make ends meet. A few hours' pleasure in exchange for a lifetime of pain and responsibility.

And did the esteemed Viscount ever think of that when he strolled about his great estate in Sussex? Did he?

All of a sudden she'd had to know. It had still taken weeks of soul-searching before she'd finally built up the courage to confront the man who had so bitterly betrayed her mum. And her.

And for what?

Nothing.

Eloise turned swiftly on her borrowed designer heels and walked over to stand by the open window. The buzz of traffic in the distance competed with the elegant strains of Beethoven.

A faint pulsing had started in her right temple and was shooting arrows of pain around her eye socket. She wanted to cry out at the injustice of it all. The total unfairness.

Jem Norland watched her, his eyes distracted by the flash of purple silk.

'Jem, are you listening to me?' Sophia asked, pulling on his arm. 'I'm going with Andrew to find somewhere to sit down.'

'Who's the blonde?' Jem cut straight to the question that interested him most.

Lord Andrew Harlington squinted across the room. 'In the purple? With the legs?'

'That's it.'

He concentrated. 'No idea,' he said, wrapping an arm around Sophia's waist. 'How about you, Sophy? Recognise her?'

'That's Eloise...' his girlfriend searched the deepest recesses of her mind '...you know, that woman off the television. Eloise...Leyton. No, Lawton. That's it. Eloise Lawton. The woman who does the clothes thing.'

Jem stilled. 'What?'

'She does that programme about style,' Sophia volunteered. 'Colours and so forth. Blue tones and red tones. It makes a difference to how great you look. She's really good at it. Writes for Image as well.'

'I'd heard that,' Jem said dryly, looking more closely at the woman who'd just pitched a missile into the midst of his family.

A blonde? Somehow he hadn't expected a blonde. Eloise Lawton—astringent, witty commentator on the fashion foibles of her contemporaries. This he knew. His mother and stepsister had told him.

But he hadn't expected the kind of cool, classy-looking blonde who might have stepped straight out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie.

'Champagne, sir.'

Jem pulled his gaze away. 'Thank you,' he said, reaching out and accepting a flute. He knew his mother would have counselled caution, but the opportunity was irresistible.

What he really wanted to know was why. Why now? Why Laurence? His stepfather was the gentlest of men. A deeply religious man, honourable and good. It was unthinkable...

'She is pretty, isn't she?' Sophia said at his elbow. 'Not your type, though.'

Jem looked down at her impish face. 'What?'

'Eloise Lawton. Very pretty.'

'Yes,' he stated baldly.

In fact, Eloise Lawton was beautiful. Beautiful, manipulative and dangerous. It was difficult to believe that anyone wrapped up inside such an appealing package could be guilty of such cold-blooded cruelty.

How could anyone dream up such a scam? And at such a painful, difficult time. Did she need the publicity so badly that she couldn't see the hurt she'd cause?

Oblivious of their amused glances, Jem made his excuses and threaded his way across to where she stood. He wasn't sure what he was going to say—not until the moment she looked up at him.

He saw the recognition in the depths of her dark brown eyes. He should have expected that. Someone like Eloise Lawton would have done her homework very thoroughly.

She'd certainly timed her letter perfectly. She'd selected the exact moment when the elderly Viscount was at his most vulnerable and the family would do practically anything to protect him.

He would do anything to protect the man who'd turned his life around. His anger crystallised into a steely coldness.

'Jem Norland,' he said, holding out his hand.

He watched the way her hands fluttered against her evening bag, the way she tried to smile before it faltered pitifully.

Eloise Lawton wasn't what he'd expected at all. It suddenly occurred to him how tired she looked. There were dark smudges beneath her eyes and they held the kind of expression he'd hoped never to see again. Such hurt. Almost hopelessness.

Slowly she placed her champagne flute on a side table. 'Eloise Lawton,' she said, placing her own hand inside his. It felt cold. Small.

He let his fingers close about it, suppressing every desire to comfort her. Whatever the appearances to the contrary, Eloise Lawton was one tough cookie. She had an agenda which would hurt the people he loved.

He knew, because he'd seen it, that the space for the father's name on her birth certificate had been left blank. Whoever her father had been, it certainly wasn't Viscount Pulborough.

Which meant?

His jaw hardened. It meant she was chancing her arm. Looking for publicity. He knew the kind of woman she must be. An 'it' girl. Looking for fame, for fame's sake. Famous for doing nothing.

And, God help him, he knew enough about that type of woman. They'd been the blight on his early childhood. The siren call his father had never been able to resist.

It was only...She didn't seem like that. She had more class than he'd expected. A gentle dignity...

She tried to smile again. He watched it start and then falter. 'I write for Image.'

'So I gather,' he said, releasing her hand. Her eyes flicked nervously towards the door. 'My friend, Sophy, tells me you're an expert on how other women should dress.'

'N-no. Well, I write about fashion, if that's what she means. It's all about opinion, after all.'

It was a diplomatic answer. She was clever. He had to give her that. And beautiful. Undeniably. A cool, serene beauty.

And beneath that...there would be...what? Passion? Fire?

And avarice. This had to be all about money, didn't it? About building a career. Using. Stepping on anyone to reach your goal.

Her goal, he reminded himself. She'd selected a vulnerable, ill, elderly man and claimed to be his daughter. With what proof?

None.

But she'd reckoned without him.

