



REGENCY

*Mistress
to the Marquis*

MARGARET MCPHEE

Gentlemen of Disrepute

Mills & Boon Historical

Margaret McPhee

Mistress to the Marquis

«HarperCollins»

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SHE MIGHT GRACE HIS BED, BUT SHE WILL NEVER WEAR HIS RING

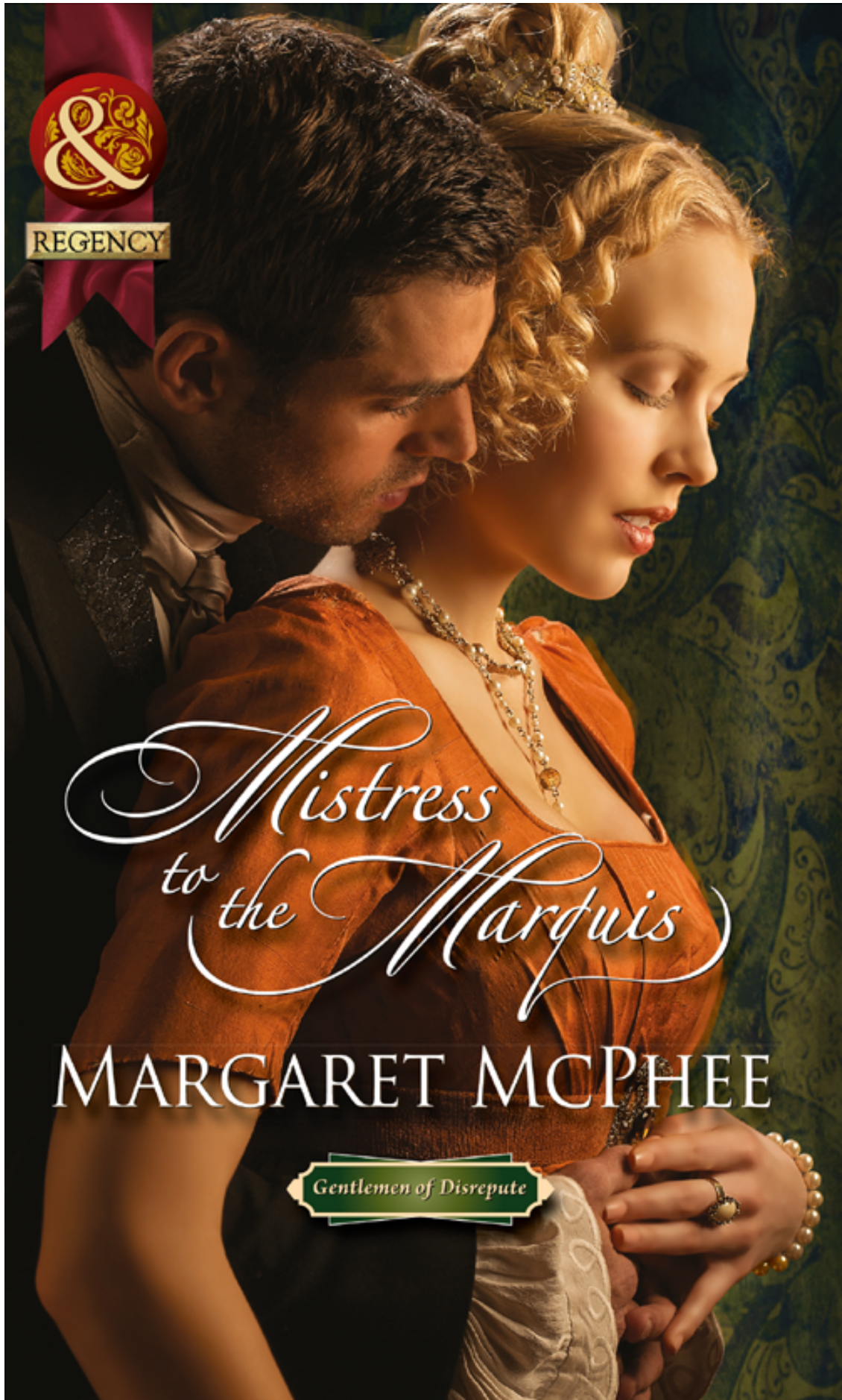
They whisper her name in the ballroom's shadows – the Marquis's mistress! It will take all of Alice Sweetly's renowned acting skills to play this part: smile until it no longer hurts, until they believe your lie, until you believe. Pretend he means nothing. If the Marquis of Razeby thinks he can let his mistress go easily, he is so very wrong. Each night she appears before a rapturous Covent Garden audience, taunting him with her beauty. But Razeby must marry, and while Alice could grace his bed she can never grace his arm. Gentlemen of Disrepute Rebellious rule-breakers, ready to wed!

