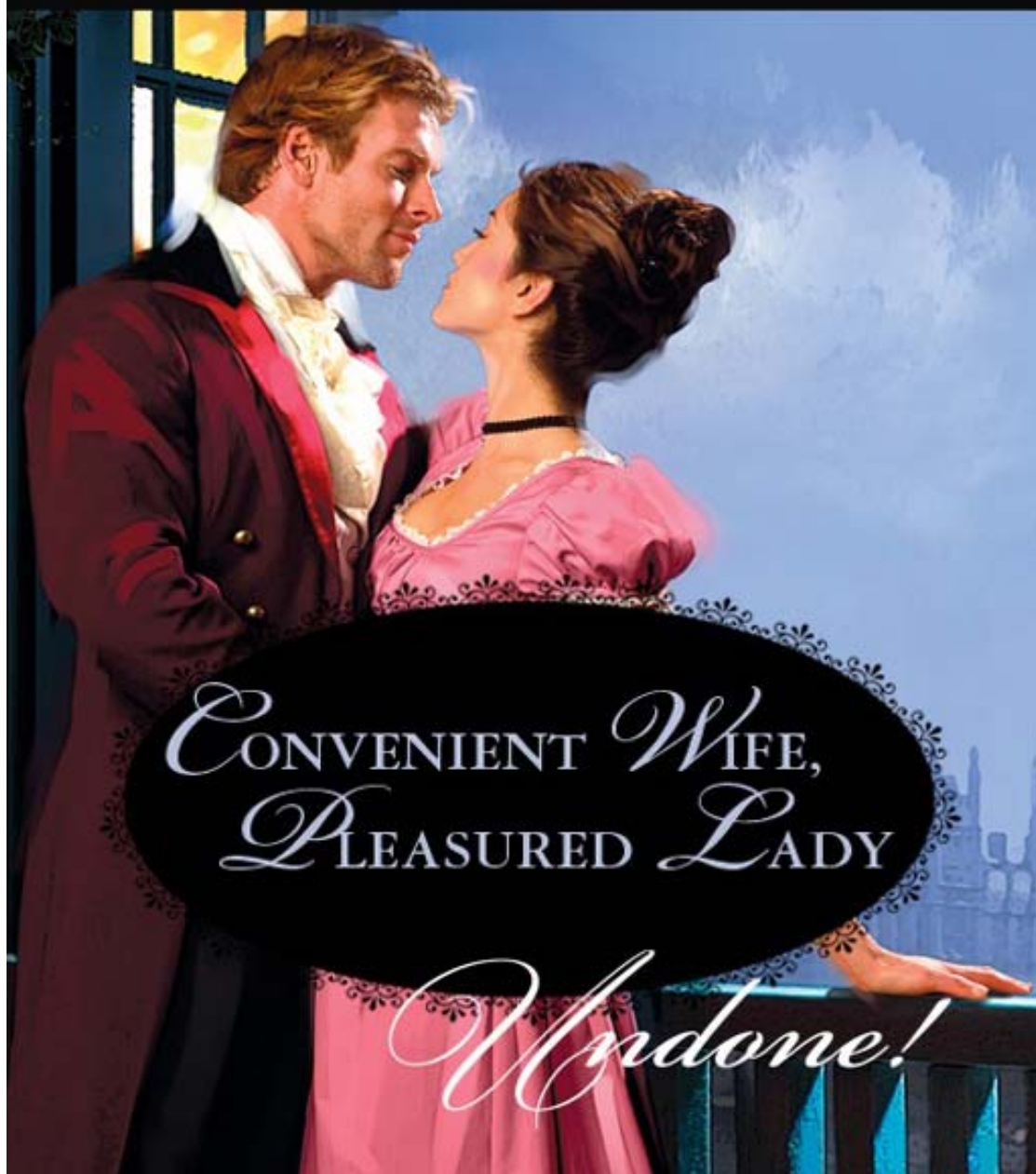


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PLEASURED LADY

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Carole Mortimer



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Daniel Wycliffe, Earl of Stanford, expected Alice Fortesque to be an obedient and biddable wife, not the vivacious beauty demanding he woo her before sharing his bed! Daniel has no intention on falling for his convenient bride, but he needs to produce an heir soon in order to secure his inheritance. He's certain that she won't be able to resist his seductive charms for long...but with Alice determined to accept nothing less than Daniel's love and respect, will he be the one to surrender first?

CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

CHAPTER ONE

“How flattering, my dear, that you were so desperate to see me again that you could not even wait until our wedding tomorrow!” The icily disapproving tone of Daniel Wycliffe, earl of Stanford, as he entered the room where Alice Fortesque sat waiting for him, showed, however, that he was neither flattered nor indeed pleased to find her there. “At such a late hour too!”

Alice firmly refused to be intimidated by that tone. “The hour was not so late when I arrived, my lord...” She gave a pointed look toward the ornate ormolu clock on the mantel, which showed the time to be approaching midnight.

Almost their wedding day, in fact...

Daniel duly noted the slight rebuke in her tone, his lids hooded as he studied the young woman whom circumstances and expediency had allowed him to choose as his future wife and the mother of the future Wycliffe heirs. The Fortesque family, although members of the ton, admittedly were not major players in that elite circle. But Alice Fortesque’s mother had been a Hammond before her marriage, and the daughter of a duke, and so rendering her own daughter eligible to become the wife of an earl.

Alice Fortesque also had the benefit of being only nineteen years of age. Young enough, Daniel hoped, to accept the businesslike marriage he offered her in exchange for the privilege of becoming his countess. The accusation in green eyes beneath an abundance of dark, glossy curls did not give the impression those things were at the forefront of Alice Fortesque’s mind at this moment, implying that she would not be as undemanding a wife as Daniel had hoped.

He raised blond brows. “Your brother and stepmother will not be concerned by your absence?”

“My family believe me to have been abed these past three hours in excited anticipation of our wedding tomorrow!” his bride assured him with scornful dismissal.

Daniel gave a derisive inclination of his head as he accepted that as from tomorrow this young woman would be at liberty to come and go as she pleased in any of the Wycliffe homes and estates. “May I offer you a glass of brandy?” He did not wait for Alice’s answer before crossing to the tray of drinks on the large dresser to pour some of the expensively acquired French liquor into two glasses.

“Have you not already drunk enough for one evening, my lord?” Alice prompted tartly, well aware of the smell of brandy and cigars he had brought into the room with him. Along with the more heady scent of a lady’s perfume...

How dare Daniel Wycliffe go to another woman on the eve of their wedding? The fact that he had done so made it even more imperative that Alice talk to him tonight, that she make him aware of her condition for their marriage before that wedding took place!

Daniel had drawn in a hissing breath at the obviously intended rebuke. "Is it not a little unwise of you to attempt to tell me what to do before we are even wed...?"

Her laugh was hard, if not a little cynical for one of such delicate years. "I doubt I will be given the opportunity to do so after we are married."

How right she was, Daniel acknowledged as he strolled across the room to place one of the brandy glasses on the table beside her chair before deliberately taking a sip from his own glass.

In truth, he had not been in the best of moods even before he arrived home and learned of Alice Fortesque's presence in his drawing room. He had received a missive from Teresa, his mistress until his betrothal a month ago, begging to see him one last time, so that they might make their goodbyes in a civilized manner. In view of the scene that had taken place when he had ended their affair, Daniel had his doubts that would prove possible. On Teresa's part, at least. His doubts, unfortunately, had proved to be more than justified.

His mouth twisted with distaste as he remembered all too clearly that meeting earlier this evening. "I sincerely trust there is an urgent reason for this unexpected visit?"

Dark green eyes sparkled brightly. "I would hardly be here otherwise."

"Well?" Daniel prompted tersely seconds later as Alice added nothing to that statement.