Jem forced himself to appear relaxed. 'And television? Sophy mentioned you'd been on television.'

'A little. I was asked to make a programme about the BAFTAs and I've done the occasional slot on morning television.'

Her hands moved endlessly over her evening bag. It didn't take a genius to recognise how nervous she was. She had good reason.

Laurence had stalwartly believed in Jem when he'd done everything he could to prove him wrong. He'd maintained a faithful belief in his stepson's innate goodness—despite all appearances to the contrary. And Jem had every intention of returning the compliment.

Laurence was not the kind of man to walk away from his responsibilities, whatever the personal cost. His sense of right and wrong was ingrained in the fibre of his personality. He could no more have rejected a daughter than he could have walked away from Coldwaltham Abbey. Both were sacred trusts, never to be abandoned.

'Do you want to do more TV?' he asked blandly.

'No.'

'No?'

Her fingers moved nervously. She placed her evening bag on the narrow table and picked up her champagne flute. 'Not really. It was exciting. Interesting. But no, I don't think so. I only really do it because it helps the magazine.'

'Image?'

'Yes.' She sipped her champagne. 'And it raises my profile.'

'That's important?'

Her eyes moved nervously. 'Very. Having a name people recognise is starting to open all kinds of doors.'

'Really?'

'Who you know is more important in this business than what you know.'

And Laurence was to be a casualty of that meteoric rise to the top.

But why Laurence?

Why try to use a man whose life had been beyond reproach? Someone who other people could look up to. Why be so cruel?

To his wife? To his family?

The answers came easily. She probably had a novel sitting in her bottom drawer she wanted publishing. All she needed was a 'name', a little scandal hanging about her, something that would persuade the big publishing houses to take a chance on her.

She sickened him.

'I'd like to write about other things. I love fashion but...'

She broke off. Her gaze darted out of the window.

'You want more?' he finished for her. Of course she did. A high maintenance blonde, dressed in designer clothes.

She looked back, responding to the edge in his voice. 'Is there something wrong with that?'

'It depends what you're prepared to do to achieve it.'

Eloise frowned. 'Of course.'

Her fingers moved nervously on her champagne flute. His face was unreadable but she sensed he didn't like her. Perhaps it was for no other reason than he despised her profession. Many people did. But, perhaps....

Eloise quickly gulped another mouthful of champagne, the excellent vintage completely wasted. It could have been pure vinegar and she probably wouldn't have noticed.

She shouldn't have come. If she'd known Jem Norland had been on the guest list, she wouldn't have. Or any other member of Viscount Pulborough's family, for that matter. When she met them she wanted to be prepared, and for it to happen in her time and on her terms.

This wasn't the way it was meant to be. She wasn't ready. Jem Norland's startling blue eyes continued to watch her.

Did he know? Or didn't he? Had his stepfather spoken to him? The questions thumped through her head with the rhythm of a heartbeat.

'I understand from my mother that you're acquainted with my stepfather.'

Eloise tightened her grip on her glass. She could feel perspiration beading on her forehead, her hands become clammy. Her mouth moved soundlessly.

He knew.

It was a sensation akin to jumping off a cliff, the wind roaring in her ears as she sped towards a fate she had no control over.

'Viscount Pulborough?' he prompted, as the silence stretched out between them. 'My mother's second husband.'

'We...we've never met.'

His right eyebrow moved in an exaggerated expression of surprise. His eyes travelled the length of her body, assessing and critical.

It was years and years of training that made it possible for a man to deliver such a non-verbal put down. Generations of believing you were somehow superior to every other member of the human race.

She really hated that he could make her feel so small and so worthless. If anyone should have been cowering with shame, it should have been him. It was his mother's husband who had abandoned a teenage girl carrying his baby.

'Really? I must have misunderstood what she told me.'

'My mum knew him. Years ago. I wrote to Viscount Pulborough to tell him she'd died.' Eloise carefully put her glass down on the side table and picked up her evening bag. 'He hasn't replied.'

Three weeks and there'd been no reply. Nothing. She hadn't expected that. She hadn't expected her father to welcome her with open arms—but nothing. No response at all. It seemed incredible. And with each passing day she felt more resentful.

How could anyone do that? How could he have created a life and care so little about it?

From the time she'd been old enough to ask questions about who her father was, her mother had said he was a good man. A man who couldn't be with them, however much he wanted to be.

His identity had always been a secret. But some part of Eloise had clung to the knowledge that he was a 'good man'. He would have wanted her in his life...if only it had been possible. He would have loved her. Loved her mother. He was a 'good man'.

Childish nonsense. He was a man who'd had too much of everything. A man who clearly rated people as worthy of notice or not worthy. A man who'd left a young girl to deal with the consequences of their affair alone and unsupported. A man who'd completely deleted the knowledge that he'd fathered a baby girl.

Her.

'He's been unwell.'

'Unwell?' Her eyes flicked up to his. She would swear his voice had become more menacing, beneath the suave veneer.

'But perhaps you know that already? He's been in hospital,' Jem continued smoothly.

'No. No...I didn't...I didn't know.'

Why would she have known that? She felt somehow that he blamed her. But for what?

‘He’s undergone heart surgery. A quadruple bypass.’

‘Oh.’ Eloise didn’t know what to say. Considering Viscount Pulborough was a man she didn’t know, had never met, it was strange to feel such an overwhelming reaction to the news of his operation.

