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To Have And To Hold

SALLY WENTWORTH

Sally Wentworth
To Have And To Hold

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Wedlocked! A runaway wife Alix North had fallen in love with Rhys Stirling the first time she had met him. Now Alix's dream was about to come true - Rhys had asked her to marry him. Rhys Stirling was an ambitious man, and the only thing that stood between him and a directorship was his single status. Of course, that was easily remedied. He'd known Alix all his life - she was the perfect choice. Alix isn't going to accept anything less than his love. It's only after Alix leaves him that Rhys finds that he's fallen in love - with his own wife!"Ms. Wentworth's talented writing comes through... " - Romantic Times

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“I’m leaving.”

“No, you’re not. I won’t let you.”

Alix laughed. “It’s too late for the possessive husband bit. You just proved you couldn’t care less.”

Rhys drew back. But he said forcefully, “I mean it. I do care about you. You know that.”

“But you don’t love me. You don’t even know what love means.”

SALLY WENTWORTH was born and raised in Hertfordshire, England, where she still lives, and started writing after attending an evening writing course. She is married and has one son. There is always a novel on the bedside table, but Sally also loves craftwork, plays bridge and is the president of a National Trust group. Sometimes she doesn’t know how she finds the time to write!

To Have And To Hold
Sally Wentworth



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CHAPTER ONE

ALIX NORTH had fallen in love with Rhys Stirling the first time she had met him. Her parents had moved to a new house in Kent, to be within easy commuting distance of her father's new job in Canterbury. It was high summer. Alix had gone out to explore the garden, looked through a hole in the hedge, and lost her heart. Rhys had been tall, lean-faced, and good-looking. He still was. But then he had been fourteen and Alix just four years old.

'Hello,' she'd called to him through the gap.

Looking up from the book he was reading, Rhys had spotted her face framed by leaves and came to squat down to her level. 'Hello. What's your name?'

'Alix. What's yours?'

'Rhys. Have you come to live here?'

'Yes.'

'I expect you'll be going to the local school, then—BABS.'

'Babs?' Alix frowned in perplexity.

'It stands for Barkham All Boys' School.'

'But I can't go to a boys' school—I'm a girl.'

'Really?' Rhys leaned closer. 'How can you be a girl with a name like Alix?'

'Well, I am.' Putting her arms through the gap, Alix suddenly launched herself through like a diver, disregarding scratches and torn clothes as she struggled to the other side, then scrambled to her feet in front of him, somehow knowing that it was vital that he should be convinced she wasn't a boy. Rhys, too, had got to his feet and loomed over her, almost as tall as an adult, but she put her hands on her hips and looked up at him with a determined chin as she said in a tone she'd heard her mother use, *Look!* I am most definitely a girl!'

That had made him laugh. 'Well, you're a tomboy at least,' he'd told her, and taking hold of her hand had led her to meet his mother, who'd given her lemonade and cake. Afterwards Rhys had lifted her on to his shoulders and taken her home, the long way round. Alix had clung on, her arms tight round his neck, and knew herself in heaven.

It had been his turn to meet her mother, but he didn't stay long. When he left Alix ran after him and caught him up in the drive, gazed up at him with a flushed face framed by springy corn-gold curls. 'Please,' she said earnestly, 'will you marry me?'

He laughed again, patted her head, and said of course he would. But he hadn't taken her seriously. He still didn't. But Alix had meant it then and went on meaning it all through the years when the gap in the hedge had been made ever bigger as she pushed her way through, until the two fathers had given in to the inevitable and put in a gate, which saved her mother a lot of mending.

Their two families had become very friendly, all of them diverted by Alix's open adoration of Rhys. He had continued to treat her with good-humoured amusement, playing games with her or letting her come with him when he went walking or fishing in the summer vacations, helping her to learn chess and letting her listen to his music collection in the winter holidays. During term-time Alix didn't see so much of him because he boarded during the week, only coming home for weekends, when he always had loads of studying to do. But when he was free she was a regular visitor, becoming as much at home in his house as her own, and treated almost like the daughter they didn't have by his parents. Alix didn't mind that, but she objected strongly when Rhys treated her like a sister. 'No, you're going to marry me,' she always insisted, supremely confident that he would keep his socasual promise.

It became a standing joke with their parents, all of whom were confident that she would grow out of it, but was referred to less when Rhys went away to college and then got a job as a civil engineer which sent him to South Africa for a couple of years, and then to build a bridge in Botswana. During

those years, when he was home, Rhys was as tolerant of her as ever, enjoying the fuss she made of him and her joy at seeing him. He let Alix go jogging with him every morning and would play a few sets with her at the tennis club from time to time. But a twenty-year-old young man didn't want to be seen by his contemporaries in public with a ten-year-old he'd nicknamed 'urchin'; he met girls of his own age and went around with them, fancied himself in love and gained some useful experience.

When he came home from Botswana he was twenty-eight. His face was tanned now, his features almost as lean, but his body had filled out, become that of a man instead of a boy. He had found strength, not only physical strength but mental self-assurance, too. He had been in charge of an important project and a great many men, and it had given him an authority which showed.

Alix, too, had met a lot of boys and young men, had gone out with some she liked, but there had been no question of any romance; she was just as in love with Rhys as that first day and had no interest in anyone else. When Rhys came home, soon after her eighteenth birthday, she was starry-eyed, convinced that he would immediately be bowled over when he saw her, that they would be officially engaged at once and be married in no time at all. Her mother did her best to dissuade her, but Alix merely laughed and said, 'You'll see.'

When Rhys saw her, grown tall and slender, wearing a very feminine dress and her face made-up, his eyebrows did in fact rise—but he laughed as he said, 'Good grief! It can't be my little Alix all grown-up.'

She gave him a shy, yet breathlessly eager look, expecting him to treat her like an adult, like his girl, but he was only amused, just the same as he'd always been.

He took her out a few times, escorting her to dances, often when their parents came along, too, and Alix was again in seventh heaven, but even she realised that his manner was merely casually affectionate. On the few occasions when she got him alone, Alix tried to tempt him to make love to her. He obliged with a few light kisses, which she found most unsatisfactory. 'Kiss me properly,' she commanded. 'After all, we are going to be married.'

'Married?' Rhys burst into laughter. 'You crazy little idiot! You're not still on about that, are you?' He tweaked her hair. 'You know, urchin, you're really good for my ego.'

Pleased, she said eagerly, 'So when will we get married?'

He kissed the end of her nose. 'Ask me again when you're an adult.'

'I am an adult!'

'OK, when you're not a teenager, then.'

'So when I'm twenty will we get married?'

Rhys glanced at her, laughter in his eyes, but then the laughter died as his gaze lingered on her face, on the long dark lashes and brows that were such a contrast to her fair hair, on her high cheek bones and straight nose that gave her ageless beauty, but mostly on her eyes, as blue as sapphires and full now of loving eagerness. Lifting a finger he traced the tip along the soft, full curve of her lips. 'Maybe I might at that,' he said almost under his breath, so softly that only her alertness let her hear it. But then he spoiled it all by sitting back, giving a twisted smile, and saying, 'You've got a lot of living to do yet, urchin, before you even think of settling down.' A gleam came into his eyes and the grin broadened. 'And so, for that matter, have I.'

