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FRASER

The Mother and  
the Millionaire

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**Alison Fraser**

# **The Mother And The Millionaire**

## **Аннотация**

Following unfounded accusations, Jack Doyle had been forced to leave his job at Highfield Manor. Now a millionaire, he's back and the new owner of the house that had been in Esme's family for centuries....Living in close proximity to the man Esme had worshiped as a teenager will be difficult enough. But she's worried that Jack will find out a secret she has kept for ten years....

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**“It might be interesting to get to know each other again.”**

Esme continued to stare at him. “I can’t think what else there is to know,” she responded at length. “You’re Jack Doyle, Internet entrepreneur and new owner of Highfield. I’m Esme Hamilton, single mother of one and ex-cleaner of your mansion. Do you think we have any common ground?”

“Is it Highfield?” he asked bluntly. “Is that the problem? You can’t bear for me, the cook’s son, to have it?”

Esme’s eyes widened at the slant he’d put on things. The animosity she felt was unconnected to house deeds and family origins.

“A little tip for the future, though. If you really don’t like a man, it’s best not to make those little moaning sounds when he’s kissing you. Might give him the whole wrong idea.”



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# The Mother and the Millionaire

Alison Fraser



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# CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS one of those life-changing moments. For Esme, anyway. She opened the door and there he was. Not so different. Older, of course. Better-dressed, too, in dark suit and silk tie. But essentially the same.

‘Midge?’ He half smiled, uncertain whether it was her.

She didn’t smile back. She was sick with shock. It was as if he’d just risen from the dead.

‘Jack Doyle.’ He identified himself.

Quite unnecessary. A towering six feet two, dark-haired and grey-eyed, with razor-sharp cheekbones and a wicked smile, he wasn’t easy to forget.

She struggled to collect her thoughts, only to find herself stammering. ‘I—I—I...’

All her hard-won composure out of the window. A decade’s worth. Back to the gawky teenager, cursed with puppy fat and the awful nickname Midge.

Speech proved impossible. Just as well or she might have said, Go away. I have a life now.

And he wouldn’t have understood.

He took advantage of her silence to do an inventory. Heavy-lidded grey eyes travelled from her coiled blonde hair and fine-boned face to her slim figure in an A-line dress, and back again.

‘Who would have thought it—little Midge all grown up?’ His

voice was teasing rather than mocking.

Midge knew that—no, Esme; that was her name—knew that, but it didn't help. Still, it rescued her from incoherence.

'No one calls me that now.' She finally spoke and, looking down her nose, added, 'May I help you?'

Polite veneer barely masking condescension.

He got it, of course. She'd expected him to. Doyle had always been quick on the uptake. Brilliantly so apart from when it concerned her sister, Arabella.

'Scary,' he commented.

'What?' she demanded, unable to help herself.

He shook his head but a smile played on his mouth. He was laughing at something.

She remembered that of old, too. Jack Doyle watching her family as if they were interesting curiosities, unable to comment because of their respective positions, but commenting all the same with the curve of his lips or the lift of a brow.

'You haven't changed!' she accused.

'You have,' he accused in return. 'Very lady of the manor.'

Esme glowered but was unable to argue, considering she had just borrowed her mother's airs and graces to try and put him down. Unsuccessfully.

'Better than being mannerless,' she threw back at length.

He looked surprised, as well he might. He might have been the cook's son, educated at the local county school, but Jack Doyle had always known how to behave.

His eyes narrowed slightly before he responded, ‘Well, you’ll know how that feels soon. Being manorless yourselves, I mean.’

So he’d heard. The manor was to be sold.

‘Is that supposed to be a joke?’

‘No.’

She hadn’t thought so. More a cruel remark. That surprised her. She didn’t remember that side of him.

‘Is your mother about?’ he added. ‘Her ladyship, should I say?’

‘No, actually you shouldn’t,’ she corrected. ‘My mother remarried.’

‘Of course,’ he concluded, ‘and presumably lost the title. Poor old Rosie. That must have been traumatic for her.’

It had been. In fact, her mother, Rosalind—who had never allowed anyone to call her Rosie in her life—had been very slow to take a second walk up the aisle. Only an ultimatum from her new husband had forced the issue.

‘Is she around?’ he asked.

‘No.’

‘Arabella?’ he added casually.

But Esme wasn’t fooled. Jack Doyle had never been casual where Arabella was concerned.

‘No, she’s in New York,’ Esme relayed, then, after a pause, ‘With her husband.’

She watched for a reaction but there was none. Jack had always kept his emotions under wraps. Well, almost always.

‘She lives there?’ was all he said.

‘At the moment,’ she confirmed.

It wasn’t a lie. Arabella would be there for some time yet. Just as being with her husband wasn’t a lie. No need to tell this man that the two were sitting on opposite sides of a divorce court.

‘Well, I’d really love to chat—’ she curled her hand round the doorknob ‘—but I’m expecting someone.’

‘Yes, I know.’ The amused look was back on his face.

It was a moment or so before Esme caught on. ‘You’re it—the man from Jadenet?’

He gave a nod. ‘I’m it—or he, to be more precise.’

Jack watched her changing expression, but found he couldn’t interpret it. Initially he’d been pleased when Esme had been the one to appear at the door. He had always liked her. The best of the Scott-Hamiltons. Now she was so much prettier—beautiful, even—but had also grown disappointingly similar to her mother.

‘Phone the estate agent,’ he suggested, ‘check my credentials if you like.’

He proffered her his mobile phone.

Esme ignored it, her uncertain look turning into a positive scowl. She believed him but his whole attitude riled her.

‘You have no idea, have you?’ she accused.

Doyle frowned. He imagined he’d been trying to help her. ‘Obviously not.’

‘Do you know how many years there’s been Scott-Hamiltons in this house?’ she demanded with atypical arrogance.

‘Don’t tell me,’ he drawled back, ‘since the Magna Carta?’

Having never been a great history student, Esme hadn't the first idea when that was, but it was scarcely relevant, as he was laughing at her.

He always had, only in the past there had been a degree of fondness in it.

'What's the point?' she dismissed at length. 'You wouldn't understand.'

'Being of simple peasant stock, you mean?' he concluded, an edge behind the banter now.

Esme was left wishing she hadn't started this. She was coming over as the snob of the century, and that wasn't really her at all. Jack Doyle had just thrown her off balance.

'I didn't say that.'

'You didn't have to. I know what your family thought of me. I heard it from the horse's mouth, remember?'

Esme coloured. She remembered. She was unlikely to forget, having her own memento from that day.

'I always thought you were different, though, Midge.' Dark grey eyes studied her once more.

Esme wanted to say, I was different. I am different. But it seemed so much safer to hide behind the class barrier.

'Don't call me Midge,' was all she eventually muttered. 'I'm not ten any more.'

'No.' Jack underlined the word as he noted once again the new Esme. Slim and long-legged but shapely where it counted, at breasts and hips. 'I can see that.'

His eyes stopped just short of undressing her. One of life's ironies. Ten years ago she had longed for him to look at her this way. Now it was anathema to her.

'Papers,' she almost barked at him, 'I assume you have some.'  
'Papers?'

'To prove you have a viewing appointment.'

Jack's mouth tightened as he wondered who Miss High and Mighty Scott-Hamilton thought she was—or who he was, for that matter.

He reached a hand into the inside pocket of his suit and took out his wallet. From it he withdrew a business card.

It was extended with a thin-lipped smile and Esme didn't need clairvoyance to know she'd annoyed him. She took the card but, without her reading glasses, the small print danced in front of her. Perhaps it would have with her glasses on, thrown back as she had been to her past.

She screwed up her eyes and the print started to come into focus, but not before he suggested, 'I'll read it for you if you like.'

This time his tone was milder, less sarcastic, but it still sliced through her. Midge wasn't the only nickname bestowed on her by her big sister Arabella when they were children, only she'd confined the use of Dumbo to outside parental range.

'I'm not that thick, you know!' she snapped back.

He looked surprised, as if such a thought had never crossed his mind. 'Have I ever suggested you were, Mi—Esme?'

In fairness, no. He was the one who'd suggested otherwise.

‘I just remember you wearing reading glasses,’ he added.