‘But at seventy-three it’s taken its toll.’

She knew a moment of panic. He couldn’t die. Not now. If he did she would never have the chance to speak to him. Would never know why he’d abandoned them.

‘Could he die?’ she asked, taking an involuntary step forward.

Jem held his ground. ‘He had a stem cell bleed four years ago which made the procedure more risky than usual, but he came through the operation with only a small scare.’

‘Scare?’

‘His blood pressure shot up as he was coming round from the anaesthetic and they had to bring him round more slowly than they’d hoped. But he’s making excellent progress now.’

‘Th-that’s good.’

‘Yes, it is. The entire family has rallied round to support him.’

Eloise looked away, embarrassed. ‘Of course. I’m sure...I...’ She closed her eyes for a moment.

‘Part of that is keeping him free of stress and making sure nothing’s allowed to upset him.’

His words pooled in the silence. There was no possible way she could misconstrue what he was saying. From somewhere deep within her Eloise pulled out a quiet, ‘I see.’ And then, because she couldn’t help it, ‘You’re protecting him from me. He hasn’t seen my letter. Has he?’

‘No.’

No. No apology, just an unequivocal ‘no’. All these days, waiting for an answer that hadn’t come. All the worry and nervous energy. The sick fear. The feeling of utter rejection. The anger.

And Viscount Pulborough didn’t even know she’d written to him.

His precious ‘new’ family, his ‘real’ family, had closed ranks round him, lest he should be upset. Upset! It didn’t occur to them to think how she might be feeling.

Of course it didn’t. And if it had, they wouldn’t have cared. She was beneath notice. An irritation. Someone born the wrong side of the blanket who was refusing to stay there.

And then there was a new thought. Someone had read her letter. A feeling of coldness spread through her body. That someone had opened her letter. Read it. Dissected and discussed it.

It had been private. So difficult to write. She’d not imagined anyone reading the contents but her father.

She took a deep breath and met his eyes. ‘Did you read it?’

‘No.’

‘Then who?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘They had no right to do it. It was a private letter. Personal. It doesn’t concern anyone except...’ She hesitated, uncertain how to refer to him. My father. She couldn’t say that. The word ‘father’ stuck in her throat. ‘Viscount Pulborough and myself. Not you, not anyone else.’

‘Not even the Viscount’s wife?’

Eloise met his critical gaze. ‘No.’

She watched him check the retort he’d been about to make. A muscle pulsed at the side of his face. ‘Why now?’ he asked softly.

‘Pardon?’

Jem smiled politely, his eyes flinty blue. ‘I was wondering why now. Why make your claims now? Why not last year? Why this exact moment?’

Eloise drew a steadying breath. His words confused her. She didn’t understand what he was trying to say, but she could hear the underlying criticism.

And then it hit her. Like a sledgehammer powering through the air, it hit her.

He didn’t believe her.

The room around her felt hot, the air heavy with a mixture of cigarette smoke and perfume. Outside the open window the low hum of traffic and the occasional siren tore through the night sky.

Jem Norland didn't believe she was his stepfather's natural daughter. He was looking down his supercilious nose as though she was something he'd stepped in. It was none of his business, nothing to do with him but he dared...he dared...

She couldn't even begin to put words to what she was feeling. Her anger was incandescent. How dared he question her? Her mother? Did he think her mother hadn't known who'd fathered her baby?

He wanted to know why she'd made contact now. She'd tell him. She'd make him feel so small he'd want to crawl beneath the skirting board. 'Because I've only just realised how much it matters.'

She saw the frown snap across his forehead.

'When my mother died...There was a letter. Kept with her will.' Eloise found it difficult to speak. Her anger choked her and her grief was still raw. Even now. She couldn't do it. She couldn't go on.

Images of that day. The policewomen who'd come to tell her. The long drive back home. The shock and the emptiness. And the sense of disbelief as she'd read the words her mother had written in her distinctive italic hand. A letter from the grave. The truth. At last.

They'd been words her mum had hoped to say—one day. No dark premonition had made her put them down on paper. It was her usual, thoughtful care for the daughter she loved that had made her write it down and tuck it inside her will. Just in case.

At first Eloise had been too busy to think clearly. There'd been a funeral to arrange—and pay for. A home to empty. Her life had changed in a single second and she'd ached for things to return to the way they'd been before—even though she'd known they couldn't.

It was much later that the anger had set in. Six years later. When she'd collected her mother's meagre possessions from storage. A whole lifetime contained in two crates. When she'd really thought about the council-owned flat they'd called home. When she'd done that first Internet search and had seen a picture of Coldwaltham Abbey.

Her father had let them struggle with nothing. Nothing.

And then she'd re-read her mother's letter. Amazingly, there'd been no bitterness. Her mum had loved her father, had believed in him right up to the moment she'd tucked the letter inside her will. Probably until the day she'd died.

From that moment Eloise had felt a gnawing curiosity. That was why now. But how could a man like Jem Norland ever hope to understand even a tenth of what she was feeling? She wasn't entirely sure she understood it herself.

Eloise took a deep breath and tried again. 'My mother was involved in a head-on collision. Six years ago. A lorry...' Her voice faltered, tears blocking her throat. 'The driver fell asleep at the wheel. She d-died. Instantly.'

'I'm sorry.'