"I—The truth is—"

"Yes?"

"I am not at all sure that I wish to marry you!" There. She had said it, Alice congratulated herself, relieved beyond words to have voiced the concern that had plagued her for the last month.

A month during which she had met the earl only twice. Once following his coming to the house and receiving her brother's approval to his marriage proposal. The second time a week later on the eve of his departure to his estate in Bedfordshire, at a family dinner to celebrate the announcement of their betrothal, when again there had been no occasion for private conversation between the two of them.

Alice had composed several notes to him during the intervening weeks. Notes that had never been sent. The things she needed to say to Daniel Wycliffe could not be written in something as soulless as a letter.

“Your affections are engaged elsewhere?”

“Of course not.” Alice frowned her impatience with the question.

Daniel Wycliffe, arrogant earl of Stanford, shrugged broad shoulders in the superbly cut black jacket that he wore over a silver brocade waistcoat and snowy-white linen, an elegant diamond pin nestled in the meticulously tied cravat at his throat. “Then I fail to see any impediment to your marrying me tomorrow...?”

Alice gasped. “You fail to see—! Why did you offer for me, my lord, when it is perfectly obvious that you do not care for me at all?”

Why? Daniel mused bitterly. Because he had no choice. Because death had given Daniel’s father the victory over his son and heir that he had never succeeded in acquiring during his life. It was a victory that Daniel had done everything in his power to avoid for the last six months, but which he could no longer afford to ignore if the Wycliffe estates were not to fall into complete disrepair through lack of funds.

“I realize you are very young, Alice, but surely you must have observed this last two seasons that marriages amongst the ton are rarely made for love?” he drawled mockingly. “Other factors, such as money, land, or merely social standing, are of far more importance in a marriage than an emotion as destructive as love.”

Alice was well aware of the cold and often cynical reasons for marriages amongst the ton. Was aware of it, and deplored it. “I fail to see which of those three things could have prompted you to offer for me, my lord,” she taunted.

The earl sighed his irritation. “I suppose, as my future wife, you have the right to know my reasons for marriage—”

“You suppose...?” Alice echoed incredulously.

Daniel gave a haughty inclination of his head. “To put it simply, my father, in his infinite wisdom—” his mouth curled disdainfully “—saw fit to leave the earl of Stanford’s fortune outside of the estate, with the condition that I, as his heir, would inherit half that fortune if I marry within the year following his death, and the second half if a future heir is born during the first year of that marriage. Failure to do those things would see half, or all, of that fortune in the hands of a cousin who, I do assure you, is even less deserving of it than I am.”

Alice found that very hard to believe. Daniel, at the age of nine and twenty, had the reputation and handsome looks of a god fallen from Mount Olympus; his hair was the gold of ripe corn, his wickedly sensual eyes the blue of the sky in a face etched and hewn as if from granite, and softened only by a sinfully moulded mouth. His shoulders were wide, waist tapered, hips and legs elegantly muscled, his every movement a delight to a woman’s senses.

Was it any wonder that women of the ton, both young and old, so often fell into the snare of those sensuously golden good looks?

Was it any wonder that Alice, too, had fallen under the spell of that sensual attraction the first time she set eyes on him a year ago...?

CHAPTER TWO

Alice may not have been introduced to the earl of Stanford until their betrothal a month ago, but that had not stopped her from being completely aware of him on the rare occasions he deigned to attend balls or parties given during the season. Occasions when he stood arrogantly removed from all but his close circle of friends, and seemingly immune to the gossip and speculation about him.

Alice's heart had stopped beating altogether four weeks ago when her brother, Jonathan, called her to his study and introduced her to Daniel as the man who had come to offer for her hand in marriage. Alice had been ecstatic, convinced that the earl must have seen her at a recent ball and fallen secretly in love with her. His coldness during that initial meeting, and the one following, and then his disappearance for three weeks to his estate in Bedfordshire, had quickly cured her of that childishness.

She gave a dismissive shake of her head now at her own naïveté then looked Daniel straight in the eye. "Your father's will does not explain why I have the dubious pleasure of becoming your choice of bride."

"‘Dubious pleasure,’ Alice?" Daniel echoed mockingly. "I assure you, my dear, that I have so far received no complaints from any woman on the subject of ‘pleasure’!"

Alice felt the heat in her cheeks. "There is always a first time for everything, my lord."

"So there is," he dismissed tauntingly. "As to my reason for choosing you as my wife...Quite bluntly, my dear, your brother, Jonathan, has become rather too fond of the card table of late. So much so that he owes me rather a lot of money. Money he informs me he does not possess. I am willing to forgo those debts on the occasion of our marriage tomorrow."

Alice felt her face go pale as she realized she was to be the sacrifice on the altar of her brother's recently acquired liking for the card table. "We have had no chance in which to even become acquainted with each other, my lord."

Daniel's patience with this conversation had come to an end. "I assure you, that omission will have been rectified by this time tomorrow."

Alice's mouth tightened. "No."

He raised questioning brows at her vehemence. "No...?"

She gave a determined shake of her head. "Understanding your reason for marriage is one thing, my lord, accepting my own role in that cold-blooded plan is something else entirely."

Daniel's mouth thinned. "You are refusing to marry me?"

The fact that she swallowed hard before answering showed Daniel that Alice was not as composed as she wished him to believe. "I assume that if I do then my brother's debts to you would become pressing?"

"You assume correctly," Daniel grated.

She stood up, a slight figure in her pale yellow gown against Daniel's superior height and heavier build. Slight, but most definitely not downtrodden, Daniel acknowledged with grudging admiration. He had expected—hoped—that Alice would be an obedient and biddable wife, but perhaps a wife with at least some fire in her might be less tedious to his jaded palate.

Damn his father to the hell in which he belonged, anyway!

The dissolute life Daniel had chosen to live these last ten years had been the only way he could think of in which to repay his father for his years of neglect and cruelty to Daniel's mother before her death. It was a retribution his father had more than returned by placing these conditions in his will.

"I have every intention of becoming your wife tomorrow, my lord," Alice softly interrupted the bitterness of Daniel's thoughts.

"I am sure that your brother will be relieved to hear it," he drawled mockingly. "Tell me, why does he gamble when he is obviously so bad at it...?"

Her perfect bow of a mouth turned down slightly. "I believe for the same reason I have agreed to marry a man I do not know, let alone feel—affection for."

Daniel's mouth tightened. "Which is?"

"You are acquainted with my stepmother, my lord." It was a statement rather than a question.

Yes, Daniel had met Lady Constance Fortesque several times.

And each time he had disliked the woman more than the last. In fact, if anything could have deterred him from offering for Alice Fortesque then it was the thought of having the shrewish, social-climbing Lady Constance as his mother-in-law.

Alice sighed. “Unfortunately she is not only Jonathan’s stepmother but also his mother-in-law. It was Jonathan’s marriage to her daughter Charlotte that brought Lady Constance into our lives,” she explained. “And that of our father,” she added heavily.

“Good God...” Daniel was stunned at Jonathan’s misfortune.

“Indeed.” Alice gave a graceful acknowledgment of her head. “Our stepmother has become even more impossible to live with since our father died two years ago.” She frowned.

“Forcing Jonathan to find his entertainment outside of his own home,” Daniel drawled knowingly.

Her green eyes flashed resentfully. “Only when it comes to the card table. I believe Jonathan is still faithful to Charlotte and their marriage, that he does still love her.”

Daniel nodded. “Then it is only the mother-in-law he despises. In that case, why does he not ask her to leave his home?”

Alice gave a humorless smile. “To go where, my lord?”

“Hmm, you have a point,” the earl murmured ruefully. “Poor devil.”

“Yes.” Alice sighed. “As I have already stated, I have every intention of becoming your wife tomorrow. However—”

“It has always been my experience, when a woman begins a sentence with ‘however,’ that I am going to heartily dislike what follows.” Daniel sighed impatiently.