Rhys had made such a success of the Botswana project that he was promoted and was centred more on his company's office in London, where he rented a flat. He still went abroad a lot but not for such long periods now, acting more as head of an estimating team for contracts, and also as a kind of trouble-shooter, ready to fly anywhere in the world where he was needed. He was, according to his proud parents, his boss's blue-eyed boy and was heading for a directorship before too long.

As for Alix, she got over her disappointment almost at once, and was happy in the knowledge that in only two years she would be twenty, when Rhys had told her to ask again. And she hugged that murmured 'I might at that' to her like a talisman, knowing that for a moment at least he had looked at her as a woman. She went to college to take a two-year business studies course, refusing

to take an additional year that would have given her a higher qualification, because Rhys had said twenty, not twenty-one.

As Rhys was living in London and she was away at college, Alix didn't see him for those two years. His visits home never seemed to coincide with hers, not even at Christmas, because he was away both years and his mother and father flew out to be with him.

By now both sets of parents were the firmest friends; neither had had more children, and they were fast coming to the opinion that Rhys and Alix were absolutely right for each other. Not that they pushed at all; with Alix it wasn't necessary, and Rhys's parents knew that he had a mind of his own. But when the time came for Alix to leave college and get a job, Rhys's father, who had got to know several people in his son's company, found out that there was a vacancy in the London office. She applied and, probably because she wanted the job so badly, survived several interviews to win the position. 'Don't let's tell Rhys. Let's all keep it as a surprise,' his father suggested.

Alix grinned, and kissed him. 'It's our secret, Uncle David.'

Rhys was away in South America when Alix went to work for his company as a secretary. She soon made friends there, her open, animated character making her popular with both sexes. But she wasn't open about knowing Rhys; that she kept to herself. There were a great many unattached men working for the company and several of them asked her for a date—some of the attached ones, too—but she confidently told them that she was already seeing someone and expected to be engaged very soon, so they left her alone.

There was one girl in her office, Kathy, with whom Alix became especially friendly, and who would pass on all the office gossip over lunch. One day they were sitting in the window of a café not far from the office building when Kathy pointed out a girl walking by. 'You see her? That's Donna Temple. She's Todd Weston's personal assistant when he's in London.'

'Todd Weston? He's one of the Canadian directors, isn't he?'

'That's right. And not only a director but the son of George Weston, the company president, who started the firm and still more or less owns it. They say Todd is in the running to inherit the company.'

'And is Donna interested in Todd?' Alix asked, watching the tall, dark-haired girl as she waited to cross the road.

Kathy shook her head. 'He's already married and has a family. No, Donna is putting out her hooks for the man who's next in line to take over from Todd when his father retires and he goes back to Canada.'

'Oh? Who's that?'

'His name is Rhys Stirling, and he is absolutely *gorgeous*. You wait till you see him.'

Alix's stomach turned over and she had to swallow hard before she could say, 'What do you mean—putting out hooks for him?'

'Well, they're a number whenever he's in England—he's away a lot, you see—and everyone's pretty certain that they're having a hot affair.'

'You mean—you mean they're in love?' Alix managed to ask, every word a cut to her heart.

'Oh, no, I'm not saying that. Just that Donna is out to catch him.' Kathy chuckled. 'Although she'll have to be very clever if she does; from what I've heard about Rhys, he has women falling for him wherever he goes. And he hasn't been caught yet.'

That last sentence gave Alix a little comfort, but she said, 'And these women; does he have affairs with all of them?'

Kathy shrugged. 'That I don't know; he's good-looking enough to be able to pick and choose, but he certainly has quite a reputation within the company.' She made a yearning face. 'I just wish he'd ask me.'

'He hasn't, then?'

'Fat chance. Not with Donna around. I mean, just look at her.'

Both girls turned to watch Donna Temple as she walked along the opposite side of the street. In her late twenties, she was rather severely dressed, in a beautifully cut suit that outlined a good figure, walked with head high, aware that she drew admiring glances, and was completely assured and sophisticated.

Alix's heart sank a little—but not very much; she had been in love with Rhys for so long that it had become part of her, but it made her very thoughtful. She had never considered Rhys in the light of other women before; OK, she knew he'd been out with girls, of course she did, but it had never even occurred to her that he might fall in love and marry someone else. She had always been so sure of him. But only now did she realise that there was competition out there. And the competition, in the shape of Donna Temple, might be dangerous.

That was her first reaction. Her second was jealousy. No way did she want to think of Rhys making love to another woman. But there again, she had somehow known that Rhys had become a man of the world, in every sense. But so long as the girls in his life had been shadowy, mythical creatures and could be put down merely to experience, then it hadn't mattered, but it came as quite a shock to see one in the flesh, as it were.

Was Rhys really attracted to that kind of woman? she wondered. Or was he just amusing himself while he waited for her to grow up? Alix decided it just had to be the latter, although she wasn't quite so sure of Rhys as she had been, and she waited with anxious eagerness for him to come home.

From time to time news of him filtered down to her, either at work or at home. From South America he had moved straight on to another project in Australia, so it was over three months later before she heard that he was finally returning to England. The office buzzed with the news, because there was also a rumour going around that old Mr Weston was retiring at last, so there would be a big reshuffle among the directors. A lot of people thought that this was the main reason Rhys was coming home.

Alix heard the rumours but was too concerned with her own reasons for wanting to see Rhys again to think anything else very important. He was due to fly in on a Friday, and everyone, Alix included, thought that he would go straight to his parents' home for the weekend. She could hardly contain her excitement, and had asked for the day off so that she could be waiting for him when he arrived, but a draft contract for a power plant in one of the Gulf states had to be finished and she had to work. Frustrated, and longing for the end of the day, Alix had to sit at her desk and wish the hours away.

But in the afternoon the phone on Kathy's desk rang. She listened then swivelled round towards Alix. 'Hey! Guess what? That was the girl on Reception. She says Rhys Stirling has come here straight from the airport.'

'He has?' Alix's face lit with excitement she couldn't hide.

But Kathy thought it was just eager interest and said, 'Now you'll be able to see for yourself how gorgeous he is.'

'You think he'll come in here?'

'I should think so; he usually comes to say hello when he gets back.'

'And goodbye when he goes,' chimed in another girl.

It was quite a large office with about a dozen girls and young men, all doing more or less equal jobs, situated on the fifth floor of the building. The directors' offices were on the floor above, so no one saw Rhys as he went up in the lift to see Todd Weston. Alix made for the cloakroom to check her make-up and brush her hair. When she'd last seen Rhys it had still been a mass of short curls, but she wore it longer now, so that it caressed her shoulders in a shining, golden mane. Not having expected to see him, she'd put on normal working clothes: a skirt, and sweater over a shirt, but the skirt was tight enough to outline the slimness of her hips and the sweater a shade of blue that emphasised the sea-blue of her eyes. Anyway, it would have to do.

When Rhys finally came to the office over an hour later, Alix was standing at a filing cabinet over by the wall, and had her back towards him. She heard his voice and began to quiver with excitement so strong she thought her heart would burst, but she didn't turn round. No one had told Rhys that she was working here and she wanted to take him completely by surprise. He worked his way down the room, greeting everyone he knew by name, came to say hello to Kathy. Then he glanced past her at Alix and said, 'You've got a new girl, I see.'