She cringed a little. Was she forever printed on his mind as a plump, bespectacled teen? At the time she’d longed for him to look her way, to notice. It seemed he had. She just hadn’t measured up.

She stared back down at the card until the bold lettering came into focus:

Jack Doyle

Managing Director

J.D. Net

She didn’t bother scrutinising the telephone number. She was too busy absorbing the rest. He was MD and it wasn’t Jadenet as she’d heard her mother say—but J.D. Net. As in, Jack Doyle Net?

What else had her mother said about their prospective buyer? Some American internet entrepreneur worth mega-bucks. Had her mother been in the dark or was she too proud to admit the truth?

‘Does my mother know J.D. Net is you?’ she asked bluntly.

He shrugged. ‘Possibly not. I didn’t arrange this viewing in person.’

No, he would have lackeys to do that. Go buy my childhood home, he’d probably said. Only technically it wasn’t. The cottage in the grounds where he’d lived was the one thing held back in the sale. She assumed he knew that.

‘You’d better come in,’ she said finally, and left him to follow

her into the hall.

It was stark and bare. What furniture her mother hadn't wanted had been auctioned off. She had tried to auction the house, too, but it hadn't made its reserve price and now they were struggling to find a buyer.

The chequered marble on the floor was worn but still magnificent. Jack Doyle looked up towards the sweeping staircase and the galleried landing above.

Esme watched him assessing, measuring, perhaps trying to picture it with his own taste of decor and furniture.

Eventually he walked towards the drawing room, his footsteps echoing in the hall, and opened the double doors to glance inside. He seemed to be taking brief mental snapshots, repeating the process for each of the main rooms until he reached what had been the dining room.

There he lingered. The room was bare but Esme wondered if he remembered how it was the night he'd barged in, looking for Arabella. Esme had sat at the window end of the long table, Rosalind Scott-Hamilton at the other. No Arabella. She'd left their mother to act as go-between, a task the older woman had seemed to relish. Esme had burned with humiliation on his behalf.

She was brought back sharply to the present as he finally turned to face her, his expression neutral. 'I'd like to look round upstairs.'

Esme shrugged her permission. She knew she should be trying



to sell the house and its good points but she couldn't bring herself to do it—not to him, anyway.

Jack started to climb the stairs and she followed automatically. When he paused at the landing window where the stairs forked into two, Esme ventured, 'Was it always an ambition—to come back and buy this place?'

Of course, it was a silly thing to ask. He was hardly likely to confess such cupidity.

His lips twisted slightly. 'I see your reading taste hasn't altered.'

Esme looked blank at this non sequitur. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Jane Eyre?' He raised a quizzical brow. 'Or was it Wuthering Heights? The one where the uncouth stable boy returns a rich man to wreak havoc on the family.'

'Wuthering Heights,' she responded, although she suspected he knew the answer.

He nodded to the view outside, stone terraces and cultivated lawns leading down to disused tennis courts, the maze and a small lake beyond. 'Not exactly Heathcliff territory, is it? Don't think I'll hear Cathy calling for me out there.'

He was laughing at her. What else?

Esme knew how to wipe the smile from his face and did so, saying, 'Don't you mean Arabella?'

'Arabella?' His mouth thinned slightly. 'As the Great Love of my life, you mean?'

She hadn't expected him to be so upfront about it. Nor had she expected it to still hurt—his preference for her big sister. But it did.

Then he added, 'Well, sorry to disappoint but I've moved on from there. I've had at least two or three Great Loves since then,' he informed her, very much tongue-in-cheek.

Esme answered in kind, 'How wonderful for you—and them, of course,' hiding her real feelings behind sarcasm.

What else could she do? Tell him what a pig of a time she'd been having while he was living the life of Reilly? It wouldn't be true, anyway. She and Harry were happy enough.

Jack was taken aback for a moment—this new Esme really had grown claws—but found himself amused despite the fact.

'I'll take that as a vote of confidence,' he said as she began leading the way to the first-floor gallery.

'I wouldn't,' Esme muttered under her breath but loud enough for him to hear.

Jack chose to ignore the comment but, wanting to set the record straight, continued, 'Anyway, it's more a coincidence, us buying this place.'

Us? Esme picked that up and pondered over it. Us as in his business, or us as in significant other?

'We need a base near London. Sussex is well-placed for the Continent and Highfield is one of three possibilities the location agency came up with,' he relayed as she showed him the first of the twelve upstairs rooms. 'Unfortunately our first choice was

sold off before we were in a position to move on it and the other place has no permission for business use, so that leaves Highfield.'

He made it sound as if he might settle for the house. Her beloved home. One of the finest Georgian manors in the area.

'Never mind,' she rallied, striding in and out of bedrooms like a demented estate agent, 'it has at least one point in its favour.'

'Which is?' Jack followed in her wake and, leaning against a door jamb, forced her to come to rest.

'Well, you could always claim it's your family seat,' Esme volunteered recklessly, resentfully. 'Impress your other nouveau riche friends.'

She knew she'd gone too far even before she said it. She just didn't care.

She wanted to pierce that seamless confidence. Hurt him as he'd hurt her, however unknowingly. Because suddenly it seemed worse that he didn't know, had never known, hadn't the first idea of the tears she'd cried for him, the pain she'd endured.

For a moment Jack didn't react at all. The truth was he wasn't sure how to. It was as if the family terrier, cute and loveable, had suddenly turned into a teeth-baring Rottweiler, guarding her territory.

Only it wasn't hers for much longer, whether he bought it or someone else did. He'd gathered that much from the location agent. And, yes, though it held some appeal—the idea that Rosalind Scott-Hamilton would eventually discover it was the

cook's son who had bought her stately pile—it wasn't part of some grand master plan. He would pass on it if it proved unsuitable.

'You may have something there,' he replied in dry tones. 'Crest of arms on the door and my portrait above the mantelpiece—what do you think?'

Esme thought he was laughing at her again.

'I'll give you the commission if you like,' he added.

'Me?'

'You were something of an artist, as I recall.'

'That was in the past.'

'But you went to art college?'

That had been Esme's intention but reality had intruded.

'No, I did other things,' she dismissed.

Jack waited for her to expand on that statement but she remained tight-lipped. He guessed she'd probably gone down the finishing school-debutante route that her sister had taken. Was that what had changed her?

'Do you want to see the other rooms?' she asked offhandedly.

It drew the response, 'Do you want to sell the house?'

She flushed. Did she want to sell the house? No. Did they have to? Yes.

'I'm sorry.' Somehow she gritted out the words. 'I wasn't sure if you were still interested.'

'Well, I won't be if I don't see it all,' he pointed out.

'Right.' Teeth clenched, Esme continued the guided tour.

At each room, she became increasingly conscious of how bare and decaying the whole house looked. Only her old sanctuary still had furniture. A bed, washstand, bookcase and chest of drawers were earmarked for her new home but she had been slow in arranging for the pieces to be moved.

‘Your room?’ Jack guessed, seeing the book titles on a shelf. She nodded.

‘Are you still living here?’ he added, frowning a little.

‘No,’ she replied shortly. ‘Everything will be gone by the time the house is sold on.’

‘Where are you based now?’ It was a natural enough question. She gave a deliberately vague, ‘Locally.’

‘Are you married?’ he added with mild curiosity.

The question made her inexplicably cross. ‘Who would I be married to?’

She recognised the oddity of her answer, even before he gave her a quizzical look.

‘Well, there was that boy,’ he replied with a slight smile, ‘from one of the neighbouring estates. You used to go riding with him. Sandy-haired. One of a few brothers?’

Esme knew who he meant but didn’t help him out. There had been no real romance with Henry Fairfax.

Instead she said, ‘Jack, you’ve been away almost ten years. Do you imagine everyone else’s life has stood still?’

‘Fair comment.’ He pulled an apologetic face. ‘But people do get frozen in time if you haven’t seen them for a while.’

Esme supposed he was right. Up until today—until just this hour—Jack Doyle had stayed in her head as her first love, a love tainted by anguish for a young man she'd idolised.

Now here he was, far too real, and bringing with him feelings of resentment that had somehow never properly surfaced till now.