“I bow to your superior knowledge on the subject,” Alice acknowledged dryly as she looked at him with calm green eyes. “It is my intention for our marriage to initially be in name only. In other words, my lord, until such time as we know each other better, I agree to share your home but not your bed.”

No, not tedious at all! “In that case, Alice, perhaps we should make a start on ‘knowing each other better’...?”

Daniel was suddenly standing much too close, Alice realized slightly dazedly, the warmth of his breath stirring the tendrils of hair at her temples, her own eyes wide with trepidation as his mocking blue gaze held her captive.

Then his head lowered and his lips were soft against hers, gently exploring as he took her into his arms before deepening the kiss. The warmth of his tongue stroked against her lips, parting them before thrusting inside, the caresses making Alice’s body burn as his hands moved down the length of her spine to curve about her bottom and pull her into him.

Alice was at once aware of the hardness of his thighs and of the way they pressed so intimately against her, causing a sudden heat between her own legs. Her breasts swelled against the tight bodice of her gown, her pleasure deepening as Daniel moved a hand to cup one of those burgeoning mounds, his thumb caressing the hardened tip with an expertise that left her breathless.

At the same time Alice suddenly became aware of exactly where, and on whom, she had last smelled the woman's perfume that now clung so insidiously to the earl's elegant jacket.

"No!" Alice regained her dignity with effort as she put her hands firmly against the earl's chest and held herself away from his seduction. "I am firm in my resolve, sir. I refuse—I will not become your wife, in the fullest sense of the word, until you have wooed and won me."

Daniel's eyes widened incredulously as his arms dropped from about her and he took a step backward. "'Wooed and won' you...?"

"Exactly, my lord." Alice gave a measured inclination of her head, grateful that the length of her gown hid the slight trembling of her lower limbs. "If you wish for me to fully become your wife, the mother of your heir, then first I will need to be convinced that your emotions are as engaged as other parts of your body." A delicate blush colored her cheeks in acknowledgment of her awareness of the earl's arousal.

She might well blush, Daniel scowled darkly. How dare this chit come here and ask—no, demand!—that he court her like some lovesick youth? "That will only happen when hell freezes over!" he bit out harshly. Having observed during his childhood and beyond the deep and abiding love his mother felt for his father, as opposed to his father's complete indifference to her, he knew that love for one's spouse was as destructive as it was painful.

Alice calmly collected her cloak, from where it lay draped over the back of a chair, before pulling it about the slenderness of her shoulders to fasten it at her throat. "You have heard my condition for our marriage, my lord."

"And you have heard mine!" he warned.

She looked steadily into his eyes. "Perhaps you would care to call off our wedding tomorrow...?"

A nerve pulsed in Daniel's tightly clenched jaw. "We both know it is far too late for that."

"In that case, I will no doubt see you at St George's Church at noon tomorrow." Alice swept from the room with all the regal elegance of a woman born to be his countess.

Daniel's expression was grim as he refilled his brandy glass before sprawling in an armchair to stare broodingly into the unlit fireplace.

On one thing Daniel was resolved; he may be forced into marrying, and to producing an heir, but he had no intention—absolutely none—of ever allowing his emotions to be engaged by the young woman who would become his wife!

CHAPTER THREE

"I had no idea that the duke of Stourbridge was to stand as your witness..." Alice attempted conversation with her husband of five hours as the four perfectly matched grays pulled the coach the two of them traveled in ever onward to Wycliffe Hall in Bedfordshire.

"The implication being that you considered the worthy duke of Stourbridge far too toplofty to have ever considered him as a possible friend of mine?" Daniel mocked as he faced her across the carriage.

That had been her implication, Alice acknowledged. The duke of Stourbridge was known to be the haughty and aloof head of the St. Claire family, as well as a diligent and forceful member of the House. Surely a complete contrast to the dangerous reputation as a rake and gambler that Daniel had enjoyed for so many years.

A man with a dangerous reputation who was now her husband, Alice thought with a shiver of apprehension.

Her confident air of the previous evening had been shaken somewhat earlier today when her clothes and personal belongings, as well as her maid, were loaded into one of the earl's coaches in order to precede their own arrival at Wycliffe Hall later today. A forceful reminder to Alice that once the wedding had taken place she would be completely in Daniel Wycliffe's power, his to do with as he wished.

The fact that he had looked so wickedly handsome as they stood together to make their vows before the parson had only added to Alice's feelings of unease. What if later tonight, as had happened yesterday evening, she could not resist Daniel's heart-melting brand of seduction? As so many women before her had not.

"Hawk and I were at school together." Daniel took pity on his bride's obvious nervousness as they approached Wycliffe Hall and the first night she was to spend in what was now to be her home. Her only home if Daniel had his way and left Alice there when he returned to London in a few weeks' time. An increasing Alice, if he were successful in impregnating her during their first weeks of marriage.

For, having briefly considered the situation after Alice had left the previous evening, Daniel did not give too much credence to her threats of not becoming his wife in the fullest sense. Alice was very young and inexperienced, and her declaration had obviously

been a case of last-minute nerves. She had certainly been responsive enough during those few minutes Daniel had held her in his arms, her curves warm and inviting, her breasts and thighs as heated as his own. Pleasurably so.

In fact, as Daniel looked admiringly at his wife's flushed beauty beneath her white bonnet, and the soft swell of her breasts above her white gown, he anticipated doing much more than merely holding Alice in his arms and kissing her later this evening...

"Oh, what a pretty village," Alice exclaimed in an effort to divert the attention of her husband's intimate blue gaze as it moved lazily over the firm swell of her breasts, and in doing so bringing the heat of awareness to her own body.

"Wycliffe," the earl informed her dryly.

Alice sat forward to look more interestedly at her surroundings. "Oh, look, my lord!" she cried with delight. "The villagers have come out to welcome you home!"

The earl also sat forward, the silkiness of his hair brushing lightly against Alice's cheek and causing her to gasp as she drew back from that contact. His sinful eyes danced with mockery as he glanced back at her. "I assure you, they are not welcoming me, my dear Alice, but the new countess of Stanford."

Alice swallowed hard at the realization she was the new countess of Stanford, her gaze quickly shifting from Daniel as she sat forward once again to return the enthusiastic waves of the children and the more muted cheers of their parents. These were her people, Alice realized emotionally. Tenants and workers of the estate had come out to welcome the new mistress of Wycliffe Hall.

Daniel's lids were lowered now as he watched his young wife's obvious pleasure in her welcome. A welcome that was no longer extended to him, even when he had returned home six months ago as the seventh earl of Stanford. Oh, he had been popular enough as a child, but the last ten years had dulled the memories of the villagers to anything other than the lurid stories of his rakish behavior in London that had reached their scandalized ears.

No, he was not and never would be, the prodigal returning. But Alice, with her obvious youth and warmth, was certainly being heralded as the wife of one.

"Sit back, Alice, and remember that you are no longer a child but a countess," Daniel rasped reprovingly, his mouth thinning in self-disgust at his harshness as he saw Alice's pleasure in the welcome instantly fade and she sat back almost guiltily.

"I apologize, my lord." Her back was ramrod straight, hands clasped tightly together, her eyes no longer smiling.

He was behaving like a bastard, Daniel accepted heavily. Worse, his behavior just now had been far too reminiscent of the contemptuous way in which his father had always treated his mother. “No, I am the one who is at fault, Alice,” he said on a sigh “for being so jaded as to dampen your enthusiasm for your new life.”

She eyed him from beneath long, dark lashes. “Perhaps you would have been more...content if you had married someone of more mature years, my lord. A woman such as Lady Benbow, perhaps?”

If he was a bastard then his little wife had claws!