Alix took a deep breath and swung round, her face radiant. 'Hello, Rhys.'

Rhys's eyes widened incredulously. 'Alix?'

With a laugh of pure delight, she ran to him and threw her arms round his neck in spontaneous joy.

He gave a whoop of astonished laughter, and put his hands on her waist to lift her up and swing her round. 'Urchin!' And then he kissed her, right there in front of them all. 'What on earth are you doing here?' he demanded when he straightened up.

'I work here.' She still had her arms round his neck and he his hands on her waist, and to Alix it was the best moment, ever. 'I've been here for months.'

'And no one told me?'

'We wanted it to be a surprise.'

'It was certainly that.' His grey eyes laughed down at her. 'I shall have words to say when I get home.'

'Are you going now?'

'In about half an hour. I've got a car laid on. Want a lift?'

'Of course.'

'OK. Meet me out front.'

He went to let her go but she pulled him closer and stood on tip-toe to murmur in his ear, 'I'm glad you're home, Rhys.'

His eyes met hers for a moment, saw the radiance in their depths. 'Still?' he asked, only half teasingly.

'Still,' she answered with sincerity. 'Always.'

He brushed her lips with his, then said, 'See you later,' and walked out of the office.

'Well!' Kathy exclaimed as soon as he'd gone. 'You're a dark horse. I thought you said you didn't know him.'

Alix came back to earth to find everyone staring at her, which made her blush. 'Oh, no; you never asked me. You just took it that I didn't.'

Some of the others came to cluster round and Kathy gave her a shrewd look. 'You could easily have told us. Why didn't you?'

'I wanted to surprise him.'

'Well, you certainly did that. And you obviously know him *very well*,' one of the men said.

Alix coloured again at the emphasis that had been put on the last two words. 'Oh, yes. I've known him nearly all my life. We live next door to each other, you see.'

Faces cleared and people went back to their desks, a few picked up phones to pass on the tit-bit of gossip. Kathy looked as if she longed to do the same, but instead pulled her chair closer to Alix's and said enviously, 'How fantastic that you know Rhys. God, I'd give anything to live next door to him. But I'd never have been able to keep it secret like that. Do you see much of him when he's home?'

'Oh, yes, lots,' Alix told her, conveniently forgetting the last couple of years. 'We go out together, too.'

'Really? Oh, wow! Just wait till Donna Temple finds out.' And unable to resist any longer, Kathy reached for the phone.

Several curious faces were looking out of windows when Alix was supposed to meet Rhys, but as it happened he was standing in the foyer, talking to another man when she came out of the lift, a

man in his forties, not as tall as Rhys but broad and tough-looking. She hesitated but Rhys saw her and beckoned her over. 'This is the surprise I found waiting for me,' he said with a grin. 'Alix, this is Todd Weston. Todd, meet Alix North. I've been pulling her out of scrapes since she was shorter than my knee.'

Alix gave him an indignant look, but smiled as she shook the outstretched hand of the head of the company. 'Hello, Mr Weston.'

'Hello, Alix,' he said with a Canadian accent. 'Isn't that a boy's name?'

'I thought she was a boy the first time I met her,' Rhys said before she could speak.

Todd Weston looked her over and grinned. 'Well, she's certainly changed.'

'So she has,' Rhys agreed, and they both laughed as Alix blushed furiously.

A chauffeur came in to say the car was there so Todd bade them goodbye. 'See you Monday and we'll talk further, Rhys.' And he clapped him on the shoulder before walking away.

Alix glanced up as they waited on the pavement for all Rhys's luggage to be loaded in the car, saw the faces at the windows, and couldn't help hoping, with great satisfaction, that one of them was that of Donna Temple.

They got in the back of the car, the glass screen dividing them from the chauffeur, and Rhys said, 'Well, urchin, how did you get the job?'

'Purely on merit,' she assured him. 'Although your father did find out about the vacancy,' she admitted.

Rhys's eyebrows flickered and he gave her a thoughtful look. 'Did he, now?'

Alix chuckled richly. 'But wasn't it the most perfect surprise?'

'It certainly was; in your letters you just said you'd got a job.'

'Oh, you did read them, then?'

'Of course.'

'But you never bothered to answer any of them,' she pointed out tartly.

'Yes, I did; I sent you postcards from all over the place.'

'Postcards!' Alix exclaimed with such a disgusted expression that he laughed. 'What good are those to a girl?'

'You used to collect them,' Rhys pointed out.

'I didn't *collect* them—I kept yours.'

'What, all of them?'

'Of course.' Alix didn't say that they were among her most treasured possessions, along with the gifts and Christmas and birthday cards that he had given her over the last sixteen years.

Maybe she didn't have to, because Rhys ran a finger along her throat and up to her chin, and said, looking into her eyes, 'You're a funny one, Alix.'

'Why—because I'm so single-minded about you?'

He smiled and gave a small shrug. 'Yes, I suppose so.'

'I don't see why. Some children know what they want to be—a doctor or a dancer or something—from a very early age, and usually everyone thinks that's great and they're given every help and encouragement. Well, it was more or less the same for me. I saw you and I just knew I wanted to be with you,' she said simply. 'I can't help it—that's just the way it is.'

Rhys shook his head at her. 'I was sure you would have grown out of that by now.'

Alix smiled at him, a delightfully mischievous smile that gave her face an elfin quality. 'And I was sure you would have grown *into* it by now.'

That made him give a burst of laughter and there was an arrested expression in his eyes as he looked at her. Her hand was still in his, but now he put his other hand over it. 'Tell me what you've been doing,' he commanded, giving her all his attention.

'I haven't seen you for more than two years; it would take ages to tell you everything.'

'Well, we have plenty of time. Tell me about college.'

So Alix told him, leaning against his arm, her voice and face animated as she recounted experiences and anecdotes, gratified to have his interest, inwardly bursting with pleasure to be near him.

‘And did you make lots of friends?’ he asked her.

‘Oh, yes, loads. Some I see quite often because they work in London, too. And we’re all determined to have a big reunion for our whole year in July.’

‘Males as well as females?’

‘Of course.’

‘And didn’t any of the men at college take your fancy?’

Again she gave him an impish look. ‘No, it’s OK, Rhys, you don’t have to be jealous.’

‘There wasn’t even *one* man who interested you?’

She shook her head with certainty. ‘No, not even one.’

‘You’re incorrigible,’ he grinned.

Alix smiled back at him and moved closer, her eyes drinking him in. After two years he had changed little, although a line at the corner of his mouth seemed to have deepened. She put up a finger to touch it. ‘You’re starting to get a cynical line here,’ she said reprovingly.

‘It’s old age,’ he said flippantly.

‘Not experience?’

‘Experience?’ He raised an eyebrow at the note in her voice.

‘Of women.’ And she lifted candid blue eyes to meet his.

Rhys’s eyes narrowed. ‘What’s this—office gossip?’

‘Yes,’ Alix answered, unable to be anything but truthful with him.

She waited for him to deny it, but he merely sat back and said, ‘What have you heard?’

‘That women fall over you wherever you go.’

‘What?’ He gave a crack of surprised laughter. ‘You surely don’t believe that rubbish, do you?’