‘So what is it that the new Esme does?’ he enquired with a smile.

The interest could have been genuine but Esme didn't think so. Had he ever really noticed her with Arabella around?

‘I do people's houses,’ she replied shortly.

‘Do?’ he echoed. ‘As in...what exactly?’

He sounded hesitant, unusual for him.

Esme glanced at him briefly. Something in his expression helped her read his mind. God, he really did think the family had fallen on hard times!

She was almost amused. Certainly amused enough to play along. ‘How do people normally do houses?’

‘You clean them?’ he said with lingering incredulity.

No, she actually decorated them, but she was enjoying his confusion too much to say so.

‘Have you a problem with that?’ she rejoined.

‘No, of course not.’ His own mother, though officially cook, had cleaned up after the Scott-Hamiltons. ‘It just isn't something I pictured you doing.’

‘Well, that's life,’ Esme concluded philosophically. ‘I never pictured you a big-shot wheeler-dealer businessman.’

‘Hardly that,’ he denied. ‘I design and market websites. That just happens to be where the money is now.’

It wasn’t false modesty. Esme knew that much. Even as a young man, Jack Doyle had never underplayed or overstated his achievements. He’d sailed through school and college, a straight ‘A’ student, but, being totally secure about his intellectual gifts, had felt no need to advertise them.

It was Esme’s father who had noticed and come up with the idea of him tutoring Esme. Up till then the cook’s son had done work in the stables or on the home farm or thinning out the wood. But, with his brains, surely he would be better employed doing something about Esme?

Looking back it was a mad idea. Why should a seventeen-year-old boy, however clever, manage to help eleven-year-old Esme when her expensive prep school had failed miserably?

But he had. That was the even crazier thing. He’d been the one to notice Esme could remember perfectly anything she was taught verbally, could talk with intelligence on most subjects and only descended into gibberish when committing to paper. Remarkably, he’d been the first to suggest dyslexia as a possibility, and tests had proved him right.

Esme found herself treading down memory lane once more and pulled herself back sharply.

‘And money is important?’ she remarked for something to say. ‘It is if you haven’t got any,’ he responded quite equably. Esme didn’t argue. She knew he was talking from experience.

His mother had died from cancer just after his finals, keeping her illness secret almost to the end. Accompanied by Jack, she had gone home to her native Ireland for a holiday and passed away there. She had left nothing but the money for her funeral. If Jack had grieved, he'd done it alone.

She watched him now, gazing through her bedroom window. It faced the back of the house and offered a view of the stable block and woods beyond. In autumn, when the trees were bare, it was just possible to see the chimney of the gamekeeper's cottage where Jack had lived with his mother. But it was currently spring and greenery obscured it.

It was in his mind, however, as he said, 'I understand the cottage is rented out.'

Esme's stomach tightened a little but she kept her cool. 'Yes, it is. You know it's not part of the sale?'

He turned. 'No, I didn't. There's no mention in the particulars.'

Esme glanced towards the folder in his hand. She'd not perused the estate agent's details. She'd trusted her mother's word instead.

'I don't really see how it could be excluded,' he continued, 'considering it's in the middle of the estate.'

'Well, it is!' Esme snapped with a certainty she was far from feeling.

Jack shrugged, unwilling to argue, commenting instead, 'Perhaps that's why you're having difficulty selling—people buy these estates for privacy.'



Esme wondered if he was going out of his way to upset. ‘Who says we’re having difficulty selling?’

‘The fact,’ he replied, ‘that the estate has been on the market over a year, perhaps... Is it a sitting tenant, the person in the cottage?’

‘Why?’ Esme had no idea what she was.

‘Just that if you’re worried about getting them to vacate,’ he relayed, ‘there are ways and means.’

‘Ways and means?’ Esme’s eyes rounded. ‘What exactly do you mean?’

‘Well, we could send a couple of heavies to persuade him to move on.’ Jack read her mind with uncanny accuracy. ‘Or, alternatively, we could offer him a generous sum to help with relocation. Personally, I prefer the latter method. Slightly more civilised,’ he finished, tongue very firmly in cheek.

He’d wrongfooted her again and Esme felt herself regressing further and further to the girl called Midge whom he’d teased so sweetly she’d ended up adoring him.

Only it didn’t feel sweet any more, just patronising, maybe even a little cruel.

‘The cottage isn’t for sale.’ She repeated what she’d first stated.

He was unimpressed. ‘Let’s see what your mother says, assuming I’m interested.’

‘You’re going to talk to my mother?’ She didn’t conceal her surprise.

He raised a brow in return. ‘Is there any reason I shouldn’t?’

Was he kidding? Esme could think of at least one but didn't want to voice it aloud.

His eyes narrowed, scrutinising her expression. 'Unless you think it inadvisable?'

'Well—' she pulled a face '—you didn't...um...part on the best of terms.'

'No, we didn't, did we?' He actually smiled at the recollection. 'What was it she said, now?'

Esme remembered, but she wasn't about to help him out.

Not that she needed to, as he ran on, 'Ah, yes, having a degree from Oxford didn't make the cook's son any more eligible as a suitor to her daughters.'

Esme cringed at the memory, even though almost a decade had passed. She had sat at the long dining table, reduced to shocked silence by her mother's careless cruelty and watched the colour come and go in Jack's face, before pride had made him lash out.

She'd never before or since seen her mother so dumb-struck. But no one else had ever called her a dimwitted, mean-spirited, stuck-up cow.

Considering the anger that had made Jack Doyle's mouth a tight white line and the temper that had flashed in stormy grey eyes, it had been a fairly restrained response. The slamming of doors behind him had conveyed better his temper.

Her mother had sat red-faced at the head of the table while her sister Arabella had appeared from the adjoining room, sniggering

with amusement.

It had been more than Esme could bear.

A decade on, she shut her eyes, expelling the scene from her mind before the camera could roll further.

‘Still, there were consolations,’ he added under his breath.

But loud enough for Esme to hear, to open her eyes again and meet his, to see the soft amusement in them.

She held his gaze for just a moment, then looked away, unable to stop her cheeks from flushing. He probably took it for remembered pleasure rather than the deep embarrassment it was.

A night with the wrong sister. Consolation prize of sorts. His behaviour understandable enough, but hers? Too desperate for words.

She buried the memory once more and took refuge in being brusque and businesslike. ‘Talk to my mother if you choose... That’s all the rooms except the attics and kitchens. Do you wish to see those?’

‘Not particularly,’ he responded. ‘I have the attic dimensions and I probably know the kitchen layout better than you do yourself, young Miss Esme.’

He pretended to touch his forelock. It seemed like humour but Esme wasn’t fooled. There was bitterness behind it, too. And why not?

But Esme refused to go on the defensive and muttered in agreement, ‘Probably,’ before walking ahead of him out onto the galleried landing and down the once magnificent staircase, now

creaking with age.

She started to walk towards the front door but his voice halted her. 'Wouldn't it be easier to go through the kitchens to view the outbuildings?'

'You want to see those?' Esme frowned darkly. Surely he knew the layout of the rear yard, too.

'The state of them,' he confirmed. 'The stables weren't in great shape the last time I saw them.'

It could have been an innocent comment.

Perhaps only she remembered exact details of where and how.

But it made her both angry and embarrassed; she turned away before he could observe either emotion.

Her heels clicked on the marble floor as she stalked ahead, a tall, willowy creature with an erect back, and Jack followed, puzzling as to how he'd upset her this time.

He went over what he'd said. Nothing much. Just about the state of the stables the last time he'd seen them.

Ah! He recalled literally the last time. The night he'd woken up to Arabella and her little games and ended up spending part of it with her sister. Not his finest hour, whichever way you looked at it, so he tended not to look at it.

There wasn't much he could say now, either, so he said nothing.

She led the way outside into the back courtyard, a large square flanked by walls and the stable blocks. It was as he remembered only in a considerably worse state of repair. Grass and weeds

were growing between cobblestones and someone had left piles of garden rubbish in one corner.

An old car, seemingly abandoned but actually belonging to Esme, stood rusting in one corner, and the red paint on garage and stable doors was cracked and peeling.