That Alice knew Lady Teresa Benbow had until recently been his mistress, was obvious. That she disapproved of the choice was also apparent in the slightly derisive curl to those delightfully kissable lips.

Daniel gave a grin of amusement—something he had not expected to find in his marriage. “Lady Benbow is not a woman that a man takes to wife, Alice.”

“Is she not?” Her tone was sharp.

“Most assuredly not,” he drawled. Clearly, Alice, during her social round of the salons and ballrooms, had heard some of the gossip concerning his relationship with Teresa. “Neither am I sure that it is altogether—proper for the two of us to be discussing her in this way,” he added with a frown.

“Why is that, my lord, when Lady Benbow is now to be such a part of both our lives?” Alice’s gaze was deceptively innocent.

Daniel narrowed his eyes. Admittedly, his young wife was proving far more entertaining than he ever would have credited, but that did not give Alice leave to question him on so intimate a subject. “I have no idea to what you are referring, Alice,” he snapped with finality.

A lesser woman would have quaked at the earl’s coldness, Alice felt sure. Fortunately, Alice was not such a woman. “I am, of course, referring to the fact that yesterday evening you returned home with Lady Benbow’s—perfume upon your person. A regular occurrence upon which I, as your wife, am no doubt expected to maintain stoically silent...?” She arched her dark brows.

The earl’s face darkened thunderously. “Something no one could accuse you of having done so far in our acquaintance!”

“I am merely trying to ascertain my own role within our marriage, my lord,” Alice assured him lightly. “Having already discussed your own yesterday evening.” She was, Alice knew, playing a dangerous game. One that could so easily backfire upon her. But it was a game she considered well worth the risk if at the end of it she had managed to

acquire the respect and love of the earl of Wycliffe. All of her husband's love. Anything else was simply unthinkable.

"You go too far, Alice—"

"I go as far as I have to, my lord," she retorted determinedly. "It is not my intention to be one of those wives who remain in ignorance of their husband's...affairs. To become the object of the ton's pity and ridicule."

The life Alice had just described was exactly that of his mother's within the confines of her loveless marriage to his father, Daniel acknowledged frowningly. A life ruined by an unrequited love that Daniel had sworn neither he nor any future wife of his would ever be subjected to.

His mouth thinned. "Lady Benbow is no longer part of my life, Alice. She ceased to be so on the occasion of our betrothal. Yesterday evening was by way of a—a final farewell. We will not discuss this any further, Alice." The iciness of his tone brooked no further argument.

For Alice's part there did not need to be. She had heard the gossip of the earl's latest in a long line of mistresses before he so much as made his offer for her a month ago. Just as Alice had been aware of the gasps of disbelief following the announcement of their own betrothal. The whispered doubts of the ton that she, the young and inexperienced Alice Fortesque, would ever be able to hold the attention of a man such as Daniel Wycliffe.

It was Alice's intention to do everything in her power to achieve exactly that.

In whatever way she deemed necessary...

CHAPTER FOUR

"I trust you are happy with your apartments?"

Alice was brushing her hair as she sat before the ornate dressing table, but she whirled round at the sound of her husband's voice, her eyes wide as she took in his large, handsome presence. She watched as he entered the yellow-and-gold bedchamber to which the housekeeper had so recently brought her and announced as being the apartments of the countess of Stanford.

Alice's eyes moved to the door that connected the earl's bedchamber to her own, her frown deepening as she saw that the key she had turned earlier was still firmly in the lock.

"I took the liberty of entering through the door from the hallway," Daniel drawled as he saw the direction of his wife's gaze. "This door appears to be locked." He strolled across the room to turn the key.

Alice's mouth tightened. "It was locked for a reason, my lord."

"Indeed," Daniel rasped. "I advise you not to lock it again, Alice."

"You—"

"As must already be apparent, Alice, a simple key turned in a lock will not keep me from my wife's bedchamber if I should choose to enter it!" His eyes glittered warningly.

Alice turned away from that dazzling stare to resume brushing her hair. "I asked my maid to inform you that I would not be joining you downstairs for dinner this evening, my lord. It has been a long day, and I—I have a headache."

Daniel studied his wife's reflection in the mirror. She did indeed look pale, and there were lines of tension between her eyes. She still wore the simple white gown she had worn for their wedding earlier today, but the bonnet had been laid to one side, and the pins removed from her hair. Long, dark, gloriously curling hair that reached almost to her waist, the chandelier overhead picking out auburn lights amongst the ebony.

"Where is the ache?" Daniel prompted as he crossed the room to stand behind her.

Alice was no longer sure. After her tensions of the day, the ache in her head had indeed been genuine a few minutes earlier, but with her husband's entry to her bedchamber Alice was aware of a much deeper ache. An ache that caused her breathing to become shallow, and her body to tremble even as she felt the warmth stealing from her shoulders, to her breasts, and down to her thighs.

"Alice...?"

Her startled look met his in the mirror as Daniel stood so close behind her. So tall. So meltingly attractive... "I—My temples," she claimed breathlessly, that breath halting altogether as her husband raised his hands and placed them on either side of her head, his fingers gently tangling in her hair as his thumbs caressed her temples.

Alice's skin felt soft and smooth, her hair silky beneath Daniel's touch as he studied her reflection in the mirror. Her lids were closed over her expressive eyes, her lips slightly parted, and the tops of her breasts quickly rising and falling above the low neckline of her gown.

Rather full breasts, Daniel observed as he moved even closer, his desire stirring restlessly at this assault of beauty upon his senses. "Better?" he encouraged throatily.

Alice could only nod as she felt the press of Daniel's arousal behind her and the caress of his fingers moved from her temples onto her shoulders and down her spine, releasing the buttons of her gown as they did so, Daniel's lightest touch increasing the rapidly rising heat in Alice's body.

She stirred protestingly. “Daniel—”

“Shh,” he murmured huskily, his breath warm against Alice’s skin before she felt the caress of his lips against her neck.

Alice raised sleepy lids to look at their reflections in the mirror, Daniel’s hair so golden against her dark curls as his lips traveled the length of her throat. The light lick of his tongue against her earlobe caused her to groan as it sent rivulets of pleasure through her body.

She couldn’t tear her gaze away from the mirror as her unbuttoned gown fell away from her breasts, her nipples dark and firm beneath the thin material of her chemise. Her neck arched and her tousled head fell back against Daniel’s chest, as she could only watch in fascination while his hands moved ever downward even while his lips and tongue continued to seek out and pleasure each sensitive hollow of her throat and shoulders.

Those hands cupped her breasts now, capturing her nipples between long slender fingers and thumb, gently squeezing and caressing, Alice feeling the thrill of those caresses all the way down to her toes.

Daniel’s heated gaze held hers in the mirror for several long seconds before he moved to sit facing her on the stool, his head lowering to capture and suck one of her nipples through the thin material of her chemise.

Alice groaned low in her throat as her hands moved up to become entangled in the thickness of Daniel’s hair as he drew her nipple deeper into the moist fire of his mouth, the heat that had pooled between Alice’s thighs becoming almost unbearable.

Still she watched their reflections in the mirror, unable to look away as Daniel turned his attentions to her other breast, rolling the hot rasping length of his tongue across her chemise as his hand cupped and rhythmically caressed the breast he’d just left.

The flimsy material clung to Alice now, wet from Daniel’s ministrations, the rosy tips of her breasts hard as her excitement grew. Alice found she wanted more. That she wanted to feel Daniel’s lips against her bare flesh, and she slipped the straps of her chemise down her shoulders to bare her breasts completely to the heat of Daniel’s gaze and of his mouth.

Daniel continued to look into Alice’s eyes as he slowly licked his tongue over one of those hardened tips. “I wish for you to touch me, too, Alice,” he encouraged gruffly as he moved one of her hands down to his thighs, her first tentative touch causing his erection to leap eagerly against the restrictions of his breeches.