‘Why not? I think you’re fantastic so why shouldn’t other girls?’

‘Well, it isn’t true.’

Alix tilted her head to one side to look at him, all wide-eyed innocence. ‘You mean you don’t go out with other girls when you’re away?’

There was a slightly considering look in the grey eyes that met hers, but then Rhys grinned. ‘Somehow I don’t think you’d believe it if I said I didn’t.’

‘Of course I wouldn’t,’ she answered. ‘It wasn’t only economics I learned at college, you know. I understand that men have to—gain experience of life.’

‘Such worldly wisdom in one so young,’ Rhys mocked, making her blush and punch his arm.

‘You know what I mean,’ she scolded.

He smiled down at her, a look of tender affection in his eyes. ‘Yes, urchin, I know what you mean. And have you gained some experience of life?’

The colour in her cheeks deepened. ‘No. It’s different for girls.’

‘Not all girls.’

‘Perhaps not,’ she admitted. ‘But it’s different for me—because of you.’

Rhys gave a gasping sigh. ‘Alix! You shouldn’t do this! You’re putting too much onus on me.’

She gave him a steady, earnest look. ‘Do you want to marry someone else, Rhys?’

‘No, but—’

‘Not Donna Temple?’

His brows drew into a frown. ‘Who told you about her?’

‘Everyone knows about you and her. Do you want to marry her, Rhys?’

The frown deepened for a moment, then cleared, and there was a definite note in his voice as he said, ‘No, I don’t.’

‘Or anyone else?’

Amusement was coming back into his eyes. 'Or anyone else,' he agreed.

Alix gave a smile of pure happiness. 'So that's OK.'

'Is it?'

'Of course. You promised to marry me over sixteen years ago, and I'm going to hold you to it. Besides, if you don't want to marry anyone else, then you might as well marry me. Everyone thinks it's about time you settled down.'

"Everyone" being my parents, I take it?' he guessed shrewdly.

'And me.'

'But what if you meet someone else and fall in love?'

She shook her head in absolute certainty. 'I won't. I'm in love with you.'

That made Rhys frown again. 'And what if I meet someone and fall in love with her?'

Alix gazed at him for a moment, then let a mock-savage look come into her face. Stretching her hands like claws, she said, 'Then I'll tear her eyes out and scratch her to pieces. I'll boil her in oil and grind her bones to dust.'

'Ugh! Nasty.' Rhys shook his head as if in horror, but there was amusement in his face. 'I take it you'd be jealous?'

'Of course I would.' She grew suddenly serious. 'You remember the last time we saw each other, when I was eighteen?' He nodded. 'Do you remember what you said then?'

Rhys gave her a wary look. 'No, but I've a feeling it was probably something as unwise as that incautious answer I gave to a four-year-old imp who pushed her way into my garden—and my life.'

She smiled, liking that, and leaned towards him so that he put his arm round her. 'I wanted you to marry me, then—when I was eighteen, I mean, but you said I'd got to wait until I was no longer a teenager and ask you again. Well, I'm not a teenager any longer, Rhys.'

He pursed his lips, sighed and nodded. 'I was right; it was an unwise thing to say.'

'But you did say it.'

'So I did.'

She looked up at him, her eyes soft and radiant as stars. 'So will you marry me, Rhys?'

For a long moment he didn't speak, then bent to lightly kiss her parted lips. 'You're very special to me, Alix—but when I want to marry a girl, *I'll* do the asking.'

Alix sat back, deep disappointment in her eyes, but then she frowned and said, 'Well, I must say you're taking a hell of a long time about it. A girl could *die* of frustration waiting for you to come home, you know.'

Which unexpected riposte made him give a crack of laughter and completely eased the situation again. His arm was still round her and he gave her a spontaneous hug. 'Urchin, you are something else.'

Which she rightly took as a great compliment. Wisely, then, she changed the subject, asking him about Australia, which lasted until they reached their village.

'Can you drop me off outside your house and I'll walk round to mine?'

'Don't you want to go through the gate?'

Alix shook her head. 'No, your parents will want you to themselves for a couple of hours.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Only a couple of hours?'

She grinned mischievously. 'We're all having dinner together at my place.'

Rhys gave a mock groan but leaned forward to tell the driver to stop. 'I might have known. What else have they got lined up for me?'

'Well, there's the welcome home party, and your grandparents are coming to visit, and then _____'

Rhys raised his hands in protest. 'Enough! Enough. I can't take any more.'

'Well, it's your own fault,' Alix pointed out prosaically. 'You shouldn't be such a lovable hunk.'

"A lovable hunk"!' Rhys gave her an outraged look. 'I've been called some things in my time, but that... Get out of the car, woman; I'll see you later.'

Alix did so with a chuckle, and walked home whistling; for the first time Rhys had called her woman instead of urchin, which to her mind was a tremendous step in the right direction.

He was home that time for over six weeks, and to Alix it was wonderful because she saw him not only when he came to Kent, but often in London, too. He drove her back to the office on Monday morning, using his own car this time, but she didn't see him for the rest of the day. Her own office seemed to be extra busy all that morning as several members of staff seemed to visit it for little reason. One of them was Donna Temple. She had her dark hair down today, sleekly combed behind her ears and turning up at the ends. And she was wearing a dress that would have cost a whole month of Alix's salary, but which was well worth the money, the way it stressed the length of Donna's legs and curved in to show the narrowness of her waist. Alix was smartly and neatly dressed, but she hadn't yet found her own style, and she knew a moment of envy for the older girl's sophistication.

Donna's eyes swept over Alix when she came into the room, but she talked for several minutes to one of the men about some papers she had with her, and turned to go before apparently noticing Alix and coming over to pause by her desk.

'You must be Alix North, Rhys's little neighbour. Right?'

The other girl's voice was all sweetness but Alix could recognise a put-down when she heard one. 'That's right. And you are...?'

'Donna Temple.'

'Oh, yes, Rhys's little...'. She didn't finish the sentence, just let it hang in the air. Behind her Kathy smothered an over-awed giggle, and the smile on Donna's face changed, became fixed.

'Perhaps you were going to say friend,' Donna said curtly, breaking the silence. 'I am a friend of his, yes. I suppose he told you about me?'

Alix shook her head. 'No, *he* didn't mention you.'

'Well, he will. How are you getting on here?' Donna asked, abruptly changing the subject.

'Very well, thank you,' Alix answered warily.

But it seemed that the older girl wanted to be friends because she gave a gracious smile and said, 'Well, if you have any problems, just let me know. Rhys wants you to get on in the firm and I'd be happy to help.'

'Thanks,' Alix answered. 'But I think I can manage on my own. And I don't have any problems.'

The older girl nodded and walked out of the room, all eyes following her.

'Phew!' Kathy exclaimed. 'I rather think our Donna wants you on her side. Probably hopes to get to Rhys's parents through you.'

'If Rhys had wanted her to meet his parents he would have taken her down before now. Anyway, he isn't interested in marrying her,' Alix said with certainty.

'No?' Kathy's eyes grew round. 'How do you know? Did he tell you?'

Belatedly remembering Kathy's love of gossip, Alix thought she'd better be more circumspect, so said, truthfully, 'I was with him most of the weekend and he didn't mention Donna once.'

'Really? How come you were with him?'