Eloise sensed Jem move towards her. She stepped back, her hand raised to shield her. 'It was a long time ago. You want to know why I waited until now?' She didn't wait for his answer, she continued relentlessly. 'She never told me who my father was. It was a secret. She told no one. She put a letter—'

'No one?'

The anger flickered back in her eyes. 'She must have been a pushover for your stepfather. She just disappeared quietly. Went off to have her baby by herself. Never asked for anything. Never tried to make contact. Never...' Her voice broke on a sob. 'My mother was worth a million of him. It was his loss.'

CHAPTER TWO

SHE turned abruptly and pushed her way through the throng of silk and chiffon-clad women with their attendant dinner-jacketed swains, her heart pounding with an anger she'd never experienced before.

And sorrow. It had seeped into her bones. It permeated everything.

Her letter hadn't even reached the man her mother had loved. It had been passed around strangers. Her mother's secret had been shared with all the people she'd tried to keep it from.

Her own quiet, dignified request for answers, her need to understand what had happened, had been misconstrued. She felt violated and desperately hurt. Angry for herself—and for her mother.

Eloise found the ladies' cloakroom by pure instinct. She could hardly see for the tears burning behind her eyes. She pushed open the door and stepped down into the marble opulence.

Thankfully it was empty. She stumbled forward and let the tap run cold for a second or two before splashing her face.

He didn't believe her. She'd never expected that. She'd spent so much time imagining what kind of response her letter would receive. She'd never imagined for a single second it would be met with blatant disbelief and never reach the man she'd intended it for.

The door clicked open. Eloise glanced up at the two middle-aged women who paused in their conversation the minute they saw her. She forced herself to stand straight and calmly turned off the cold tap. She didn't want their sympathy—or their questions.

As soon as they'd passed Eloise covered her eyes with her hand. She needed to go home. Decide what she was going to do now. Cry.

She needed to cry out the frustration and the anger. The sadness. The waste of it all.

Cassie wouldn't like it but she couldn't risk speaking to Jem Norland again. Why did he think her mother had lied? How dared he think that? She brushed away an angry tear.

The door at the end of the powder room clicked open. 'Are you feeling unwell?' one of ladies who'd passed earlier asked.

Eloise spun round. 'I'm fine. Sorry,' she answered briskly. 'I'm fine. Really.' She made a show of checking her make-up in the lighted mirrors and adjusted the narrow straps of her evening gown before leaving the ladies' room.

The babble of conversation immediately hit her as a wall of sound. The heat was stifling and the air was full of heavy perfume. Eloise pulled a tired hand across her forehead, easing out the tension, and crossed the room towards her employer.

'You look dreadful,' Cassie remarked as soon as she joined her.

Eloise let her breath out in a gentle, single stream. They were friends to a point, but Cassie wasn't the kind of woman you could confide in.

In fact, since her mother's death she'd discovered she really didn't have any friends she trusted in that way. Not for the things that were truly important, the things that touched your soul and defined your personality.

'It's nothing a good night's sleep won't cure,' she lied. 'I think I'll go home, though.'

Cassie's mouth thinned. She didn't like it. Eloise knew the signs of irritation well. Her employer ate and slept her job and expected everyone else to do the same. Nothing in Cassie's life was allowed to impinge on the really important business of running a magazine.

'Now?'

'I've got plenty of material.' Eloise glanced down at her watch and added, 'Which is more than can be said for Bernadette Ryland.'

Cassie's painted mouth relaxed into a half smile and she spun round to take another view of the actress's skimpy gown. 'True. But there are one or two people I'd still like to speak to, if I can.'

Failure wasn't in Cassie's vocabulary. She would speak to everyone she intended to—and stay until it was done. It was why she was as successful as she was.

Eloise followed Cassie's eyes as they searched out Monica Bennington, whose affair with a disgraced Member of Parliament had been headline news for the past week. A salacious story and Cassie wouldn't leave without some take on it.

'If you give me half an hour I'll come with you. We're all a bit jittery after Naomi's mugging.'

Naomi's recent attack had traumatised the entire office—but even that couldn't persuade Eloise to wait. Cassie's half an hour would become an hour, then maybe two. She had to leave now. Her temples had started to thud and she felt as if needles were being pushed into her eye sockets.

And she wanted to cry. Tough, sassy woman about town that she was—she wanted to cry like a baby. 'I don't want to rush you. I'll call a cab.'

Cassie's eyes flicked back to Monica. Eloise could see that she was torn as to what she should do. 'Alone? You're sure?'

'Positive. I'll be fine. It's not very late. I could even catch the tube but I'd look a bit daft dressed like this. Probably not the best idea for a fashion guru.'

Cassie laughed, as Eloise had intended she should. Her hard face softened slightly and she rested her hand lightly on Eloise's bare arm. 'Get them to call you a taxi from Reception. Bring the receipt in tomorrow. Keep safe.'

Eloise smiled her thanks and turned away. Thank God. Escape. Her eyes fixed on the double doors with the determination of a drowning man trying to reach shore. She'd never left an evening like this so early before. Had never felt such an overwhelming urge to run away.

But then she'd never met Jem Norland before.

The sudden cold blast of air was a relief. Eloise had never fainted in her life but she'd felt perilously close to it back in the ballroom. She took in a couple of steadying breaths, grateful for the comparative quiet.