Daniel moaned as Alice became bolder in her caresses, her fingers touching the pulsing length of him as the palm of her hand pressed against the base of his shaft.

“Harder, Alice,” he urged as he moved encouragingly against her hand. “I need to have your fingers about me,” he explained at her confused expression.

Daniel almost came apart completely as Alice released the buttons on his breeches, then he turned his head slightly so that he could look at them both in the mirror. He watched Alice’s face as she released him fully from his clothing and her fingers closed about him. She began to caress him, her tongue running unconsciously across her lips as she stared down so intently at his pulsing erection.

More than anything, Daniel wanted that hot tongue against him!

Alice had never seen any part of a man’s body naked before, but even so, she was sure that every part of Daniel was beautiful. His erection was long and thick, her fingers tightening about him as her caresses became quicker and harder.

Daniel had never fought so hard to hold on to his ejaculation, the pleasure all the more torturous as Alice’s tongue continued to move slowly across her parted lips. As if she did indeed want to take him into her mouth and pleasure him. He sat up abruptly, the movement dislodging her hand. “We will be much more comfortable on the bed, Alice,” he assured her as she looked at him in bewilderment.

Daniel stood up to swing Alice into his arms and carry her over to the bed, peeling the chemise from her body to gaze down at her—naked apart from white stockings secured at her thighs with pale blue garters.

“Let me, Alice,” he groaned, hearing her gasp as he moved to kneel between her parted legs.

His fingers were gentle as he bared her completely to his gaze, his lips and tongue starting the ascent up the inside of her thighs. Alice moaned in protest as Daniel ceased his exploration of her, that moan quickly turning to one of renewed abandon as Daniel turned the attentions of his mouth to the throb of her clitoris, whilst at the same time gently pushing two of his fingers deep inside her. Her hips moved up to meet the rhythm of his thrusts as her own fingers curled desperately into the bedclothes beneath her.

Daniel felt Alice rapidly approaching release, and reversed his position so that he was above and over her looking down at her parted thighs. His fingers continued to move inside her as he lowered his head once more and sucked hard at the very center of her pleasure.

In the maelstrom of unimagined pleasure, Alice reacted instinctively, her fingers moving to curl about the length of Daniel before she guided the tip of him into the heat of her mouth.

Again her actions were instinctive as she began to suck rhythmically, her hand moving slowly up and down, knowing that her instincts were correct when she heard Daniel groan gruffly.

His own tongue was now a hard caress against the sensitive spot between her thighs, the thrusts of his fingers increasing in tempo to match those caresses, driving her closer, ever closer—

Suddenly Alice's body caught fire, her hips lifting high off the bed as she pressed herself into Daniel's lips. Pleasure unlike anything she had ever known, ever dreamed of, coursed like molten lava through every particle of her body.

At the same time Daniel's own release came.

"Dear God!" he cried as he finally collapsed down beside her on the bed, and Alice was brought to an abrupt awareness of the intimacy of their situation.

At once alerting Alice to the fact that within hours of becoming Daniel's wife, she had completely forgotten her resolve to hold herself apart from him until she was sure that he loved her.

As she loved him...?

Alice shied away from even thinking such a thing. "I believe my headache has returned more severely than ever." She spoke distantly as she turned to pull a coverlet over her nakedness, keeping her face averted as Daniel stood up to refasten his clothing.

His gaze was mocking as he looked down at her. "Strange, lovemaking usually achieves the opposite."

"What we just did—" Alice gave a shake of her head. "That was not lovemaking!" she told him scornfully.

His mouth twisted derisively. "There are many ways to make love, Alice. Before too long has passed I promise you will know all of them," he assured her huskily.

"Indeed?" She gave a pained frown. "If this is an example of your 'wooing' of me, my lord, then I am afraid you have failed—abysmally."

Daniel drew in a sharply angry breath. "I believe I have already informed you that I have no intention of wooing you."

"You will not touch me again in this way until you have done so!" Her eyes glittered with her anger.

Daniel glowered at her. "Keep your precious virginity then," he said as he strode forcefully across the room to open the door that connected their bedchambers. "But I advise you never, ever, to lock a door between us again!" he warned before slamming that door behind him.

Alice could hold back her choking sob no longer as she buried her face in her hands and began to cry in earnest.

She would hold out for Daniel's love.

She could not accept anything less...

CHAPTER FIVE

"Where the deuce have you been?"

Alice calmly handed the bonnet and gloves that matched the green of her gown to Reynolds, the butler, before turning to face the man who had been her husband in name only for the past week. Daniel stood in the doorway to the drawing room as he looked across at her with brooding intensity.

It had been a long, trying week. No doubt for both of them, Alice privately admitted. Her hopes of a loving relationship developing between the two of them had been dashed time and time again by Daniel's mercurial moods, one minute politely attentive, the next impatient and cutting because of her newly found resolve.

"I have displeased you by going out in the carriage, my lord?" she returned lightly as she joined him in the drawing room and heard the door softly close behind her.

"You are late returning for luncheon." Daniel was scowling darkly as he moved to stand in front of the empty fireplace, the weather too clement to warrant it being lit. "And you did not leave word as to where you were going," he added disapprovingly.

Alice raised her eyebrows. "Did I need to?"

"Of course—!" Daniel bit off his expletive, knowing he was as furious with himself as he was with Alice. For being concerned by her absence. "For all I knew, you could have been set upon by footpads. Or worse." A nerve pulsed in his tightly clenched jaw.

"And would my informing someone as to my destination have prevented either of those things from happening, my lord?"

"You are being deliberately difficult, Alice."

"Am I?" she replied before moving to sit in one of the armchairs to look up at him expectantly.

Daniel held on to his temper with difficulty. Something he seemed to have been doing rather a lot this past week. For one reason or another. And all those reasons had to do with the annoying young woman who was now his wife.

Why couldn't Alice have been the shy and biddable wife of his imaginings? A woman who would happily spend her days doing embroidery or arranging flowers? Her nights spent in bed with him in an effort to provide him with his heir...

Alice did none of those things. Instead she spent her days going about the estate visiting his workers and the tenants farmers, often coming back with a list of things needed by one tenant or another, which she then presented to Daniel so that he could pass it on to his estate manager.

As for her nights...

Daniel had made a promise to himself after that incident on their wedding night that he would not enter Alice's bedchamber again until she invited him to do so. It was an invitation that had so far not been forthcoming.

Instead Daniel was left to watch as his young wife charmed every member of his household, from the stiffly formal Reynolds to the lowliest housemaid. To witness the warmth with which Alice was greeted by the villagers on the two afternoons they had ventured out on social calls to neighboring estates so that he might introduce his countess to the local gentry.

"You could have accompanied me if you had wished..."

Daniel scowled as she sat in the armchair looking so fresh and beautiful. "I do not recall being invited."

Her smile was chidingly mischievous. "I am sure that has never before prevented you from doing exactly as you wished."

Perhaps not, but Daniel found himself increasingly uncertain of how to proceed with his young countess. An uncertainty he had never experienced before. A part of him could not help but admire and approve of the way Alice rode about the countryside in the carriage, much as his mother had done, offering help and advice to his tenants. But another part of him felt unaccountably resentful of this draw upon her time. It was time Alice could have spent with him. Getting to know him. Showering that warmth upon him.

Ridiculous. Daniel had never needed anyone. He had decided long ago that he never would.

Except...

Under Alice's gentle guidance this past week, Wycliffe Hall had become a home again instead of a mausoleum that Daniel wished only to escape from. The household staff seemed to work more willingly and happily. The cook seemed to outdo herself with each meal she provided for their enjoyment. And on the occasions that Daniel rode about the estate, the workers he met now greeted him cheerfully as well as respectfully.