'Our parents are the closest friends. We all had dinner together at my house, then his parents gave an open-house party for him on Saturday; one of those whole day things where people come and go the whole time. I was helping with the food and everything.'

'You are *so* lucky, Alix,' Kathy said soulfully. 'How about inviting me down one weekend when Rhys is there?' But then she said, 'Donna must have been really curious about you, just like all the other people who've been wandering in here today.'

For a day or so people continued to be curious about her, but it all died down when Rhys didn't come into the office again. Alix didn't see him for a few days, but then he phoned her at home one evening. 'How about lunch tomorrow?'

'Of course,' Alix agreed immediately, shelving a shopping hour with Kathy without hesitation. 'Where and when?'

'Meet you in the foyer at one. See you, urchin.'

Alix hadn't expected him to meet her in the building, hadn't expected him to take her out in London, if it came to that. Next day she wore a new outfit and was there early, eager to see him as always. But Rhys was a few minutes late, and when he came out of the lift Donna was with him.

The other girl had a possessive hand on his arm and was laughing up at him. Alix felt a harsh rip of jealousy, that was instantly gone as Rhys said, 'Excuse me, Donna. I have a date. 'Bye.' And he smilingly walked over to Alix and kissed her lightly. 'Hello, little one.'

'Hi.' She dropped her voice. 'Am I being used?'

His eyes immediately filled with laughter. 'You could say that.'

'It's going to cost you a really good meal.'

'It will be worth it.'

'She won't let go, huh?' Alix guessed.

'Something like that. But I think she's got the message now.'

'Good,' Alix said with feeling, which made Rhys laugh as he tucked her arm in his and took her out to lunch.

The rest of those six weeks were wonderful because Alix knew she had him to herself, socially, that was; he spent a great deal of time in meetings and conferences, and it was eventually announced that he had been made a director in the boardroom game of musical chairs. And he was still only thirty. When he took her out at first Alix thought it was merely to emphasise to Donna that he wasn't interested, but after two weeks the company hummed with the news that Donna had got a new job and was leaving immediately. Whenever Rhys was free he took Alix to the theatre and concerts, to dinner in ethnic restaurants where he laughed at the doubtful face she pulled as she tried food she'd never heard of before, let alone tasted.

Although Alix had known him most of her life there were many things about Rhys that she had yet to discover; he had never treated her as an adult before, so their conversations were different, making her feel closer to him. And he seemed to have changed since she'd seen him last, become a little harder perhaps. For Alix these weeks became a period of learning about Rhys, and her own experience had broadened so that she was able to look at him with more mature eyes. And the same went for him, she supposed, but she had always been completely open and natural with him, so there was less for him to learn.

When he went back to Australia she went to his flat to collect him, so that she could drive him in his car to the airport and then drive it back to Kent, to garage it at his parents' house. His flat was in a modern block with an entry-phone system. Because she was feeling unhappy at his leaving, Alix had bought a lurid witch mask and put it on when she rang the bell.

Rhys's laugh crackled over the intercom. 'A great improvement. Come on up, Alix.'

His bags were all packed and standing ready in the hall.

'How long will you be away this time?' she asked him.

'Not sure. A couple of months, maybe.' His eyes settled on her face. 'Have you ever thought of getting yourself a flat in London instead of commuting every day?'

She thinned her lips expressively. 'Flats in London cost the earth to rent.'

Rhys held up some keys. 'How about using this one, then, while I'm away?'

Alix's eyes widened with pleasure. 'Rhys! Do you mean it? Oh, that would be great, great, great!'

He laughed and tossed her the keys. 'Don't have any rave-ups and don't upset the neighbours.

OK?'

'Of course not.'

'Let's go, then.'

They reached the airport and he turned to her. 'Goodbye, urchin.'

Alix swallowed and blinked hard. 'I'm going to miss you, Rhys.'

He put a finger under her chin and tilted her face, looked down at her with strange intentness. 'Then remember this,' he said softly, and bent to kiss her.

At last it was a real kiss, not that of an indulgent friend, but the kiss of a man to a woman. Letting her know masculine curiosity and desire, softly exploring her mouth, drinking in its moist sensuality, deepening to demand a response. At first taken by surprise, Alix was completely still, but then she gave a low moan of wonder and joy, opening her lips to him, finding herself caught in whirling timelessness, clinging to him as she experienced overwhelming sexual need for the first time in her life.

When he lifted his head there were tears of happiness in her eyes.

'Idiot,' he said, and kissed the tears away.

'Wow!' she managed on a choking laugh. 'That was really something!'

He grinned. 'You should get me on a good day.'

'Yes, *please*,' she said fervently.

He laughed and tweaked her hair. 'Goodbye, urchin. Take care of yourself.'

He unloaded his bags, turned to wave to her as he went through the doors. But it was a while before Alix had recovered enough to start the car and drive home.

Alix moved into his flat the next day, enjoying hanging her clothes beside his in the wardrobe, putting her things out as if they were sharing the place. Not that there was much of Rhys's stuff there; he was hardly at the flat long enough to make it look lived in, and he seemed to take most of his clothes with him. She got into bed that night, her thoughts full of him, when the phone rang.

'Hello, Alix.'

'Rhys! How did you know I was thinking about you?'

'Telepathy. You settled in OK?'

'Yes, fine.'

'I forgot to tell you to forward any post.'

'Will do.' A little disappointed, Alix said, 'Is that why you rang?'

'No.' His voice changed a little. 'I called to ask you to marry me.'

CHAPTER TWO

‘ALIX? Alix, are you still there?’ Rhys demanded when the silence had lengthened and she still hadn’t replied.

‘Y-yes, I’m here,’ she said faintly. Then, on a note of understanding, that was, however, unable to hide the disappointment, ‘It was a joke, right?’

‘No joke, urchin. I’m asking you to be my wife.’ Again there was a long silence. ‘Alix, don’t do this to me. Is it yes or no?’

From somewhere, out of the overwhelming joy that filled her heart to bursting, out of the dizzying happiness that filled her head, her every sense, Alix was able to say with some dignity, ‘I shall have to think about it.’

‘You’ve got two minutes,’ Rhys said in amusement.

This time she was silent for only two seconds. ‘Yes, of course I’ll marry you, you idiot! Oh Rhys, oh Rhys, oh Rhys!’ The happiness bubbled in her voice, then changed to awe as the future she’d always dreamed about shone before her. *‘Oh, Rhys!’*

‘Can’t you think of anything else to say?’ he complained.

‘I’ll try.’ She gave a watery chuckle.

‘And if you start to cry the deal’s off,’ he warned.

That made her laugh properly. ‘I do wish I could see you.’ She rolled on to her stomach. ‘Tell me where you are,’ she commanded. ‘I want to picture you there, proposing to me.’

‘It’s just a hotel room like any other—except that the fridge is bigger to hold all the beer.’

‘I’m in your bed,’ she told him with satisfaction. ‘And I’m wearing the top of a pair of your pyjamas that you left behind. The dark blue silk one.’

‘I never wear the tops,’ he told her.

‘Oh, good. Think how much money we’ll save,’ Alix said happily.

Rhys chuckled. ‘We’ll get officially engaged when I get home,’ he told her. ‘In the meantime keep it under your hat.’

‘Can’t I even tell the parents?’