Esme had grown used to the decay of what had used to be kept immaculate while her father was alive, but she saw it afresh through Jack Doyle's eyes. She waited for him to make some derogatory remark, with every intention of snapping his head off if he did.

But he kept his thoughts to himself as he crossed the yard to the stable block. He went from stall to stall, eyes measuring, assessing, judging how much of the stone structure would have to be rebuilt.

Esme followed along, hovering at a distance, there to answer questions but wearing an expression that discouraged any. She supposed she should be trying to sell the place but she still doubted he was there to buy it.

He reached the tack room and found it locked. 'Have you the key?'

'No, it's back at—' she broke off abruptly, about to say the cottage, and switched to, 'Back at the house,' then added a suitably vague, 'Somewhere,' in case he asked her to produce it.

Not that there was anything incriminating inside the tack room. Just some odd pieces of bridle equipment. It was the mention of the cottage she'd been avoiding, although, on

reflection, he might not have associated it with the cottage, originally his, now hers and Harry's.

He shrugged and moved on to the barn adjacent where they'd kept the feed. It was empty apart from some old hay in the loft, so it had been left open.

He went inside. Esme made no attempt to follow. She heard him moving around and waited, teeth gritted once more as she prepared for any possible remark he might pass, any allusion to the interlude they'd shared—impromptu passion fuelled by a bottle of whisky.

Her face flamed for the umpteenth time that afternoon. At twenty-six, she thought she'd grown out of blushing, but it seemed this humiliating habit from younger days had returned with a vengeance.

The Beetroot, that was another of Arabella's names for her. How she would cringe when Arabella called her that in company. In fact, she had cringed her way through a lot of her childhood and had been more than happy to grow up and grow out of these afflictions.

Now here she was, reverting at the rate of knots just because a ghost from the past had suddenly returned to haunt her.

Well, that was it. No more. She wasn't going to stand here like a spare part, waiting for Mr Jack Doyle to make some oblique crack that would complete her journey back in time.

She retreated to the house, leaving him to his own devices. She entered the kitchen and, in pressing need of a cooling

drink, opened the fridge. It was bare except for a few bottles of white wine, some tonic water and a tray of ice in the freezer compartment.

She'd been hoping for orange juice but the tonic was to be expected. It went with the gin bottle she took out of hiding from behind a food processor. She pursed her lips. Gin and tonic, her mother's favourite tippie. At one time more than a tippie, and, even now, her mother didn't seem to go through a day without at least a couple of stiff drinks.

Esme splashed some of the tonic in the bottom of a glass, added some ice but gave the gin a miss, having no inclination to follow her mother's example.

She picked up the glass, resting its chill against her forehead for a moment to cool herself down, before taking a swig just as Jack Doyle reappeared.

He walked quietly for a big man, coming to a halt in the kitchen doorway; his eyes switched from her face to the gin bottle on the worktop and back again.

Esme could almost hear his thoughts as he jumped to the wrong conclusions.

She decided to brazen it out. 'Do you want a drink?'

'Bit early for me,' he answered, 'but don't let me stop you.'

'I won't,' Esme muttered, rather than go into a denial that probably wouldn't be believed.

A long-drawn-out pause followed before he asked, 'How long have you been drinking?'

Esme, who had been studying the tonic in her glass, glanced up in time to catch his expression, a condescending blend of pity and disapproval. She wouldn't have liked it even if she'd had a drink problem.

She made a show of looking at her watch. 'About three minutes and twenty-five seconds.'

'I meant in the longer term.'

'I know.'

Esme pulled a face. He ignored it, his eyes resting on her with patient forbearance.

'Well?'

She wondered what he was expecting. A full and frank confession: My name is Esme and I'm an alcoholic.

'For the record, this is just tonic water.' The sheer nerve of him made her reckless. 'However, I had my first real drink at sixteen. Whisky, it was. Can't quite remember who supplied it.'

Except she remembered only too well who'd supplied the whisky. She wondered if he did, though.

She rather thought he did as the pitying look in his eyes became something else. Guilt? Distaste? Whichever, it served him right for coming over all sanctimonious.

But if she assumed he'd dropped the whole subject, she was mistaken.

'You were seventeen, as I recall,' he said instead.

For a moment she thought he was being pedantic, then she realised from his tone that her age was important to him. It had



been at the time, too. That's why she'd lied.

No need to now. No need to tell him, either, only some devil inside her wanted to. Probably something to do with him attempting to take the moral high ground.

'A couple of weeks over sixteen, actually,' she corrected.

His eyes met hers, trying to sort out fact and fiction. 'You said —'

'Does it matter?' She saw it did to him, but the whole incident had suddenly lost its embarrassment factor—and romantic haze—for her. 'You were drunk, I was drunk, we both wanted to stick it to my mother. End of story.'

Esme knew she sounded a little crude, but that was better than blushing like a ninny. Anyway, as a version of events, it was close enough.

Jack gave a brief laugh. Out of relief, he suspected. He'd always felt guilty about the way he'd used Arabella's little sister but it seemed he'd underestimated her.

'Nothing like telling it how it is,' he commented at length. 'Still, you were always the most honest of the bunch... So no hard feelings?'

He approached her, hand outstretched.

Esme stared at this token of—of friendship, reconciliation, what exactly? She shrank from him in obvious distaste.

Unused to this reaction from women, Jack was more puzzled than anything else. She was treating him like a pariah but nothing he remembered in their past relationship warranted that. Sure,

she'd been young—too young perhaps—when they'd made love that time, but she'd been willing. Very, as he recalled now.

He dropped his hand away. 'Isn't it rather late to treat me as untouchable?' he drawled with slight overtones of the American accent he'd picked up from years spent in California.

'Better late than never,' Esme retorted rather tritely and, almost hemmed into a corner, tried to brush past him.

He caught her bare arm, detaining her. 'If it's an apology you want, then you can have one. I was sorry, I am sorry, for the way I treated you.'

He sounded sincere and Esme was slightly disarmed by the fact. Easiest to reply in kind but she couldn't. Her stomach was clenching and unclenching at the touch of his hand on her skin. She put it down to revulsion and wondered when love had turned to hate. Some time over the last ten years? Or just today, when reality had caught up with her?

'I don't want anything from you,' she stated scornfully, 'so if you let my arm go, I'll show you out.'

Jack's eyes narrowed on her, analytical in their intent. She'd dismissed his apology and discounted their brief liaison as a moment of drunkenness, yet she was so angry her body was shaking with it.

'Let me go!' An order this time as she tried to wrest her arm away.

Jack held her fast. 'Not yet. Explain first.'

'Explain?' she echoed.

‘Ten years ago,’ he recalled, ‘we parted on a more intimate note. OK, possibly assisted by some rather potent whisky. In the interim we have had no communication apart from one unanswered letter yet somehow I’ve become beneath contempt in your eyes... Well, call me slow, but I feel I’ve missed something.’

So had Esme. What unanswered letter?

‘Or is it just the old class thing,’ he continued at her silence, ‘and us stable boys are fine for a quick session in the hayloft but not welcome up at the big house?’

‘That’s ridiculous!’ Esme found the voice to protest at this absurdity. She hadn’t been a snob at sixteen and she wasn’t one now.

‘Is it?’ he challenged.

‘Yes!’ she almost spat back. ‘For a start you were never a stable boy. All right, you mucked out occasionally to earn some pocket money but as often as not you got me to do it. Shovelling horse manure was far too menial for Mr Brainbox Doyle.’

‘OK, maybe I wasn’t in the literal sense,’ he conceded, ‘but I was low enough on the social ladder for you to look down your nose.’

‘I didn’t!’ she could claim with angry conviction. ‘In fact, if anything, you condescended to me. Poor, stupid, plain Midge, let’s pat her on the head once in a while, be kind to her—that’s when we’re not treating her as invisible, of course.’

‘I don’t remember it being like that.’

‘You wouldn’t!’

Jack was surprised to find himself now on the defensive. 'I certainly never suggested you were plain or stupid.'

'You didn't have to,' she accused, 'it was bloody obvious. And, anyway, maybe I was plain and stupid!'