All, Daniel felt sure, because of the attentions his young wife gave to them and their welfare.

The life Daniel had led in London—one of hedonism and dalliance—now somehow seemed like a lifetime ago. Certainly it no longer held the appeal that it once had.

Instead Daniel had found himself taking an interest in the estate, and he was even thinking of taking up his seat in the House once Parliament returned in the autumn. His friend Hawk St. Claire, duke of Stourbridge, had certainly been encouraging Daniel to do so for some months now.

He could not leave the estate to the care of his manager, however, if he did not first put some restraints upon his young wife's behavior; his estate manager was one of the few people Alice had not succeeded in charming since her arrival here. "Alice, I appreciate the changes you have wrought within this household—"

"I did not realize you had noticed them, my lord." She smiled at Daniel warmly.

"I have noticed them," he grated. "I approve of them," he allowed tersely. "But your continued interference about the estate is another matter, however," he added with a frown.

Alice lowered her lashes. "Interference, my lord...?" she echoed innocently. "You call it interference when I bring to your attention the fact that one of the tenants' children is in need of a doctor? Or—"

"You know to what I refer, Alice," he reproved. "I have now been informed that you have made promises to the estate workers that all their cottages will be thoroughly examined during the next week, and then repairs carried out if necessary."

Alice looked unperturbed. "Informed by whom, my lord?"

"The who does not signify, Alice," Daniel replied impatiently.

She looked at him intently. "You do not approve of rendering the estate workers' conditions a little more comfortable, my lord?"

He was irritated by the implied criticism. "I did not say that—"

“Then it is someone else who does not approve,” she acknowledged mildly. “Mr Carter, perhaps? Whose job it is to see to these things—”

“You really must leave these matters to me, Alice,” Daniel snapped in frustration, not at all enjoying the experience of being chastised by his young wife.

“Of course, my lord. It is only that I believed you to be a fair and just man...”

“I am a fair and just man, Alice!” he said impatiently.

“Yes, my lord,” she agreed. “Then perhaps you might also see fit to ensure that James Carter exhibits those same traits?”

She was like a dog worrying a bone, Daniel acknowledged irritably. But a justified dog with a bone...? Perhaps.

“Carter will leave if you do not desist, Alice.” Daniel scowled.

She gave an unconcerned nod. “I am sure you would do a much better job of managing the estate.”

“An earl does not himself cater to the wants and needs of the people on his estate.”

Alice gave a confident smile. “Then perhaps you could start a new trend, my lord...?”

A reciprocal smile played unwillingly about Daniel’s sensually sculptured mouth. “You are mocking me, Alice.”

“I am teasing you, Daniel,” she corrected huskily.

Daniel turned away to stand in front of the window looking out across the neatly manicured lawns of Wycliffe Hall. He could not before recall, ever, having anyone tease him. Or explain why he liked having Alice do so.

Oh to hell with the disgruntled James Carter! Let the man leave if he so wished; Daniel would just engage another manager to take his place. Or take on the role himself...?

Alice took advantage of Daniel’s averted profile to look upon her husband, her heart, no doubt, in her eyes.

The love she had suspected she felt for Daniel had deepened during this past week. His devilishly handsome good looks were indisputable, and just looking at him made her heart pound faster, but the things Alice had learned about the Wycliffe family had helped her to understand him better too. To realize why he was the man that he was. Why he shunned and mistrusted even the idea of love between husband and wife.

From the cook Alice had learned that this had not been a happy household under Daniel's father, the sixth earl of Stanford. That Geoffrey Wycliffe had spent most of his time in London, ignoring the wife who loved him in favour of the mistresses he kept there.

From Reynolds she had heard that Daniel had adored his mother, the beautiful Diana.

From the people in the village Alice had discovered that Daniel had been mischievous and well liked as a child and a young man, but that he had rarely returned to Wycliffe Hall after a row with his father immediately following the funeral of his beloved mother ten years ago.

Adding all those things together, Alice had come to realize that Daniel's mother had loved his father deeply. That the emotion had not been returned. In fact, it had been callously rejected in preference to other women.

Was it any wonder that Daniel distrusted the mere idea of the emotion of love? That he shunned the very idea of falling in love with the woman who was his own wife, and so leaving him open to the same pain and anguish that his mother had known in loving his father?

Having learned those things about her husband Alice was more determined than ever that Daniel would one day come to love her in the same way that she now loved him. He did not know it, refused to acknowledge it, but Alice believed that Daniel needed to love someone as deeply as he needed someone to love him.

As Alice did love him...

CHAPTER SIX

Alice stood up. "I was late returning for luncheon, my lord, because I have arranged a surprise for us this afternoon."

Daniel turned slowly back to face her, his expression wary. "A surprise...?"

Alice refused to be deterred by his obvious reluctance. "I have had Cook prepare us a picnic, my lord. I am informed there is a glade, with a river running through it, which is an ideal place in which to enjoy a picnic."

Daniel knew the glade to which Alice referred, having spent many happy hours there as a boy throwing stones into the water with the children of the village. Before his father became aware of what he was doing, and with whom he was associating, and put a stop to it.

That Alice had learned of the often sun-dappled glade in the week she had been here should not have surprised him. "I am a little old for picnics, Alice—"

“One is never too old to enjoy the informality of a picnic, my lord,” she assured him lightly.

“There are things I need to do this afternoon—”

“Surely they can wait a little longer. Please, Daniel.” Alice crossed the room to link her arm through his as she looked up at him encouragingly.

It was the first time that Alice had voluntarily touched him since their wedding night. Neither was Daniel immune to the warmth in those beautiful deep green eyes as she looked up at him so pleadingly. The thought of being alone with Alice in the sun-dappled glade certainly had its attractions, too...

“I received a letter from Jonathan this morning, informing me that our stepmother has gone on an extended visit to a relative in Devonshire,” Alice murmured.

“Really?” Daniel drawled. “That must come as something of a relief to both your brother and his wife.”

“Most assuredly.” Alice nodded, her eyes dancing with mischief. “Except that we do not have any relatives in Devonshire. Do you have any relatives in Devonshire, my lord?” Her tone was deceptively innocent.

He shrugged. “I may have...”

“The dowager duchess of Penfield, perhaps?”

“Perhaps,” Daniel allowed gratingly.

“I knew it!” Alice grasped his arm excitedly. “You arranged for this visit so that Jonathan and Charlotte might finally have some time alone together! You really are not as cynical and dismissive of the plight of others as you like to appear, my Lord.”

Daniel wasn’t sure that he cared for the description “cynical and dismissive of the plight of others,” but he could find little to complain about in the warmth and approval he could see in Alice’s gaze as she looked up at him so happily.

He gave a grimace. “My great-aunt—the dowager duchess of Penfield—is not a woman who listens or even hears the word no. In fact, she is as overbearing as she is unpleasant. It seemed to me, from what you have said of your stepmother, that the two women would deal extremely well together. Once they tire of each other, I have several more titled relatives, equally as unpleasant, with whom Lady Constance may visit.”

“How wonderful!” Alice approved as she regained her bonnet and gloves from Reynolds before she and Daniel strolled outside together, the open carriage already packed with the picnic basket and waiting in the driveway.

Daniel assisted Alice inside before dismissing the groom and taking up the reins himself, finding himself strangely happy as the carriage bowled along the narrow country lanes. It was a beautiful summer's day. The sun was shining. The birds were singing. A glowingly approving Alice was seated beside him...

He brought his thoughts up short. What did it matter to him whether or not Alice approved of his actions? He had arranged for his great-aunt to issue the invitation to Lady Constance as a means of keeping his brother-in-law from the card table, and possibly bringing disgrace to the family, not as an effort to gain Alice's approval.

Hadn't he...?