Her fingers struggled with the stiff clasp on her evening bag before she managed to retrieve the small white ticket she needed to reclaim her wrap. With a nervous glance over her shoulder, she hurried down the wide-stepped staircase.

'Miss Lawton?'

She didn't need to turn round to recognise the voice of Jem Norland. Her fingers hesitated on the smooth mahogany banister rail and she stopped. 'Go away,' she managed. 'I don't want to speak to you.'

She carried on down the stairs, gathering up the fine silk of her skirt to keep it out of the way of her heels.

The marble-floored entrance hall was full of people and she had no choice but to take her place in a queue. He came to stand beside her. Tall and intimidating. 'I'm sorry.'

Eloise kept looking staunchly ahead. 'For what?'

'I've upset you.'

Bizarrely, he sounded genuine. Eloise couldn't quite understand that. He'd made a point of coming to speak to her when he'd known perfectly well who she was. He'd made it perfectly plain that he didn't believe her story. What exactly did he expect her to feel?

'I'm angry. Okay?' She turned to look at him. 'Not upset, angry. Very, very angry.'

'I'm sorry.' He kept his voice level and calm.

Eloise felt hot tears prick behind her eyes. 'Oh, go away.' Then, with a small break in her voice, 'Please, Leave me alone. Just go away.'

The queue moved forward and Eloise resolutely concentrated on handing over her ticket and reclaiming her wrap. She draped the soft folds about her shoulders, aware that Jem Norland had moved to stand near the reception desk.

Eloise looked back up the staircase to the oppressive portraits above. The sound of laughter and the general hum of conversation wafted down. She'd have been better off waiting for Cassie. If only he'd leave her alone.

She looked at the queue, which was five deep, all waiting patiently for the receptionist, and with sudden decisiveness she turned towards the exit.

Jem stopped her. 'We ought to talk.'

'About?' She pulled her wrap tightly about her shoulders. 'I've got nothing to say to you and I'm not interested in anything you've got to say to me. My mum was right when she decided to have nothing to do with my father.'

As exits went, it was pretty good. Head held high, she stepped out on the stone steps.

But it was dark.

And she'd meant to wait for a taxi. It was stupid to be walking about London at night, alone, in sandals with three-inch heels and wearing an expensive evening dress. She knew it.

But she couldn't go back. Stifling the panic she always felt about being alone at night, Eloise headed towards the main road. The street was deserted. Naomi had been unlucky. There was nothing to worry about, she told herself. This was a well-lit road in a good area and it would be easy to hail a taxi at Hyde Park Corner.

The wind whipped between the buildings and she pulled her deep purple wrap more closely about her shoulders as though it would offer protection. A shield against people who would do her wrong.

She pulled a wry smile. It wasn't even doing a particularly good job at keeping her warm. What was really needed on a night like this was thermal underwear and a duffel coat. Oh, and a pair of comfortable shoes. She'd kill for a pair of loafers right now.

A quick glance over her shoulder reassured her. There was no one. Not even Jem Norland. It was eerily quiet and, after the bright lights of Alburgh House, unpleasantly dark. It was strange how night made such a difference and made familiar places uncomfortable.

A sensible woman would have called for a cab from Reception; she wouldn't have let Jem Norland deflect her. She crossed the road and set out along the pavement at a brisk pace. Her skin seemed to prickle with an undisclosed danger. All the result of an overactive imagination, she chided herself immediately, but she still quickened her pace.

In the daylight this was a bustling affluent area. In the dark it seemed full of alleyways and litter. It was all fanciful nonsense, though, and the main road was only a short distance away. Lots of people. Lots of taxis. No problem, she muttered underneath her breath.

No problem at all. Keep walking, keep looking ahead, make it look like you know where you're going....

The wind picked up and Eloise sensed the first droplets of rain hanging in the air. Blast it. A drenching would really be a perfect ending to a miserable evening. She pulled her wrap tightly around her body.

It was getting colder and the wind stronger. Almost before she heard them she was aware of footsteps behind her. A sudden sound in the darkness. Her heart pounded uncomfortably against her ribcage and she quickened her pace, listening for the slightest sound behind her.

The footsteps seemed to keep pace with hers—although they were some way back. She took a deep breath to steady herself. She was jumping at shadows. A few more metres and she'd be on the main road. Plenty of people there, she reminded herself, but her heart continued to pound painfully against her chest.

With a furtive glance behind her to confirm there was someone coming up behind her, she saw a man still someway in the distance. Turning back, she did a few rapid calculations. How far from the main road was she? If she made a run for it, could he catch her? Probably. With her shoes off? Maybe not.

She let out another long slow breath. Time to discover whether not waiting in the Reception area had been one of the dumbest decisions she'd ever made. With a defiant toss of the head she crossed the road. And then she listened.

The footsteps stayed steady. For a moment Eloise allowed herself to relax. How stupid was she being? She was walking towards the main road; it was highly likely other people would decide to do the same. Then she noticed the footsteps behind her had quickened—and she heard the man cross the road.

Every nerve in her body was screaming as she resisted the overwhelming temptation to turn round and look. If she did that she'd be committed to flight and it wasn't much further. Not much further at all.

Eloise could see the corner approaching fast even as the footsteps sounded closer. The lights of the restaurants shone brightly. If this man got any closer she would kick off her heels and run for it. It was a question of timing.