'No, you weren't.' Jack gave her a concerned look, as if now doubting her stability. 'You were pretty and funny and—'

'Don't!' Esme cut short this list of her qualities. 'You're patting me on the head again and I don't need it. I'm quite happy with myself and my life now. I am simply pointing out that any reluctance to be pawed by you at this precise moment in time has no connection with the social class into which we were born.'

'Pawed?' Clearly oscillating between amusement and annoyance, he lifted her arm by the wrist. 'This comes under the category of pawing?'

'I... Don't change the subject!' Esme snapped back.

'I'm afraid I've kind of lost it,' he admitted, 'but if this is what you consider pawing, you must have one pretty tame private life. Now if I'd done this—' an arm curved round her waist to draw her closer '—or this,' the other rose so a hand could briefly cup her cheek before turning to gently trail his knuckles down the long, elegant nape of her neck, 'Then I think you might be justified.'

He'd moved in on her so suddenly, Esme was too startled to react. By the time she did, the brief embrace was over and he'd actually let her go.

She was left with a heart racing like a train and a rage inside her that she could barely contain.

In fact, she didn't contain it, didn't even try. She let her hand come up, open-palmed, and slapped him as hard as she could. Slapped him so hard his head jerked backwards and her palm stung.

Esme watched as his cheek reddened, initial exhilaration giving way to horror. She'd never slapped anyone before, never felt the urge to. It was basic and primitive. Like sex.

Like his reaction. Shock quickly followed by retaliation as he grabbed her arms and, pushing them behind her back, trapped her against the kitchen cupboards. Then a hand was thrust in her hair, pulling her head back, leaving her just time to spit out a swear word before he covered her mouth with his.

It was an assault of lips and teeth that robbed her of breath but not the will to fight. She clutched at his jacket, trying to push him off, feeling fury not fear as she recognised this subjugation for what it was.

Only he was stronger and fury was dangerously akin to passion as the kiss went relentlessly on, demanding a response, forcing long-dormant feelings to the surface. There was no exact point when things changed and the hands digging into his chest began to uncurl and flatten and spread upwards to his shoulders. No dividing line between the hateful bruising of his mouth on hers and the sweet, sensual invasion that followed.

All she knew was that what she started off repudiating, she ended up silently begging for, as she slid her hands round his neck and held his mouth to hers, shifting in his arms until she could

feel his heart beating against the softness of her breasts, and she moaned aloud as the hand circling her waist slipped lower, half lifting her body to his, already hard with arousal.

When he finally broke off, it was to catch breath and ask, with his deep silent gaze, for what he might merely have taken.

For a moment Esme hovered between madness and sanity, dizzy with desire yet shaken by the very force of it. So easily she could have let herself be swept away but somehow, through fear of drowning, she clawed her way back to the bank.

She didn't hit him again or play the outraged virgin or even pretend distaste. Half-ashamed, wholly disturbed, she said simply, 'I can't. I just can't. Please leave me alone.'

Quiet words, but shot with desperation, and more effective than any shouting, it seemed.

'Very well,' was all he muttered back as, releasing her completely, he pushed a distracted hand through his hair.

No argument. No pleading. She could have seen it as insulting how quickly he retreated, making for the hallway, his footsteps an echo on the marble, then gone, the front door closed quietly behind him.

But she saw nothing because her eyes were filling with tears at the raw, ragged pain from the scarred-over wound he'd reopened.

## CHAPTER TWO

ESME didn't cry for long. It was an indulgence she could not afford. It was now mid-afternoon and soon she would have to go to pick up Harry.

She washed her face in cold water from the kitchen tap, trying to take the heat from it, then put the tonic and ice tray back in the fridge. She pushed the offending gin bottle back in its corner, half wishing she had taken a drink. At least then she could have blamed the alcohol for her pathetic behaviour.

It wasn't as though she was entirely unprepared for Jack Doyle's reappearance in her life. In fact, she'd imagined just such a scenario. Only in her version he would have changed, would not be so good-looking or smart or superior to most other men. She would wonder what she'd ever seen in him and be remote and dignified. Gone would be the young girl's infatuation with an older boy, because she was no longer a young girl.

Reality, of course, had made a mockery of all her imaginings. He hadn't changed, still maddeningly cool and collected ninety-nine per cent of the time, and frighteningly passionate that other one. And her? Well, it seemed she was still a walk-over even if the puppy love had festered into resentment.

Or maybe it was as he'd implied: her private life was too tame. Could that be the reason? It had been a while—a long while, it seemed—since her last abortive relationship had made celibacy

an attractive option.

Yes, that had to be it. Sex-starved after three years of abstinence, she might have kissed any personable man in the same circumstances.

It didn't say much for her self-restraint but she rather liked it as an explanation. In fact, she almost managed to convince herself of its truth. She would have but for the image of Charles Bell Fox, the nearest thing she currently had to a boyfriend. She'd known him for ever, liked him always and, encouraged by her mother, had even recognised him as good husband material. Yet she had repelled all his gentle overtures.

But then Charles was a gentleman. He'd never kiss her against her will, never force physical intimacy until some base sexual urges kicked in. Perhaps if he had, they might have progressed further than their current careful friendship.

A perverse thought, she shook her head, and, checking that Jack Doyle and his undoubtedly expensive motor had disappeared from the drive, locked and bolted the front door, before keying in the burglar-alarm code on the box above the cellar steps.

She exited smartly via the kitchen to the courtyard, then beyond to the back service road through the woods, passing her current home.

Intended originally for an unmarried gamekeeper, and built in the late 1890s, it wasn't a pretty cottage, the stone roughly hewn and with ramshackle outhouses tacked on. But Esme had done



her best to improve the outside with a bright terracotta masonry paint and bold blue doors and an array of pots and baskets of flowers to distract from the random ugliness of the house. She doubted Jack Doyle would have recognised it as his old home.

She slipped inside for a moment to collect a denim jacket and change her heels to flats. Transformed instantly from fashionable woman-about-town to young practical mother, she didn't bother locking her door as she set off along a short cut through the wood to the rear gates of the estate.

She glanced at her watch, and, though on time, she quickened her pace. It was always an anxiety—that one day the bus would arrive early and deposit Harry alone at the side of the road.

The high wrought-iron gates were locked, so she used the door in the wall, its key hidden behind loose stonework. She emerged onto the verge of the main road and only then did she observe the car parked on the far side.

It was a sleek dark green auto, built on racing lines; she didn't recognise the make or number and, with the inside obscured by tinted glass, it was impossible to see the driver. But she knew all the same. Who else would be sitting opposite the rear gates to Highfield when there was nothing else of interest on this back road?

He had to have spotted her, too, so no point in scuttling back inside. It would smack of panic and fear, and, besides, the bus was due to arrive. She could only stand there and pray he would tire of staring at two rusting locked gates and a six-foot-high

stone wall.

Under her breath she muttered the word, ‘Go,’ over and over, as if she could will him to leave, and believed the spell had worked when she heard his engine start up.

She cheered too early, however, as he pulled out onto the road and executed a 180-degree turn to bring his car alongside her.

The driver’s window slid silently downwards and Esme wasn’t certain if she would prefer it to be him or a total stranger lurking for nefarious purposes.

She opted for the total stranger at about the same second as Jack Doyle offered her one of his slightly crooked smiles.

‘Waiting for someone?’ he enquired.

A ‘no’ formed on her lips but thankfully she never got round to uttering it. Because why else would she possibly be here, standing at the roadside?

She limited herself to a nod.

‘Not very reliable, are they,’ he suggested, ‘leaving you out here on your own? Anyone could come along.’

Fake concern? Had to be.

It prompted Esme to retaliate with a dry, ‘They already have.’

A jibe he ignored as he ran on, ‘I’ll give you a lift to wherever you’re going.’

She was surprised into a passing polite, ‘No, thanks.’

‘All right, suit yourself.’ He shrugged. ‘I’ll just hang around until he comes.’

‘No, you mustn’t!’ Esme didn’t have to feign horror at the idea.

He looked at her curiously. 'Jealous type?'

He had the wrong idea, totally, but Esme didn't disabuse him. The important thing was for him to be gone by the time the bus arrived.

'Yes, yes, he is,' she agreed. 'I mean really. He'll be here any second and if he sees you...'

Esme glanced fearfully down the road and left him to fill in the rest.