‘Oh, sure.’ His voice changed a little. ‘But don’t expect them to be surprised.’

‘You think they’ll have guessed?’

‘They knew I didn’t stand a chance.’

Alix laughed richly. ‘When did you realise?’

‘Realise what?’

‘That you were in love with me, of course.’

‘Oh...’ His voice became flippant. ‘When you glared up at me and told me you weren’t a boy, you were definitely a girl, of course.’

‘Really? Was it that long ago for you, too?’ Alix’s voice was all eagerness.

‘No, idiot. I was only kidding. I’ll tell you when I get home. OK?’

‘OK,’ she agreed, a little wistfully. ‘Will you write to me—a proper letter?’

‘Wouldn’t you rather I called?’

‘I’d like you to do both. Oh, Rhys. I wish you were home. I wish you were here with me.’

‘It won’t be long, just a couple of months.’ There was a noise in the background. ‘Alix, I have to go now. My car’s arrived to take me to work.’

‘You’ll call me tomorrow?’

‘As soon as I can. Bye, urchin.’

‘Goodnight, Rhys.’ Then, experimenting with happiness, ‘Goodbye, darling.’

Being an only child, Alix was used to sharing everything with her parents, and it wasn't in her nature not to, so, even though it was almost midnight, she hugged her joy to herself for only a short time before picking up the phone to call them.

'Daddy,' her voice was still breathless with excitement. 'I've got something to tell you. No. No, I haven't been mugged. I'm quite all right. Fine. Yes, I know you told me to be careful.' She raised her voice. 'Daddy, will you please *listen*?' Alix paused till he was quiet. 'I'm going to get married. I'm engaged!' she told him, the thrilled wonder of it still in her voice. But then she frowned. 'No, I am not at a party and I'm not drunk. Of course it's someone you know—it's Rhys.'

She grinned with supreme pleasure as she heard her father excitedly telling her mother. Then of course her mother came on the line, wanting to know every detail. 'Yes, he phoned me from Australia. I know, isn't it wonderful? What do you mean, you're not surprised? I was. But Rhys said you wouldn't be.' She listened, then said, laughing with excitement, 'No, Ma, of course we haven't set a date yet. Rhys didn't even talk about that. We only got engaged half an hour ago, for heaven's sake! Oh, and he said we weren't to tell everyone yet, not till he comes home and makes it official. No, you can't tell Uncle David and Aunt Joanne because I want to tell them myself. No, Rhys had to go to work. OK. Yes. I promise to ring them right this minute. Yes, I am brilliantly, fantastically happy. More happy than it's possible for anyone to be. Yes, tomorrow. Goodnight, Mum. Love to Daddy. Night.'

The next twenty minutes and more were almost exactly identical as Alix told Rhys's parents the news. Next to her own parents, she was closer to them than to anyone, even her own relations, and had always called them aunt and uncle; the knowledge that their relationship was soon to become even closer gave them all the greatest of pleasure. 'We're so pleased, darling,' Aunt Joanne told her. 'We've been looking forward to this day for years.'

Alix accepted their happiness as perfectly natural, quite sure that their pleasure wouldn't have been half so great if Rhys had chosen to marry some other girl. She had been a proxy daughter to them for so long, and now she was to officially become part of their family. Everything was perfect for them all.

It never occurred to Alix that his parents' love for her might have influenced Rhys's decision to propose to her. And it certainly never occurred to her that her own overwhelming love for him wasn't reciprocated a hundredfold. Everything in the world was wonderful—except for the long, long wait for Rhys to come home and claim her as his own.

Keeping her engagement a secret for the next two months was terribly difficult, especially as her happiness shone from her face and was obvious for all to see.

'You're in love,' Kathy accused her when she went into work the next day.

'Yes,' Alix admitted. 'I am.'

'Who with? Who did you meet over the weekend? It must have been love at first sight,' Kathy said enviously.

'Yes, it was. Isn't life wonderful?'

'I thought you were crazy over Rhys,' the other girl said shrewdly.

'Good heavens, what on earth gave you that idea?'

'What's this new man like?'

'Oh, you know—just fantastic.'

More than that she wouldn't say, but her whole outlook changed. Instead of window-shopping outside clothes shops in the lunch hour, Alix now wanted to look at cutlery and linens, at china and saucepans.

'That's boring,' Kathy protested. 'You're too young and attractive to become a *hausfrau*. Anyone would think you were going to live with this guy.'

Alix protested, but was inwardly excited at the idea. Surely that was what Rhys had intended by letting her live in his flat while he was away? When he came back he would just move in with her

and they would live together, eventually getting married, eventually having children, and definitely living happily ever after.

The rest of the day went past all too slowly. At the end of it Alix would dearly have loved to have gone home to share her excitement with her parents, but Rhys had said he would phone her again at the flat, so she had to stay in town. Only when he didn't call that evening did Alix remember that he hadn't promised definitely for that night, just said he'd ring as soon as he could. She fell asleep disappointed, and turned down an outing with some of the girls from the office to stay in the next night, but was overwhelmingly glad she had when Rhys rang again, earlier this time, at ten o'clock.

'Hi, urchin. Have you changed your mind?'

'What about?' she asked, deliberately not understanding.

Rhys chuckled. 'Marrying me, of course.'

'Oh, that. No, I guess I'll make do with you.'

'Only two days and the woman's blasé already.'

'Oh, I'll never be that,' Alix assured him, immediately abandoning her mock coolness. 'I told the parents. They were so pleased, Rhys. You wouldn't believe.'

'Oh, yes, I would. They rang me at some Godforsaken hour in the morning yesterday to congratulate me. All four of them. Your father said I should have asked his permission first.'

'He didn't!' Alix exclaimed delightedly. 'What did you say?'

'I told him that if he'd refused to give it you would probably have disowned him.'

She burst into laughter. 'I would, too. Oh, Rhys, I am *so* happy. But I do wish you were here. Do you wish I was there with you?' she asked, expecting a tender reply.

'No, you'd be completely in the way and I'd never get any work done,' he said prosaically.

That made her laugh again. 'When do you think you will be home? I want to know the exact date.'

She could almost hear him shrug. 'Some time at the end of next month; I can't be any more exact than that at the moment, but everything is going well, no holdups.'

'Tell me about it.'

'It would take too long, and these calls cost the earth.'

'When will you call again?'

'Some time next week probably.'

'OK. If I'm not here I expect I'll be at home,' she ventured, not wanting him to phone and wonder where she was.

But Rhys merely said, 'Fine. Listen, will you collect a couple of jackets I left at the cleaners? You'll find the ticket in the top drawer of the chest in the bedroom.'

'Do you want me to send them to you?'

'No, just put them in the wardrobe. Thanks. I'll have to go. Take care of yourself, little one.'

'And you, Rhys. I miss you so much. I——'

'And you, urchin. Bye.'

Alix heard the phone go dead and slowly replaced her own in disappointment. She had been about to tell him she loved him but he had been too quick for her. But that was Rhys, brisk and to the point; and anyway there was really no need to tell him because he already knew, there was nothing in the world he could be more sure of.