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Содержание

About the Author	8
Mistress to	9
MILLS & BOON	10
Chapter One	11
Chapter Two	16
Chapter Three	19
Chapter Four	23
Chapter Five	29
Chapter Six	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	37



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Gentlemen of Disrepute

‘Arrangements like ours are not meant to last, Alice.’

‘They’re not,’ she agreed.

‘I have to do my duty.’ His mouth, which had always been so warm and smiling, was unhappy and determined, the expression in his eyes unreadable.

Her heart was beating harder than a horse at full gallop. ‘Maybe you should have thought about your duty six months ago.’ When he had wooed her and swept her off her feet and made her his mistress within weeks of their meeting.

‘Maybe I should have,’ he said.

His quiet admission stripped her raw.

‘For what it is worth, I really am sorry, Alice.’ He took a step towards her, reached out a hand as if he meant to touch her.

Alice recoiled. It was a hand that had caressed her lips and stroked against her naked skin, a hand that had touched her in the most intimate of places. It was all she could do to stop herself from striking it away with every ounce of strength in her body.

‘You should go now,’ she said with feigned calmness.

AUTHOR NOTE

You met Alice and Razeby in *DICING WITH THE DANGEROUS LORD*—the story that belongs to their best friends, and in which Alice becomes Razeby’s mistress.

During the Regency era it was considered completely acceptable for a gentleman and nobleman such as Razeby to keep a demi-rep woman such as Alice as his mistress. Marriage between them, however, would have been viewed very differently. But there were cases in which mistresses went on to marry their noblemen protectors. Margaret Farmer, a commoner and daughter of an Irish spendthrift, married Lord Mountjoy and became the Countess of Blessington. Sophia Dubochet, courtesan and sister of the infamous Harriette Wilson, married Lord Berwick.

So, with those exceptions in mind, here in *MISTRESS TO THE MARQUIS* is Alice and Razeby’s own story of a love strong enough to defy the strictest social class rules of their time. I truly hope that you enjoy reading it.

About the Author

MARGARET MCPHEE loves to use her imagination—an essential requirement for a trained scientist. However, when she realised that her imagination was inspired more by the historical romances she loves to read rather than by her experiments, she decided to put the ideas down on paper. She has since left her scientific life behind, retaining only the romance—her husband, whom she met in a laboratory. In summer, Margaret enjoys cycling along the coastline overlooking the Firth of Clyde in Scotland, where she lives. In winter, tea, cakes and a good book suffice.

Previous novels by the same author:

THE CAPTAIN'S LADY

MISTAKEN MISTRESS

THE WICKED EARL

UNTOUCHED MISTRESS

A SMUGGLER'S TALE

(part of *Regency Christmas Weddings*) THE CAPTAIN'S FOBIDDEN MISS UNLACING THE INNOCENT MISS (part of *Regency Silk & Scandal* mini-series) UNMASKING THE DUKE'S MISTRESS* A DARK AND BROODING GENTLEMAN* HIS MASK OF RETRIBUTION* DICING WITH THE DANGEROUS LORD*

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For my wee Wee Sister, Joanne—an extra spicy story especially for you!