He did so with darkening brow. 'Is that why you were so upset when I kissed you?'

Esme nodded. It was too good an excuse to waste. In fact, a little embellishment wouldn't go amiss.

'He's very possessive. Doesn't like me even speaking to other men. So please, Jack, just go.' She trained appealing blue eyes on him.

Jack saw traces of the old Esme and was torn. He suddenly felt responsible for her, certain that any man so possessive had to be bad news. But then what right had he to interfere? He had been away too long.

'Please,' Esme repeated with genuine urgency as she heard the bus in the distance.

'Yes, all right.' He remained a moment longer, holding her anxious gaze, then, putting the car into gear, roared off along the highway.

If Esme felt guilty, she also felt justified as the bus came into view, passing Jack going in the opposite direction. Talk about

close calls.

‘What’s wrong?’ Harry asked as she practically pulled him off the bus and hustled him through the door in the wall.

‘Nothing.’ She just didn’t trust Jack not to change his mind and return.

Because that was something else she remembered about him. How protective he’d been at times, looking out for her when she’d been hurt, physically and emotionally. Her hero until he’d proved otherwise.

‘So how was school?’ She tried to sound normal to Harry and it came out forced.

Her son frowned before shrugging. ‘The same.’

‘And those boys?’ This time genuine worry.

He pulled a face.

Esme interpreted that as bad. ‘Look, if you’ll let me go into school—’

‘No,’ Harry cut across her, ‘you mustn’t, Mum. You’ll just make it worse.’

Perhaps he was right. Esme could see his point. Having your mother go wading in on your behalf to complain about Dwayne and Dean, the twins from hell—or at least the roughest housing estate in Southbury—wasn’t going to do his street cred much good, but she felt so helpless.

‘OK, OK.’ She put an arm round his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. ‘But if it escalates, you must tell me.’

He gave a brief nod.

Unsure if he understood, Esme added, 'By escalate, I mean—'  
'I know, Mum,' he cut in once more. 'If they threaten me with an AK47, I have to tell you, right?'

He gave her a wry smile and she smiled back, although hardly reassured.

'I realise you're joking, Harry,' she ran on, 'but do any of the boys carry weapons—penknives, say?'

He shrugged again before saying, 'They're not allowed.'

That hardly answered the question, either. His junior school, City Road, had a nicely printed booklet of rules and mission statements on bullying, but that hadn't stopped her son becoming the target for boys in the year group above him.

Esme watched as he strode ahead of her now. Nothing visible could mark him down for derision. He was tall for his age and, to her eyes, a good-looking boy with a shock of blond hair and a thin, clever face, but no spectacles or physical weaknesses or strange mannerisms that would single him out.

The teacher had suggested the fault might lie elsewhere. In a school dominated by the local accent, Harry talked differently—in the same regionless precise English that had been encouraged by Esme's various boarding-schools. But that wasn't all. There was his cleverness, indisputable and hard to conceal. Harry had tried, very quickly learning not to put up his hand in class or work too hard or say anything to draw attention to it. But it was part of him, the way he was, self-contained and independent, able to absorb everything at a glance without conscious effort.

Esme had never been able to decide whether it was a curse or a blessing, but she didn't pride herself on it. She knew it didn't come from her.

Her contribution was his shock of blond hair and fair-skinned looks but otherwise he was someone else's child. It wasn't a striking likeness. It was there, however, in the eyes, solemnly grey to her sky-blue, and some of his expressions. There, if you cared to look. Enough to feel a need to keep him and his father apart.

When they reached the cottage, Harry immediately excused himself. He left his bag in the hall and went up to his room built into the attic space.

Esme knew he would be already logging on to his computer, his intellectual mainstay. She might have tried to stop him if she could have offered an alternative, but, without brothers or sisters or children to play with, it was difficult.

Her mother had suggested boarding-school more than once but Esme had neither the money nor the inclination to send Harry away, having hated boarding herself.

Besides, she couldn't imagine life without him. Not that it had been easy in the early years. She'd been a frightened teenager, back at school when she'd realised she might be pregnant. Morning sick, then simply sick with anxiety, she had actually lost weight, so her bump had gone unnoticed almost to the seventh month. Then discovery had been followed by disgrace and dispatch homewards.

Recriminations had given way to arrangements. A cousin of

her mother's in Bath. Adoption at birth. Forget it ever happened.

Esme had gone along with it all up until a twenty-hour labour had thrust her rudely into adulthood. Everything had changed after that. She'd looked at her newborn son and, from somewhere, had found the courage to defy her mother's ultimatum: come home minus baby or don't come home at all.

Social Services had helped to get her into a mother and baby hostel. It had been a steep learning curve. On top of her new-found responsibility for a tiny human had come the shock of being out in the real world. She'd ceased feeling hard-done-by when she'd heard the other girls' stories. While they'd talked of bad-news boyfriends and abusive stepfathers and drunken mothers, her childhood had seemed a fairy story.

In the hostel she'd learned to cook and clean and wash; she'd also learned to curse and swear and stand up for herself. From there she'd moved to a flat in Bristol, ten flights up with a lift that rarely worked.

She'd stuck it out until a two-year-old Harry had fallen on the stairwell. A grazed knee—no big deal. But in the corner, inches from his hand, a discarded syringe.

It was at that point she'd swallowed her pride and taken the bus home. Her mother had been speechless for the first thirty seconds, barely recognising her younger daughter in this stick-thin, badly dressed young woman, then, drawing breath, she'd launched into a tirade of I-told-you-sos before eventually allowing Esme through the door.

In this respect Rosalind Scott-Hamilton had behaved pretty much as her daughter had anticipated. The true surprise had been her reaction to Harry. While bundled up in the pushchair and covered by a rain-hood he'd been an anonymous lump, but when he'd woken and climbed out of his pushchair to stand silently gazing at his grandmother it had appeared even she wasn't immune to his charm.

‘What a perfectly beautiful little boy!’ she'd exclaimed in utter surprise.

Esme hadn't known whether to be gratified or insulted. She'd certainly understood the implication—how could someone as ordinary as her younger daughter have produced such a son?

Still, it was Harry who had helped bridge the gap. Not that her mother acted the part of fond grandmother—she wouldn't even allow Harry to use the term—but there was an affection there that allowed her to ignore his ignominious start in life.

Thus, Esme had rejoined the fold, but only partly, setting up home in the cottage and trading some of her acquired domestic skills for petty cash from her mother until her twenty-first birthday had brought a small trust fund from her godmother.

It was hardly an exciting existence but she'd been content enough till today. Now it seemed under threat and she couldn't wait to phone her mother.

‘Darling—’ Rosalind Scott-Hamilton called most female acquaintances that, having lately taken on the persona of an ageing film star ‘—I was going to ring you tonight. How did it



go, the viewing?’

Esme breathed deeply before ignoring the question and demanding instead, ‘Mother, are you aware who the viewer was?’

‘Who the viewer was?’ Rosalind gave herself time to think. ‘Some internet millionaire, I believe. Cash buyer, according to the agent. Why?’

‘It’s Jack Doyle,’ Esme told her bluntly.

‘Jack Doyle?’ Her mother was clearly trawling through her memory for the name.

‘Mrs Doyle’s son,’ Esme prompted.

‘Mrs Doyle!’ Her mother echoed this name, too.

Esme sighed heavily. ‘Mrs Doyle. Our cook. Lived in the cottage.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Rosalind Scott Hamilton dismissed, ‘I do know who Mrs Doyle is, or was. I was expressing surprise... Jack Doyle. Who’d have thought it? After all these years and in the market to buy Highfield... Did he say if he was interested?’

‘No, Mother, he didn’t!’ This conversation was not going how Esme had planned.

‘Well, he must be,’ her mother ran on. ‘I mean, he knows what the place is like and it hasn’t changed much from when he was a boy. The question is whether he can afford it—or was he just on a sentimental journey? Perhaps Robin can make a few enquiries in the City.’

The City was the heart of London’s money markets from where her stepfather did his wheeling and dealing.

‘But surely you wouldn’t sell to Jack Doyle even if he was interested?’ Esme appealed.

‘Why not?’

‘Well...all the things you said about him once.’