Rousing herself, she went over to the chest of drawers to look in the top one. Rhys had cleared several of them out for her, but this wasn't one of them. There were a lot of things in it that he hadn't needed to take to Australia: his gold twenty-first birthday watch, several membership cards, a combined address book and diary. Alix fingered the latter, was strongly tempted to look inside but resisted it. Rhys was hers now; she trusted him implicitly and had no wish beyond curiosity to know about his past.

On Friday Alix went home to Kent and had the most marvellous weekend. To be secretly engaged was wildly romantic, but to be able to share the secret, and discuss it with all the parents, was even better. Her mother and Aunt Joanne were already discussing wedding plans, deciding where and when, drawing up lists of guests. Uncle David picked up their combined list and pretended to be terribly shaken. ‘Good lord, John!’ he said to her father. ‘At this rate we’re both going to have to work till we’re ninety to pay for all this.’ But it was said in fun, and they were all as openly delighted as Alix.

The next two months went by agonisingly slowly. Alix didn’t go out much in case Rhys rang, which he did a few times, but the calls were, to Alix, frustratingly short. Instead she sat at home and relieved her feelings somewhat by writing very long letters to Rhys, trying to restrict herself to one a week, but often ending up sending two or three. In return, Rhys sent her several postcards, but she didn’t receive the letter she had so longed for; a love-letter, her very first from the man she was to marry.

Life became full of excitement again when Rhys at last rang his parents to say he was coming home in just a few days, he wasn’t sure exactly when, though. Alix had finally succumbed to Kathy’s persuasion and had gone to see a film with her, so missing Rhys’s call to the flat, to her bitter disappointment. And when she tried to ring him back someone with a strong Australian accent said he wasn’t available. Trying to control her impatience, trying without much success to hide her happiness and excitement, Alix somehow got through the next couple of days, expecting every night to hear from Rhys so that she would know when to collect him from the airport. But on the Thursday afternoon Alix got a call, not from Rhys, but from his mother.

‘Rhys is home, dear. He flew into Gatwick this morning, and it was so near home that he just rang and asked me to collect him. He expected to be here last night and surprise us all, but unfortunately his plane was delayed for hours in Singapore.’

‘He’s home?’ Alix didn’t know whether to be pleased or disappointed; she’d rehearsed going to meet him so many times in her mind. ‘I’ll come straight away.’

‘There’s no point in rushing, Alix dear; he’s so jetlagged that I’ve made him have a rest. Come at the usual time and we’ll all have a celebration dinner together.’

Alix would much rather have had Rhys to herself that evening, that night, here in London, but realised that if he was at home she wouldn’t stand a chance. Even though Rhys’s mother had told her not to rush back, Alix still wanted time to wash her hair and get ready for tonight, so she decided to ask to leave early anyway. But unfortunately her own boss was away sick that day, so she had to go to the head of the department to ask permission, and also ask to have the following day off.

‘I’m owed a day’s holiday,’ Alix pointed out, but determined to have the day off no matter what.

‘That’s OK, Alix. Your work is always up to date. Is it——?’ He broke off as there was a brief rap on the door and Todd Weston walked in.

‘Hi there. Sorry to interrupt.’ He glanced towards Alix and smiled in recognition. ‘Ah, the girl with a boy’s name. Alex, isn’t it?’

‘You’re close. It’s Alix,’ she corrected him.

‘Nice to see you again. How are you?’

‘Fine, thank you.’

His eyes settled on her face and he grinned. ‘Yes, I can see you are.’ He looked towards the head of department. ‘Is there some problem?’

‘No.’ He shook his head. ‘Alix just came to ask for tomorrow off. I was just going to ask her if it was something special?’

He was rewarded with the most dazzling smile. ‘Oh, yes, it most *certainly* is.’

Both men laughed at her enthusiasm, and Todd said, ‘I wonder if I can guess what it is.’

Alix flushed a little but shook her head and wouldn’t explain.

The department head said, ‘OK, Alix, off you go. See you Monday.’

‘Yes. Thank you. Goodbye, Mr Weston.’

‘So long, Alix.’

As soon as she was out of the office, Alix rushed to catch the tube and then the train, willing them to go faster and yet faster, her thoughts flying ahead of her.

It was still only half-past four when Alix ran into the house, hugged her mother in excitement, then ran upstairs to spend the next two and a half hours getting ready. Weeks ago she had found the perfect outfit to wear tonight: black silk evening trousers, a beaded black strapless top, and a loose shirt with silver flecks to go over the top. Alix put them on and felt really glamorous. Her hair she wore long and as straight as it would go with so much natural curl in it, and she wore more makeup than she usually did at home. She added some new expensive French perfume, examined herself anxiously in the mirror, then glowed with satisfaction, knowing she looked good.

Both the families had always been so close that it didn’t occur to anyone that Alix might feel a little shy at meeting Rhys again in these new circumstances. It didn’t even occur to Alix until they were walking along the road to Rhys’s house. But when they had parted they had been merely long-term friends; now they were engaged to be married. She suddenly longed to be alone when she met him, to have time to be at ease with him again. But with parents as close as hers, Alix didn’t stand a chance. They were walking along, chatting happily together, wondering how long Rhys would be at home this time, how long in England.

When they reached the door Alix hung back, terribly unsure of herself. Was she supposed to rush into Rhys’s arms, to kiss him and call him darling in front of them all? She couldn’t do it, not when everything was so new, not when she hadn’t yet been alone with him as his fiancée. She didn’t know how to act towards him, how she was supposed to behave. Alix wanted to turn and run but Uncle David had opened the door and was ushering them in.

‘Rhys is in the sitting-room.’

They all looked at her expectantly, but Alix knew an uncharacteristic moment of panic and couldn’t move.

‘Alix?’ her father said questioningly.

But then suddenly it was all right because Rhys came out into the hall. He glanced at her, but turned first to her mother and father to greet them and receive their congratulations. Then he quite firmly showed the others into the sitting-room and shut the door so that they were alone. The shyness lasted for a moment longer until Rhys raised his eyebrow and said, ‘Had second thoughts?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Then come here, idiot.’ And he spread his arms.

She ran into them and he held her close, then looked down at her teasingly. ‘Hello, urchin.’

He kissed her, then, a most satisfactory kiss that left her head in a whirl and made her give a long sigh of discovery when he lifted his head. ‘I have been waiting for that for *so* long.’

He grinned. ‘Well, I’m home now.’

But she hadn’t meant that; Alix meant that she had been waiting for her body to feel this aching need when she was close to him, for awakening womanhood. But she put the thought aside for later, and smiled back at him, her eyes alight with happiness.

‘Come on, we have to face them some time.’

Taking her hand, Rhys led her into the sitting-room, to be confronted by their parents with raised glasses of champagne. ‘To Rhys and Alix! Congratulations, darlings.’

Then there were kisses all around, they were given champagne and Rhys raised his glass in a silent toast to her. Alix knew she was grinning like an idiot but couldn’t help it. It was a moment of the most supreme happiness, to be surrounded by those she loved and who loved her, and to know that her dream had come true and she was to spend the rest of her life with the man she had always wanted. Once, during the course of the evening, when they were all seated round the table, laughing and talking, for a strange moment she felt detached from it, as if she was an onlooker, and the silly

thought came into her mind that it was all too good to be true. Someone spoke to her, she blinked and shook off the unwelcome thought, promptly forgot it as she leant forward to reply.