Whether Daniel had or had not was of no real importance when it had resulted in his being given this opportunity in which to seduce his young and beautiful wife.

"It is delightful here, is it not?" Alice murmured happily as she lay back upon the blanket on the ground once they had eaten their fill of the food Cook had provided for their picnic, and its remains had been packed away in the basket. "We should come here often when we are at Wycliffe, Daniel." She stared up at the blue of the sky through the bower of green leaves overhead, dreamily likening that blue to the color of her husband's eyes.

Her own eyes widened as Alice realized that she no longer need make that comparison—to the sky's detriment—as she now found herself looking up into her husband's sensuous blue gaze, her breath catching in her throat as Daniel plucked a blade of grass and began to trail it slowly down the length of her throat and across the firm swell of her breasts, at once sending quivers of awareness down the length of her spine.

Alice nervously moistened her lips. "My lord—"

"My lady," he whispered.

Alice had tried very hard this past week not to think of her wedding night, to recall the intimacies she and Daniel had shared, of his lips upon her breasts, and other parts of her body she blushed just to think of. She blushed anew as she recalled the daring way she had touched and kissed Daniel in return.

She had rarely succeeded in blocking those memories from her mind, of course, and as she thought of them she had found herself roused all over again. As she recalled the beautiful hardness of Daniel's body. All of it. How she had felt the leap of Daniel's response beneath her caressing fingers. How she had tasted his release even as she reached that pinnacle herself.

For days, nights, Alice had longed to feel all of those things again...

The desire she now read in her husband's eyes assured her that he felt the same way.

Alice was tempted. So very tempted. That temptation added to by the gentle strokes of that blade of grass against her breasts, Alice barely breathing now as she looked up into her husband's sinfully mesmerizing face and felt herself falling deeper under the sensual spell he cast, as she imagined the two of them naked together beneath the dappling trees.

She wanted Daniel so much! Wanted to lose herself once again in his caresses! Wanted to touch him in return, and this time to know the fierceness, the ecstasy, of his full possession!

But above any of that she wanted Daniel's love...!

Alice turned her head away before Daniel's mouth or anything else—could make contact with hers. "We really should return to the house, my Lord," she told him firmly as she quickly stood up and put some distance between them.

Daniel sat up to frown his impatience with this unwelcome interruption to seducing his wife. "We have plenty of time before we need return in order to change for dinner, Alice."

"I wish to take a bath first, my lord," she retorted, looking wholly innocent in her green gown and her dark hair curling enticingly against her temples and nape.

Except Daniel did not believe Alice to be so innocent that she had not known exactly what had been about to happen between them. And avoided having it do so. He bit back his frustration with that evasion as he stood up to look down at her.

In some ways—in a lot of ways!—Daniel's life in London had been so much simpler than here in the country, where he should have found only rest and relaxation but instead found neither.

In London he knew how he was expected to behave, felt at ease with his role as a rake and a gambler.

Having brought Alice to Wycliffe Hall he was aware that she expected more of him. That her actions and words demanded more of him. That she was slowly, insidiously, involving him in the running of the estate, and in the lives of the people who worked for him. That she had made him aware of his responsibility to such things as taking his seat in the House in the autumn. That earlier he had been contemplating taking on the managing of Wycliffe Hall and the estate himself.

It had to stop, Daniel realized. Now. Before he became everything that Alice wished him to be and he found himself in love with her into the bargain.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alice frowned at her husband as he began to fold the blanket, disappointed that he did not make further protest at leaving. "I could perhaps be persuaded into remaining here a little longer, my lord...?" she once again attempted to tease.

This time Daniel did not respond to that teasing, his expression coldly distant. "I have several matters I need to deal with before departing for London."

Alice's eyes widened; Daniel had made no mention before this of the two of them going to London. "I am not packed, my lord. You did not tell me we would be leaving today—"

"That is because we are not leaving, Alice," he bit out dismissively, his eyes now as cold and bleak as a winter sky. "Your place is on the estate. I, however, am sorely in need of more sophisticated entertainment than I can possibly hope to find here in the country."

More sophisticated entertainment than her, Alice easily guessed as she felt the heat of sudden tears prick her eyes. She had failed. Once Daniel returned to London—to the arms of Lady Teresa Benbow, perhaps—it could be weeks, perhaps months, until he returned to Wycliffe Hall. Until Alice had a chance to demonstrate the love she now felt for him. To have Daniel come to love her in the same way.

Her mouth firmed determinedly. "I wish to come with you—"

"You may wish all you please, Alice," Daniel rasped harshly, at once feeling guilty when he saw tears glistening in her pained eyes. "I have spent a week in the country with my wife, and now it is time for me to shake the grass from my clothes and the ink from my fingers and return to the life I prefer!"

Alice felt each of his words flay her tender heart. The heart that belonged completely to Daniel. That would always belong to him. But which he now showed by word and deed that he had absolutely no use for.

Not so, her anguished heart cried. Daniel did care something for her, otherwise she did not believe he would have felt the need to act in the way that he had over her concern for her brother's dilemma with Lady Constance.

Alice straightened, feeling even more determined, her shoulders back proudly, her gaze refusing to drop from Daniel's as he continued to look at her with chilling intensity. "I will miss you if you leave, my lord."

He looked startled. "What did you say, Alice?"

"I will miss you, Daniel." This time a wistful smile accompanied her claim.

That smile, as much as her words, washed over Daniel like a healing balm. For it was a smile that Daniel found he craved. A smile that Daniel suddenly realized he needed as much as the air that he breathed...

That knowledge hit him with the force of a blow. Robbing him of breath as he could only stand and stare at the beautiful young woman who had rendered this change in him.

Alice.

Beautiful Alice. Lovely Alice. Compassionate Alice. Magnificent Alice.

Dear God, why had Daniel not realized his feelings for her before now?

He gave a dazed shake of his head. "I have always hated it here, Alice—"

"Surely not always, Daniel," she instantly protested. "As a young child—"

"As a very young child I lived in ignorance of the unhappy undercurrents within my father's household." His expression was bleak. "It was only as I grew older that I became aware of my father's complete disregard for my mother's feelings for him, and consequently my mother's deep unhappiness." He sighed heavily. "I was sent away to school at the age of eleven, so it was easier for me then to ignore or simply forget about my mother's misery. When I returned home for the holidays, she always made an effort not to let me see how unhappy she was."

"She was your mother and she loved you deeply."

"As I loved her." Daniel nodded. "But my love was not enough, it did not prevent her from killing herself!"

Alice gasped her shock at his announcement. "But your mother died of pneumonia..."

A nerve pulsed in his clenched jaw. "Which she contracted after throwing herself in the lake with the intention of drowning herself."

Alice gave a bewildered blink. "But there is no lake at Wycliffe Hall..."

"Not anymore," Daniel acknowledged. "As soon as I became the earl of Stanford I had the lake drained and filled in, removing any sign it had ever existed."

No one had told Alice of Diana's last desperate act. Perhaps because no one on the estate knew of it. Perhaps the sixth earl, Daniel's father, had kept that, at least, from becoming public knowledge. But not, unfortunately, from his son.

She hung her head. "It is no wonder that you hate it here."

"But that is the point I am trying to make, Alice." Daniel felt the heaviness lift from his heart as he looked at her. So tiny. So young. So monumentally important to his own happiness. "Alice?" He reached out and placed his hand beneath her chin, smiling down at her as he lifted her face so that he could look into the depths of her eyes. "I no longer

hate it here. I meant it earlier when I said I approve of the changes you have brought to Wycliffe Hall. I—Alice, I accede to your condition unequivocally.”

She frowned her confusion. “I do not understand...”

“You wished to be wooed and won, Alice,” Daniel huskily reminded her of her request on the eve of their wedding. “It is my wish, above all things, that I be allowed to woo, and hopefully win you.”