To her mother, Jack had been a jumped-up working-class boy who had dared to imagine himself suitable for one of her daughters just because he’d managed a first from Oxford.

‘Things,’ her mother muttered vaguely. ‘Oh, you mean the time he fancied his chances with Arabella? Yes, that was quite absurd. Still, in hindsight, who knows? She might have been better off with him than that character she did marry.’

Esme was speechless for a moment. How the world had changed! Her mother had been absolutely delighted when Arabella had married Franklin Homer, supposed heir to an American banking fortune. Only the fortune seemed to have dissolved along with the marriage.

‘Anyway,’ her mother resumed, ‘if Jack Doyle wants to buy Highfield, then good luck to him.’

Esme’s heart sank. ‘You can’t mean that, Mother.’

‘Whyever not?’ An impatient edge crept into her mother’s voice. ‘I really am surprised at you, Esme. I would have thought you’d be delighted at the whole idea. You’re the one who has always championed the underdog, maintained there is no fundamental difference between the working class and us, apart from money.’

Esme didn’t know about ‘championing’ the underdog. She was

usually too busy looking out for herself and Harry. But she had always deplored her mother's blatant snobbery.

'Anyway, I need the money,' her mother continued. 'You know that, darling. I've explained.'

Esme could have said, No, you don't. You have a husband as rich as sin. But her mother saw Highfield as her insurance policy in case anything happened to her second marriage.

'You're bound to sell it eventually,' Esme pointed out. 'You don't have to sell it to Jack Doyle.'

'No, but it would be simply perverse to turn down an offer from him,' Rosalind argued back. 'And I don't really see the problem. It's not as if you and Jack were ever involved.'

A silence followed. Esme could have broken it with the knowledge she'd always withheld from her mother, but she doubted it would change anything.

She changed tack instead. 'Well, at least make sure the estate agent clarifies what's included in the sale.'

'What do you mean, darling?'

Was it her imagination or did her mother sound cagey?

'He thinks the cottage is up for grabs. I told him it wasn't but he didn't believe me. Perhaps Connell, Richards & Baines could draw his attention to the fact?'

'Yes, well...' There was a pause while her mother decided on her phrasing.

'Mother?' Esme prompted with growing suspicion. 'You haven't changed your mind? You said I could have a life interest

in the cottage.’

‘I know, darling, and I meant it,’ her mother claimed, ‘but James Connell says it just isn’t feasible, parcelling up the estate that way. But don’t worry, you should be all right. You’re a sitting tenant.’

Esme did not believe this. ‘And if we’re not all right, what do Harry and I do then?’

‘Well, obviously you’d have to find somewhere else,’ Rosalind sighed in reply, ‘but would that be so awful? I mean, the cottage is very basic. Little better than staff quarters.’

‘We like it,’ Esme claimed, temper finally rising, ‘and, compared to bed and breakfast accommodation for the homeless, it’s palatial!’

‘Don’t be absurd, darling!’ Rosalind snapped back. ‘You have other alternatives.’

‘Like?’ Esme was confident that her mother wasn’t about to invite Harry and her to live in her Kensington four-storey in London.

‘I don’t know,’ Rosalind replied just as crossly. ‘I’m sure there are lots of places you could go, if you would stop playing the martyr... I’ve heard Charles Bell Fox would have you at the drop of a hat, and you could do a lot worse.’

Esme agreed. She could. But it was hardly any business of her mother’s.

‘Charles and I are just friends,’ Esme could claim in perfect conscience.

‘Only because you won’t let the poor boy be anything else,’ her mother countered, ‘and goodness knows why. He’s rich, he’s eligible, he’s even quite good-looking. What are you waiting for?’

‘Nothing,’ Esme replied tartly. ‘I’ll call him up now, shall I? Ask if he’d like us to shack up together?’

Her mother gave a weary sigh. ‘Is that meant to be funny?’

‘Not especially.’

‘Because it isn’t—and you know perfectly well I was talking about marriage, not cohabitation. I think you’ve already done enough of that, don’t you?’

‘What?’ Esme was genuinely puzzled for a moment. She’d never lived with anyone other than her family. ‘Oh, right, my fall from grace? I don’t think casual sex counts as cohabitation, Mother.’

A loud tut came down the phone. At times her mother liked to pretend she was a prude.

‘Really, Esme,’ her mother reproved, ‘it’s nothing to be proud of—having a baby with someone you barely knew. What have you said to Charles about Harry?’

‘Nothing.’ Charles had scrupulously avoided the subject.

‘Well, I trust when you do,’ Rosalind continued, ‘you’ll dress it up a bit. Falling into bed with some Italian boy you met in a café sounds very loose.’

Esme controlled an errant desire to laugh. Such a lame story, it was a source of perennial wonder that her mother still believed it.

‘OK, Mother, I’ll bear it in mind,’ Esme replied, tongue-in-

cheek, 'when and if Charles ever asks me to marry him.'

'Good.' Her mother seemed oblivious of any irony. 'Because he really is your best bet. You certainly can't expect me to keep bailing you out... Now I really must go. I'm having people for dinner.'

Boiled or fried? Esme was tempted to ask, but was already holding a dead line. She replaced the receiver and pushed a worried hand through her hair before hearing a sound behind her.

She turned to find Harry standing on the open staircase from his bedroom. He looked vaguely troubled. How much had he overheard?

He stared at her briefly before saying, 'I'm hungry. What's for tea?'

A normal, ordinary-boy question. Esme allowed it to dispel her fears and led the way through to the kitchen as she declared, 'We have a choice: pizza, pizza or pizza.'

Harry rolled his eyes at this familiar joke but joined in by saying, 'OK, pizza. The second one.'

'That's pizza with pepperoni and olives,' she announced.

It elicited a boyish, 'Yuk. I've changed my mind. I'll have pizza, the first one.'

'Anchovies.'

'Double yuk.'

'Ham and mushroom?'

'Yeah, suppose that'll do.'

'But no picking off the mushroom,' she warned as she got

the ready-made meal out of the freezer, 'and you'll have it with orange juice so at least something healthy passes your lips today.'

He pulled a face. 'I had chips for lunch. That's a vegetable.'

'Potatoes are a vegetable,' she corrected. 'Fry them and we're talking a whole new ballgame.'

'Like the difference between football and pinball,' he suggested wryly.

'Quite,' she agreed, wrestling with an oven shelf that refused to pull out.

The cooker was ancient. It had been here in the time of the Doyles and must have been antiquated then. A poor tool for a woman like Mary Doyle, who had been a wonderful cook.

A lovely person, too. Kind and thoughtful and endlessly patient. That was how Esme remembered her, anyway.

She'd died that same year, before Harry had been conceived, so she'd never seen her little grandson.

It was sad, really. Though her own mother wouldn't even let Harry call her grandmother, she imagined Mary Doyle would have been different.

Would she have told her? Esme suspected there would have been no need. She would have seen. The smile was Jack's, as was the temperament. Maybe it was elemental, a recognition of genes shared.

Thank God it hadn't been put to the test that afternoon. But what if Jack actually bought Highfield? Wouldn't a meeting of man and boy be inevitable?

She shook her head. Yes, it would, but it wasn't going to happen. It couldn't.

Esme had no logical reason for this certainty, just blind faith and the fact she couldn't allow herself to believe otherwise.



## CHAPTER THREE

ESME dismissed the Doyles from her thoughts and concentrated on making tea, which they ate at the kitchen table.

Later, with Harry in bed and the cottage gravely silent, she tried to focus on her latest project. She'd been commissioned to design a master bedroom for a mock-Tudor house owned by a City dealer friend of her stepfather and his advertising-executive wife, but it was proving difficult as the two had quite conflicting ideas on what they wanted. Esme, who had fallen into interior design more by chance than planning, had come to accept the work required enormous tact and patience as well as flair and a good eye.

She pored over colour charts now, hoping for inspiration, but her mind kept wandering. Back to that summer almost ten years ago.

She'd come home for the holidays to find Jack there. He'd returned from Ireland to wait for the results of his finals and dispose of his mother's things. Her mother had allowed him to remain in the cottage, paying him subsistence money for gardening duties and general repairs.