Or she could turn and fight. Her mind struggled to remember what she'd learnt. Hand beneath the chin, knee in groin...

'Miss Lawton.'

She stopped and spun round to confront Jem Norland. Hot, molten anger rose even as relief flooded through her. 'Damn you. You stupid man! How dare you do this to me?'

Painful gulps of air shot into her lungs as she tried to control some of the anger bursting from her. 'Hasn't anyone ever told you that you shouldn't go following women, particularly at night, and even more particularly when they're on their own? It's an incredibly crass thing to do.'

'I didn't mean to frighten you,' Jem said, his footsteps slowing. 'I thought you'd seen me.'

'Just like you didn't mean to upset me? Why can't you leave me alone?' Eloise asked in a burst of anger before her chest contracted and she suddenly found she couldn't breathe. Her eyes opened in shock as she struggled to take in enough air, each shallow breath only serving to make her feel more frightened.

Jem took her face between his hands. 'Just breathe. In and out.' His blue eyes held her brown ones, the strength in them willing her to stay calm. 'It's okay. You're okay.'

Eloise didn't believe him but she kept looking up at him, the warmth from his hands giving her comfort. Her chest hurt and her breath was still coming in painful gasps. 'I'm sorry. I—'

'Don't try and speak,' he cut across her curtly. 'You're in shock. Just keep breathing steadily. In and out. If I had a paper bag I'd give you that to blow into.' He looked about him as though he might be able to conjure one up in the middle of a London street.

Eloise laughed, a hiccup and then a sob. 'I'm sorry.'

'What for? I'm the one that's frightened you. I should have called out earlier, made sure you knew I was there. I didn't think.'

As her breath steadied he let his hands fall down by his sides. There was silence for a moment as they looked at each other. Then Eloise shivered. Within seconds he'd slipped off his jacket and placed it around her shoulders.

'No. I can't—' she began but he stopped her.

'It's cold.' He looked up at the sky as the soft drops of rain continued to fall. 'And it's started to rain.'

He moved to place a hand in the small of her back and urged her towards the main road. After a few steps, Eloise stopped. 'What are you doing? What do you want?'

'To talk to you,' he said, as though he were speaking to a child. 'We do need to talk.'

Eloise shook her head and her voice wavered. 'Why? You don't believe me.'

He put his hands in his pockets. 'But you believe it,' he said quietly.

His jacket hung heavy about her shoulders. She turned and walked towards the main road. He hadn't said he believed her, only that he believed she believed it.

And he wanted to talk. Why? But all at once she didn't really care. The most important thing was that she wasn't alone in a dark street. She hadn't been attacked. She was safe.

Still, after eight years, the memories of that night haunted her. She'd been one of the lucky ones, she'd got away unharmed, but in so many ways she was still a victim. Frightened of the dark, frightened of walking alone, frightened of being frightened.

Naomi's mugging had brought it all back. Had made that fear fresh. A large drop of rain fell on the fine wool of his jacket. Eloise glanced up and then across at Jem. 'You'll get wet.'

'I'll survive.' He gave a half smile and her stomach twisted in recognition of something. 'Where are we going?' he asked.

'To the main road. To hail a cab.'

'You could have got one from Reception.'

'I know.' She kept walking, her face turned away.

'But I was there,' he said slowly. 'Is that it?'

'Something like that.' She risked a glance across at him. The rain had started in earnest and his crisp white shirt had begun to stick to his body.

It was a good body. Tautly muscled, as Cassie had noticed. She'd said he was sexy too, the tiny voice in her head reminded her.

And he was. Sexy. Strong. Safe.

Safe. Why had she thought that? Perhaps it was because of the way his eyes had held hers when she'd been panicked and fighting for breath. His hands had cradled her face.

Eloise looked down at her ruined sandals. 'I'll be fine now.'

'I'll find you a taxi.'

His voice brooked no argument and she was too relieved to protest. The lights of the main road ahead shone brightly, but she'd still prefer not to be alone. 'Thanks.'

'You're welcome. Having scared you witless, it's the least I can do.'

She looked up in time to see his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. Very sexy. But still the enemy.

He still thought she'd claimed to be Viscount Pulborough's daughter when she wasn't. What did he think she wanted? What could she possibly hope to gain?

'Why don't you believe me?' she asked suddenly.

Jem drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. 'Laurence is a deeply religious man. He stayed married to his first wife for nearly thirty years, even when she was seriously ill with motor neurone disease. His opinions on the sanctity of marriage are very fixed.'

'So you think my mum was lying?'

'Laurence's name doesn't appear on your birth certificate—'

'How could it?' she responded swiftly. 'He didn't stay around that long.'

Jem turned towards her. His eyes were sad, compassionate, as though he didn't want to hurt her but believed he had no choice.

'I can't see Laurence ever turning his back on a child. It's out of character. He wouldn't do it.'

'But you didn't ask him. Did you?' Eloise hugged his jacket about her shoulders. 'You didn't show him my letter.'

'No. Not yet.' He stopped by the door of a lighted café. 'Do you want a coffee?'

Eloise glanced up and then through the window. The staff were clearing the tables. 'I want to go home. I'll be fine now, you go back to the gala.'

'I'm not going.' He slicked back his dark hair. 'I'm cold, drenched and I'm going to see you home.'

'What about Sophia Westbrooke? Won't she be looking for you?'