Alice stared up at her husband blankly for several seconds, too stunned to fully comprehend the import of his words. Daniel wished to woo and win her...?

“I love you, Alice!” Daniel spoke fiercely when he received no response to his request. “I want—I wish for you to allow me—to give me the opportunity—to win your love!”

Daniel loved her?

It could not be true! He—“But you were returning to Lady Benbow in London,” she accused.

His expression was bleak. “It pains me that you should even have thought that. Whatever else I am, Alice, whatever I have become these last ten years, it was never my intention to take a mistress once I married. I would never put any wife of mine—but most especially you—through the pain and humiliation of such an act.” Daniel gave a determined shake of his head. “No, my love, by returning to London I was running away. From you. From loving you. I have never wanted to fall in love, Alice. Never wanted to leave myself open to the pain of rejection that my mother endured all her short life—”

“I would never reject you, Daniel,” Alice cut in fiercely.

“No, you are far too tenderhearted to ever hurt anyone in the way that my father hurt my mother,” he agreed. “By trying to protect my own heart, Alice, I have been treating you with the same disregard my father showed to my mother—”

“Never!” Alice avowed firmly. “You are not your father, Daniel.

You will never be like him.” She reached out to clasp his arms.

“Can you not see, you have too much goodness and compassion inside you ever to be like him? Daniel, you are—you are already the man that I love,” she breathed heavily. “The man I will always love.”

Daniel stared down at her searchingly, wonderingly. Could it really be true? Did Alice truly love him?

Once again she bathed him in the glow of her smile. “Why do you suppose that I wished for you to ‘woo and win’ me on the eve of our wedding if I was not half in love with you already?” she chided. “A love that is now so deep that you mean everything to me...”

“Alice...?” Daniel felt as if his heart was soaring. As if he was finally free of the chains of the past that had held him loveless and alone for so long.

Alice stepped back, smiling at him over her shoulder as she presented her back to him. “Unbutton my gown, please, Daniel,” she invited. “Make love to me fully. Here. Now. As I have so longed—ached!—for you to do.”

His hands shook as he dealt with the tiny buttons down the back of her gown. “Alice, are you sure...? I do not want your first time to be—” Daniel broke off abruptly, rendered speechless as his wife slipped off her gown and allowed it to drop onto the grass at her feet, her chemise following seconds later, leaving Alice standing completely naked in the dappled sunlight.

Her shoulders were slender and creamy, her breasts as firm and tempting as he remembered, her waist narrow, hips full and generous, her legs slender and silky, her feet delicately tiny.

Her gaze, that loving gaze, held Daniel’s as she stepped forward to slip his jacket from his shoulders and down his arms, his cravat, waistcoat and shirt following next. Then Daniel sat down upon the grass to remove his boots and breeches, his eyes never leaving Alice as she once more spread the blanket on the grass before lying down upon it.

Daniel quickly joined her, kissing her deeply, fiercely, taking all and everything that she had to give him.

“You are so beautiful, Daniel,” Alice murmured appreciatively some time later as she ran her hands over his naked back and torso. “I have dreamed of us being together like this again since our wedding night,” Alice encouraged achingly as Daniel began to make love to her in every sense of the word.

Daniel took his time to enjoy, to worship, every delectable inch of her, starting with her toes, which he kissed, one by one, before slowly traveling the length of her calf and then up to her thighs.

“Oh, yes, Daniel!” Alice’s legs parted invitingly. “Please, yes!”

“It will increase your pleasure if you watch me, Alice,” Daniel whispered as he slowly lowered his head to lick against the little pink nub her parted thighs had bared.

“I am not sure I will survive an increase in my pleasure,” Alice gasped shakily as she raised herself onto her elbows to look down at her husband.

Daniel's tongue moved against her rhythmically, creating an ache so deep that Alice cried out with her need.

"Cup your breasts for me, my love," Daniel urged throatily. "Yes," he groaned as she sat up to obey him, her breasts feeling firm and heavy in her hands. "Now touch yourself—"

"My lord...?" she gasped, eyes wide with disbelief.

"Try it, Alice," he murmured. "You will see and feel—Yes, just like that," he groaned as Alice ran light fingertips across her own nipples, the caress causing her to gasp out loud as pleasure surged powerfully between her thighs, Daniel's gaze riveted on the increasing boldness of her movements as he now moved his fingers so pleasurably inside her.

The climax, when it came, was so much more than Alice had ever known existed, so intensely, agonizingly pleasurable that she never wanted it to stop, her hands leaving her breasts to become entangled in the thick blondness of Daniel's hair as she held him to her.

Alice moved up on her knees. "Now you—"

"Not this time, my love," Daniel instructed as he grasped her hand, knowing his control was too finely balanced to stand more than seconds of that hot, delicious mouth on his arousal before he exploded. "I want to be inside you, Alice," he groaned. "I want that so much!"

Her eyes glowed with love. "I want that too, my love."

"I am afraid of hurting you—"

"Nothing you do could ever hurt me, Daniel," she assured him.

Alice's blind faith in him, the love she showed him so unreservedly, made Daniel's own heart contract in his chest. To love, and be loved, by this beautiful woman was more than he had ever hoped, or dreamed of.

"You will be in control this time, Alice," he told her as he lay back upon the blanket and placed her above him, a leg on either side of his thighs, Daniel moaning as the throb of his arousal brushed against her thighs. "You must be the one to take me inside you, Alice," he encouraged gruffly, his jaw clenched as he fought to maintain his own control. "Slowly, so that I do not hurt you." His arms moved about her fiercely as he pulled her down to once more capture her mouth with his, drinking of her deeply before, just as suddenly, releasing her. "Now. Take me now, Alice!"

Alice moved to guide him inside her aching sheath, one slow inch at a time, her gaze seeking Daniel's frustratedly as he touched the barrier of her virginity. "I want all of you," she demanded.

He chuckled softly at her impatience. “Then take all of me, my love,” he invited. “Quickly now, so that we do not prolong your discomfort—Aah!” Daniel was silenced as Alice moved her thighs sharply downward and took him fully inside her.

Daniel was so big, the part of him inside her so engorged that he filled her totally, seeming to touch the very heart of her as he held her hips and began to stroke slowly inside her.

Alice felt herself blossom, widen to accommodate those thrusts, placing her hands upon Daniel’s shoulders as she moved to the same rhythm, their gazes locked.

“Give me your breasts, Alice,” Daniel groaned. “I need to taste them. To kiss them.”

She bent forward to offer him what he wanted, her breath catching in her throat as he drew one nipple into the heat of his mouth and sucked fiercely, desperately, drawing her deeper and deeper into that heat, Alice crying out as the ripples of her release instantly began to claim her.

“My love!” Daniel said hoarsely, no longer able to hold back the desperate clamoring for his own release as he began to thrust faster, more deeply inside her, the ripples of Alice’s climax enough to drive him over the edge of control as long, shuddering waves of pleasure threatened to rip the very heart from his body. And into Alice’s safekeeping.

“How I love you, Daniel!” Alice cried out her ecstasy.

“I love you, Alice!”

Alice felt complete and fulfilled when she lay down upon his chest some minutes later. “We have wooed and won each other, Daniel,” she murmured happily.

Daniel knew, had absolutely no doubt, that was exactly what they had done. Knew that it would always be this way between himself and his beloved Alice.

That there was no more wonderful feeling than to love and be loved in return...

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Carole Mortimer was born in England, the youngest of three children. She began writing in 1978, and has now written over one hundred and forty books for Harlequin Mills and Boon®. Carole has six sons, Matthew, Joshua, Timothy, Michael, David and Peter. She says, 'I'm happily married to Peter senior; we're best friends as well as lovers, which is probably the best recipe for a successful relationship. We live in a lovely part of England.'

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Convenient Wife, Pleasured Lady

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