A lot of the talk of course was about the wedding and where they would live. 'You must buy a house near here,' both mothers insisted.

'There's plenty of time,' Rhys said in casual protest. 'We're not even officially engaged yet.'

'So when is the announcement to be made?' her father asked.

Rhys looked amused. 'Loading up your shotgun, John?'

He had never called her parents aunt and uncle, he had always seemed too old for that; to him they were John and Valerie, and he spoke to them as equals. Alix thought about calling his parents by their Christian names only but knew that she never would; they were a different generation and that relationship was firmly fixed with the titles she had used for as long as she could remember.

'I'll phone the announcement through to the newspapers tomorrow,' Rhys was saying. 'Have it come out on Monday. Then you'll be able to tell everyone,' he said to the two mothers in amusement.

'My God, just think of the telephone bills,' his father sighed.

It was like that all through dinner and the evening that followed—light, happy. Alix helped to clear the table and when they went back into the sitting-room found that the others had tactfully left her a space beside Rhys on one of the settees. She would probably have sat next to him if their relationship was as it used to be, would probably have frowned mightily if anyone else had taken the place. But, now that she had the right to be beside him, Alix again felt shy and blushed rosily when Rhys put a casual but possessive arm across her shoulders. Tentatively she reached her hand up to hold his, found it held in a strong grip. Alix glanced at her mother and Aunt Jo and found that both women were looking at them with moist, sentimental smiles on their faces, making Alix quickly look away in case she got maudlin, too.

When they left to go home, Rhys again took control, saying as he helped her on with her coat, 'Alix and I are going to take a walk.'

The street was dark and empty. Rhys put his arm round her and walked her down through the village to an open meadow that they had often gone to when they were young: to lie in the long grass and read, to practice tennis shots, for Rhys to teach her about natural history. A place that had long and good memories for them both. He lifted her over the fence, then leaned against it and pulled her to him. This time his kiss wasn't just adult, it was sensuously intimate. He arched her body against his, letting her feel its hardness against her length and his shoulders hunched as his kiss deepened with passion.

Alix returned his kiss ardently, then gave a gasping moan against his mouth as a fierce fire of need grew deep inside her. 'Rhys.' She said his name on a shuddering sigh as he took her mouth by storm, sending her senses whirling. She clung to him, lost, drowning, crying out in delight and yearning as he put a hand low on her hips and held her tight against him. She moved in sensual arousal, her head tilting backwards as he kissed the long length of her throat. She wanted him. Oh, God, she wanted him so much!

But Rhys loosened his hold, raised his head.

Slowly Alix opened her eyes and stared at him. Her breath was panting, unsteady, and her whole body, every nerve, every pore, seemed to be an aching need for love. 'Oh, Rhys, I love you so much,' she said fervently.

He kissed her lightly, then said, 'I have a present for you.'

'A—a present?' she said dazedly.

'Yes. Look.'

He took a small box from his pocket and clicked it open. Inside was a ring. A large stone surrounded by diamonds that seemed to be on fire in the moonlight. A ring of fire, Alix thought fancifully, her mind still stunned and whirling.

'Here let me put it on for you. I hope it fits. I had your mother find out the size.' He took her shaking left hand in his and slipped the ring on to her engagement finger. 'It's an opal,' he told her. 'There was a mine near where I was working and they let me go down and hack this out for you.'

'You found it yourself?' She turned eyes that were as bright as the ring up to him. 'Oh, Rhys!'

'You keep saying that,' he admonished.

She laughed. 'I know. I'm sorry. It's just—just all so overwhelming.'

'I know, kitten.' He gave her a hug. 'So now it's official. You can go ahead and tell your friends. And at work.'

'Oh, wow, I can't wait! Kathy will just die with jealousy. She thinks you're gorgeous, you know.' Rhys laughed but she turned and put her arms round his neck. 'And so do I. Rhys, I'm so happy. Thank you for my lovely ring and for wanting to marry me. Why did you?' she asked in a sudden burst of vulnerability. 'You could have had any girl you wanted.'

'But you're the one I want.' He raised a finger to trace the outline of her lips. 'My sweet, innocent urchin. Always here. So pretty, so untouched.'

She raised a questioning face at that, but he kissed her again and she forgot everything else for several long, wonderful minutes.

When he let her go, Alix gave a shaky laugh. Her hands were gripping the lapels of his jacket to steady herself, although his arm was strong around her.

'What is it?'

She shook her head a little. 'I—I didn't know it would be as—as devastating as this.'

'Good. I'm glad.'

'Glad that it's devastating?'

'Yes, but mostly glad that you didn't know before.'

'There never was and never will be anyone but you,' she said simply.

Putting his hands on her shoulders, Rhys looked deep into her eyes, then said the words her heart had always longed for. 'That's what I love about you, urchin. My sweet little Alix.'

They kissed again, but then it began to rain and they had to turn and hurry back.

'I'll call for you around eleven tomorrow,' Rhys told her. 'We'll go out somewhere, get away from the parents. Goodnight, little one.'

'Goodnight, my love,' she answered, then quickly slipped indoors so that he could go home and not get wet.

Next day they drove down to the coast, found a deserted stretch of beach and walked along at the edge of the sea, both of them with their shoes off and trousers rolled up to their knees.

'I wouldn't mind living by the sea,' Alix remarked as the wind lifted her hair. She laughed. 'My mother keeps on about buying a house in the village.'

'So does mine,' Rhys said with a mock groan.

She put her arm through his. 'Where will we live?'

'Oh, I expect we'll look for a house round here some time. In the meantime you can continue to stay in the flat whenever I'm away and go back to your parents' when I'm in England.'

She lifted a puzzled face to look at him. 'You want me to move out while you're home?' He nodded. 'But——' she flushed a little '—but I thought we could live at the flat together.'

'When we're married we can, sure.'

Alix stood still and put her hands on his arms, looking up at him earnestly but shyly. 'Rhys, I don't mind—that is, I'd like to live with you there *now*. Not—not wait.'

He kissed her lightly, but to her disappointment shook his head. 'The parents would never wear it. And, besides, I want to do it right. Don't you?'

'Yes, I suppose so,' she agreed.

Hearing the reluctance in her voice, Rhys pulled her to him. 'What's the matter?'

'Will we be married soon, then?'

‘We have plenty of time, Alix. You’re only twenty. We don’t necessarily have to rush things because that’s what the parents want. Let’s enjoy being engaged.’ He kissed her lingeringly, and putting his arm round her, walked along at the edge of the sea.

Completely happy again, Alix immediately put all thoughts of living together out of her mind. If Rhys said they were to wait, then that must be the right thing to do. But although her mind accepted it, her body, newly woken to the magic of his caresses, yearned for fulfilment. But not living together didn’t necessarily mean that they wouldn’t make love. Alix was young and naïve enough to think that because she couldn’t wait then Rhys couldn’t either.

She would have liked to ask him, but she was still slightly in awe of Rhys, and shy as yet where sex was concerned. The age difference was still there, the ten years that made him a mature man and her an inexperienced girl. It created a barrier of intense inner admiration of him that she had yet to overcome to be completely at ease in their new relationship, to tease and argue with him as she would have done with someone nearer her own age. She was working on it, but at the moment accepted everything he said as right.

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