'Sophy will go home with Andrew.'

'Will she mind?'

‘Why would she? They know I hate these kinds of events. I don’t really like London. Too noisy. Too many people.’

They turned the final corner and stood beneath a street light, the rain glinting as it was illuminated in the soft beam.

‘I’d read that.’

He glanced across at her. ‘What else did you read?’

Eloise let her eyes scan the distance. She took a shallow breath. ‘Your father is the late Rupert Norland. He died in a speedboat accident when you were fourteen and your mother married Viscount Pulborough eighteen months later. You were expelled from school. You design furniture and you’re not married.’

‘That’s all?’

She glanced across at him. His hands were nonchalantly in his trouser pockets, his face mildly interested. ‘You’ve a half-brother called Alexander who’s at Harrow and who will ultimately inherit Coldwaltham Abbey. Rumour has it you were all but engaged to Brigitte Coulthard, heiress to the Coulthard retail empire. Since then, nothing particularly serious.’ She raised an eyebrow. ‘Do you want any more? I’m good at research.’

‘So I see. I’ve no secrets then,’ he said dryly.

Eloise pulled his jacket closely about her shoulders. ‘Have I?’

‘No.’ He gave a half smile. ‘I’m pretty good at research myself.’

There was a silence before Jem lunged forward and hailed a passing black cab. As the driver swerved over, switching off his ‘for hire’ light, Jem turned back. ‘Where to?’

‘Hammersmith.’

He nodded and Eloise noticed the way the rain was now dripping down the back of his neck, his shirt sticking to his back. His jacket around her shoulders was sodden, the bottom of her fine silk dress hung in miserable folds and her shoes were ruined.

She didn’t care. About that or about anything. A strange fatalism seemed to rest upon her. Jem seemed inclined to make decisions and she didn’t have the energy to stop him.

Settling back in the deep seat of the taxi, she didn’t even comment when he took the seat next to her. It seemed natural he should. She didn’t ask where he was going or whether this was taking him out of his way.

What if he were right? What if Viscount Pulborough wasn’t her father? It was a small chink of doubt which made her feel like she was betraying her mother. But he was so certain. So very certain.

She turned her head away and watched the raindrops bead and weave their way across the window. Beyond it was all a blur of night.

Would her mother have lied? Eloise couldn’t believe that. Wouldn’t.

‘Where to, luv?’ The taxi driver half turned his head to talk through the open window.

Eloise jumped. ‘Second on the left. Number fifteen.’ She glanced across at Jem. His face was hidden in darkness but she knew he was watching her. She shrugged out of his jacket. ‘You’d better have this back,’ she said, passing it to him. ‘Thank you.’

He took the jacket and felt inside the inner pocket for his wallet as the taxi pulled up outside her home. Jem opened the door and helped her out on to the pavement.

Eloise stood foolishly and watched him walk round to pay the driver. The rain had stopped but the pavements were dark and the air smelt damp.

Jem came back to join her as the taxi pulled away. As she watched the tail-lights disappear she glanced up at him. ‘You’ll never get another taxi round here.’

He shrugged. ‘Then I’ll walk.’

‘That’s silly.’ Eloise shivered, her thin wrap doing nothing to keep her warm.

‘Perhaps, but I’ll be happier if I know you’re safe.’

She turned and fitted her front door key into the lock. ‘Do you want to come in for a coffee? You could ring for a taxi.’ The words were out of her mouth before she even knew what she’d said.

‘Coffee would be good.’

In the ‘guide to all single women living alone in London’ this was another foolish thing to do. You didn’t ask a man you’d met that evening back to your flat. But even though Jem Norland was many things she loathed, she wasn’t frightened of him.

She wasn’t even sure she loathed him any more. It had burned itself out. It was the situation she hated and someone to talk to, anyone, was better than no one.

The traditional nineteen-thirties front door opened into a small lobby. ‘My flat is upstairs,’ she said unnecessarily. ‘The house was divided ten years ago.’

‘How long have you lived here?’

‘Six months. I was lucky to get it.’

Jem followed her up the staircase and waited while she unlocked the second door.

‘The lounge is through there. You’d better go in,’ she said curtly. ‘I’m just going to get changed.’

Eloise walked straight towards her bedroom, shutting the door behind her. She stood resting her back against the cold woodwork.

What was she doing? There had been no need to ask him in for coffee. No need at all.

There was no need for him to have accepted either, she reminded herself. No reason why he should have bothered to see her home. If he were so certain her mother was lying there’d be no reason for him to want to talk to her.

Eloise pulled out some dry underwear, jeans and a pale pink jumper from her chest of drawers, kicking off her Eduardo Munno sandals as she did so.

She slipped the narrow straps off her shoulders and let the damp fabric of her dress pool on the floor. Her skin felt cold and her hair was wet. It was so tempting to curl up beneath her duvet. To shut her eyes and let the day’s problems melt into sleep. To forget all about Jem Norland waiting in her lounge.

Waiting. She pulled on her jeans and pulled the soft angora jumper over her head. He must be frozen—but she hadn’t got anything for him to wear. She made a detour and grabbed a towel.

Why was he here?

She didn’t want to talk about her mother. Not if he was going to criticise her and question her honesty.