It showed how little her mother had really known Jack. To her, he'd been the cook's son, and therefore suited to manual work. Esme, of course, had known him a lot better. He'd tutored her, ridden with her and babysat on more than one occasion.

Undoubtedly strong and fit, he, nevertheless, had not been handyman material. Give him the intricacies of a computer to fathom, and he'd be your man. Give him a stable door off its hinges and he'd be resolutely uninterested.

He'd put in the hours—mowing the lawns on the ride-on tractor, feeding the two horses left in the stables, washing down cars and the yard—but no more.

Esme had watched from a distance, wishing she could keep him company as she had so many times before. But something had changed. Him or her or the situation.

It wasn't that she'd had nothing to say to him. On the contrary, she had longed to go up and ask him how he was and tell him how much she, too, missed his mother. It had just seemed that the gap between them—social, age, intelligence—had grown into a chasm since the Christmas when they'd last talked.

Or maybe it had been Arabella. She'd been home, too, from the Swiss finishing-school that had been meant to teach her to be a lady but had, to Esme's mind, failed miserably. Bored and kicking her heels while a socially acceptable job was being found for her in London, she had looked for a way to kill time and settled on Jack.

At first Esme hadn't worried. Jack had always been offhand to Arabella and at times obliquely rude.

Esme wondered sometimes if that was why she'd become infatuated. All her life she'd played second fiddle to Arabella, with Jack the only one seeming to prefer her.

Until that summer, of course, when August brought a heat-wave and with it a kind of madness.

Or maybe it had just been sex.

She'd felt it, too. Weak at the knees every time Jack had come near. Tongue-tied and pathetic whenever he'd smiled her way. Morose with her awkwardness. Shot through with jealousy as his thing with Arabella had developed.

She would have borne it better if Arabella had been discreet. But that had been the whole point. Arabella had wanted her to know she was sleeping with 'the stable boy,' as she'd referred to Jack, and, in doing so, had made it plain she was just amusing herself.

Even then it had been Jack Esme bled for, so much so that she'd felt compelled to tell him the truth.

'I know about you and Arabella,' she declared, only to be fixed by one of his emotionless stares. 'I don't want to interfere or anything.'

'Then don't,' he advised, almost curtly.

It hurt. Jack never talked to her like that. Not normally.

She couldn't stop. She didn't want to see him hurt in turn. 'I just wondered if you realised,' she ran on determinedly, 'that she's not serious about...well, about you and her.'

He looked annoyed, more than annoyed, although he responded in a kind of joke. 'So don't go buying any engagement rings, is that it?'

'Something like that.' She nodded.

His eyes narrowed further on her grave face, assessing her motives, before he chose to laugh back. ‘Don’t worry, I’ve still got the receipt.’

‘What?’ It took Esme a moment to understand. ‘Oh, right.’

Another joke...or was it?

‘The question is, who’s put you up to this pep talk?’ he considered aloud. ‘Your lovely sister or the family matriarch?’

‘Who?’

‘Your mother.’

‘Oh.’ Esme was made to feel dense. ‘No, nobody. I just thought... Never mind.’

She decided it would be impossible to explain why she was concerned without exposing her own feelings.

He was already looking at her in a funny way, and she could feel colour ebb and flow in her cheeks.

‘Forget I said anything,’ she urged instead.

‘OK, I will.’ He echoed her tone but a suspicion of a smile was lurking at the corners of his mouth.

No longer cross with her. Just amused. Was that better or worse?

Worse, maybe. It certainly added to her mortification and, turning, she walked away.

He called to her, ‘Midge, wait up.’ But, in response, she quickened her footsteps until she’d broken into a run, fleeing back to the house and the sanctuary of her bedroom.

After that, she couldn’t bear to face him or Arabella—she

imagined him relaying the conversation to her—and became a virtual recluse, skulking in her room apart from at mealtimes.

The incident at dinner happened a week later. To Esme, it came out of the blue. Not, it seemed, to her mother or Arabella.

When Jack called at the front door—a first—the new cook was instructed to show him into the dining room.

Arabella disappeared through an interconnecting door and her mother instructed Esme, ‘Stay silent.’

So she did, silent and forgotten at one end of the table.

Jack barely glanced her way. ‘You changed the lock,’ he directed at their mother. ‘What did you think I was going to do? Smash the place up?’

‘For all I know,’ Rosalind Scott-Hamilton sniffed back, ‘you’re capable of it... Now you’ve been thwarted.’

‘Thwarted?’ Jack echoed. ‘Meaning what exactly?’

‘Meaning, young man—’ from her sitting position her mother still managed to look down her nose ‘—your attempts to compromise my daughter have come to naught.’

‘Compromise?’ A ridiculously old-fashioned word, it was clear Jack thought so, too.

‘But in case you’ve failed to get the message—’ her mother paused briefly before launching into a vituperative speech, making it crystal clear that Jack wasn’t fit to court her eldest daughter.

As Arabella was listening in the next room—and Arabella was quite capable of defying their mother and interrupting— Esme

assumed this tirade had her approval.

Esme watched the anger darkening Jack's brow, heard his intake of breath, then cheered silently as he finally retaliated to her mother's snobbery with a few well-chosen words.

When he turned on his heel and slammed the door behind him, her mother still had her mouth hanging open.

Esme pushed back her chair to follow.

'And where are you going?' Her mother turned on her.

'To my room.' She could hardly say, After Jack.

Her mother might have insisted she stay, but when Arabella reappeared the focus of her attention shifted.

'Yes, all right.' She waved Esme away.

Esme knew she was already forgotten and could please herself. She hurried to the front door, imagining Jack had exited the same way he'd entered, but there was no sign of anyone in the drive. She retraced her steps, creeping past the dining room en route to the kitchen.

The new cook, Maggie, was putting the finishing touches to dessert. She glanced up at Esme, noted her expression, then gestured towards the back door.

'He's gone to the barn.'

'The barn?'

Maggie nodded. 'I gave him a bottle to keep out the chill.'

'A bottle? A bottle of what?'

'Whisky from the larder. I'll replace it, of course.'

Esme wasn't worried about that, but frowned. 'Jack doesn't

drink.'

Maggie shook her head—over Esme's naïveté. 'All men drink. Trust me... He'll need it tonight, too, if he's to sleep in the hayloft.'

'But why...?' Esme was still trying to catch up with events.

'He has nowhere else,' Maggie relayed. 'Your mother's dumped his stuff and had a locksmith in. It seems she didn't like him and your sister being so friendly.'

Esme had gathered as much but why now, so suddenly? Arabella had been hanging round Jack for weeks and her mother had done little to prevent it, being indulgent in the extreme to her elder daughter.

'I fetched this down earlier—' Maggie indicated a blanket draped over a chair '—but he's gone off without it.'

'I'll take it to him.' Esme picked it up.

'Are you sure?' Maggie looked a little uncertain but didn't try to stop Esme, adding, 'I'll leave the door on the latch.'

'Thanks.' Esme went out into the night.

It was almost nine, but, being summer, it was still light as Esme crossed the stable yard to the barn at the end.

The door squeaked on rusty hinges; she called out, 'Jack,' faintly at first, then louder at his lack of response.

'Up here.' Reluctantly admitted, it came from the hayloft above.

Esme stepped fully inside. Very little light filtered into the barn but she knew her way by memory. She reached the ladder

and started to climb, pushing the blanket up before her. She was hardly attired for the occasion, in a summer dress, but she stayed poised at the top while her eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness.

‘It’s me, Esme.’ She identified herself in case he’d hoped for someone different.

His voice came from the far wall and sounded gruffer than usual. ‘I know it’s you. What do you want?’

‘I—I...’ What did she want? To tell him she was sorry, she supposed. It suddenly seemed inadequate and his tone was scarcely welcoming.

‘Well, while you’re deciding,’ he mocked her stammering, ‘either come up or go down before you fall and break your neck.’

A torch was switched on and shone across the floor so she had some light to guide her. She still couldn’t see him but it was obvious he was indifferent as to whether she stayed or went.

Esme hovered for a moment longer, then scrambled all the way into the hayloft, ripping the hem of her dress. Uncaring, she edged nearer on all fours until she reached the back wall.



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