In many ways it would have been better if she’d just folded up the letter again and forgotten all about it. Or burnt it, maybe. She should have trusted her mum’s judgement. There must have been very real reasons why she’d decided to disappear quietly. Why she’d never tried to make contact.

Or had she? Perhaps she’d tried over the years but the Viscount hadn’t wanted to know.

She walked nervously into the lounge. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t think. You must be cold. Wet.’

Jem stood with his back to her, gazing down at the road below. He turned to look at her. ‘It’s quiet here.’

Eloise hugged the towel against her body. ‘Yes.’

She had to pull herself together. To jump-start her brain in to some kind of working order.

What was the matter with her? She’d always had an answer for everything. Could cope with anything life threw at her. Just tonight it all seemed to have deserted her. She felt like a walking zombie. Like someone who’d had all their fire sucked out of them.

She tried again. ‘That’s why I bought it. That and the fact I could afford it. Plus it’s only a short walk from the tube.’ Eloise stopped. Total drivel. She was speaking total drivel.

He smiled. His blue eyes glinted down at her. Almost, Eloise thought as she was caught in their glare, she could almost forget he was the enemy. He had an uncanny knack of making you feel special. It was a rare gift.

Hesitantly she held out the towel. ‘I’ve brought you a towel.’

‘Thank you. Probably better to just lay it out on your sofa. Save the fabric. If I can sit down?’

Eloise shook her head. ‘That doesn’t matter.’ Then, as she realised what he’d said, ‘I’m sorry. Please do. Sit, I mean.’ She rubbed a tired hand across her eyes. ‘I can get you another towel, if you like.’ She moved towards the door.

His voice stopped her. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Something to drink? I’m making a coffee.’

‘Coffee would be lovely.’

His voice was rich and warm. A cultured voice. Safe. She watched him lay out the towel across her small green sofa before sitting down. Eloise closed her eyes for a second and forced herself to walk out of the room.

He made her small living-room seem tiny. He made her feel tiny, small enough to put in his pocket. She wasn’t used to that sort of feeling. Eloise rubbed at her cold arms and shivered. Jem Norland was still the enemy, firmly on the side of the man who’d betrayed her mother’s trust.

She had to remember that.

But Viscount Pulborough was fortunate in having someone so strong in his corner. There was no one looking out for her. No one to put their arms about her to hug her. She’d been strong for so long. Sometimes she just wanted...

Comfort.

She just wanted someone to tell her it would be all right. She missed her mum with an ache that was physical. It had been just the two of them for so long. She had always been supportive, loving and protective. And now...

Now she was alone. She’d been alone for such a long time. Six years.

For six years she’d fought her own battles and dried her own tears. There’d been no one to share the happy, triumphant moments of her life. She felt as if she was standing facing the sea and the tide was about to bear down upon her, an unstoppable force, and she would be swept away by the power of it.

CHAPTER THREE

ELOISE switched on the kettle and crouched down to search for the cafetière. It was tucked at the back of a bottom cupboard behind two large mixing bowls.

She sniffed the contents of an open packet of ground coffee, hoping it was still fresh. It didn't matter. None of this mattered.

Nothing Jem Norland could say would change anything. Her mum hadn't lied. Viscount Pulborough was her father—whether he wanted to accept that or not.

She glanced about aimlessly for a tray. She had one somewhere. Then she saw it. High on the top of the kitchen cupboards.

As she reached up with her fingertips it balanced precariously on the edge before tipping over, bringing with it a couple of bun tins and a baking sheet. Eloise closed her eyes and braced herself for the resounding crash.

She opened one eye gingerly.

'What the—?' Jem walked into the kitchen and began to pick everything off the floor. 'Not your day, is it?'

'I was looking for a tray.'

He held it up. 'You found it. Where do you want everything else?'

Eloise grabbed the tins off him and shoved them into the oven. Her mother would have had a fit if she'd seen her do it. It had been one of her pet hates.

Her hands shook as she rested the tray on the melamine work top. Why had she remembered that now? She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. When she opened them she saw Jem was watching her.

'All right?'

'I've been better.' She pulled out a couple of mugs from the top cupboard. Then she turned to look at him. 'Are you drying off?'

He smiled, the lines at the edges of his eyes fanning outwards. 'Steaming slowly.'

Eloise found her mouth curving in response. Strange. Awkwardly she turned and reached for a couple of cream mugs. 'Sugar?'

'No. No milk either.' He leant against the doorframe. Relaxed. Watchful.

Eloise tipped the last of a carton of milk into a jug and placed it on the tray.

'Perhaps you'd better let me carry it.' He stepped forward and picked it up. She stood back and let him do it, unusually passive.

Jem looked across at her. She looked absurdly youthful. Her chic bob lacked the sophisticated glamour it had had earlier. In bare feet she didn't reach his shoulder. Considering the damage she could do to the people he loved, he felt curiously protective of her.

And what if she was telling the truth?

More than that—what if it was the truth? What if she really was Laurence's daughter? It would mean Laurence wasn't the man of high ideals and personal integrity he'd always thought him. It would be a crack on the pedestal of the man who had done so much to restore his belief in others.

He followed her into the small lounge and watched her turn on the gas fire. The flames flickered up. She stood watching them for a moment and then turned to settle herself in the armchair, a cushion on her lap.

Jem carefully put the tray down on the old wooden trunk she used as a coffee table. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if he should be mother. And then he remembered—her mother was dead.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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