Chapter One

London, England—April 1811

‘Razeby, you surprise me! I wasn’t expecting you until later.’ *Much, much later.* Miss Alice Sweetly’s fingers were flustered as she shoved the sheet of paper she had been writing upon into the drawer and rammed it shut, but her sudden anxiety had nothing to do with not being ready for her protector. Within seconds she was on her feet and hurrying towards the Marquis of Razeby to distract his interest from the desk. ‘You’ve caught me unawares.’

‘Forgive me, Alice. I did not mean to startle you when you were so absorbed.’ Razeby said in his rich, aristocratic voice.

‘Hardly absorbed. I was just writing a letter to a friend.’ In her nervousness her natural soft Irish lilt grew stronger than ever and she felt her face burn with traitorous colour at the lie.

‘Lucky friend.’ Razeby smiled with his usual good nature.

She tensed in case he meant to quiz her on the fictitious letter and friend. But, true to form, Razeby trusted her and did no such thing. He did not even glance over at the little bureau.

‘Finish your letter. I will fetch myself a brandy while I wait.’

‘I’ll do no such thing.’ Embarrassment rippled through her, making her face grow hotter just at the thought of sitting back down at the desk with him watching. With a glance down at her shabby moth-nibbled woollen shawl and the morning dress beneath it, with its old-fashioned style, the pretty muslin faded and worn, she changed the subject. ‘Look at the state of me! I’m only wearing this old thing to keep my fine clothes good.’ It was a habit she found hard to break, having grown up with nothing. ‘And I’ve a lovely silk ready to wear tonight. I best get up the stairs and change into something decent.’ She made to pass him.

But Razeby swept an arm around her waist, stilling her panic and pulling her against him. ‘Relax, Alice. You look beautiful just as you are. As ever.’ His eyes, deep brown and true, met hers as he stroked an escaped strand of hair away from her cheek. ‘And have I not told you, it is not the clothes that are important, but the woman beneath?’

‘Flatterer,’ she accused, but she smiled and his tall, masculine body in such proximity sent waves of attraction and excitement crashing through her.

‘It is the truth as well you know it.’ Razeby could charm the birds down from the trees. He was still smiling as he pulled her closer. ‘But if you have a wish for a new wardrobe, then you shall have one.’

‘I’ve no wish for a new wardrobe. I’ve enough dresses up those stairs to clothe half the women in London!’

‘I like buying you things—it makes you happy.’ He gathered her right hand in his left. ‘And I want you to be happy, Alice.’

Alice tried to curl her fingers to hide the black inkstains that marred her fingers, but Razeby did not let her. He slid his thumb to rub against the marks on her skin.

‘Mmm...’ His eyes lingered over the inkstains before moving teasingly to hers. ‘I do believe a new pen is a requirement.’

‘No.’ She laughed, but her face flamed anew at the mention of writing and of the precious silver pen that was so dear to her. ‘I don’t want another pen. I like the one I’ve got just fine.’

‘I am very glad of that,’ Razeby murmured huskily and pressed her inkstained fingers to the warmth of his lips.

‘You know I’m happy. Very happy...’ She paused before adding softly, ‘And not because of the things you buy for me.’ It was the truth.

He smiled a strange, almost poignant, smile, stroked his fingers against her cheek and stared into her eyes.

And it did not matter that she had been his mistress for six months, sleeping with him nearly every one of those nights. When he looked at her with that look in his eyes she felt that same flare of desire that had sparked between them the very first moment they met in the Green Room of the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden. Indeed, familiarity had not diminished the passion, or all that had grown alongside, between them, only sharpened and heated it. Her stomach turned cartwheels, her skin tingled all over and her thighs seemed to burn. He glanced away, over towards the window, a pensive, sombre expression upon his face. ‘Alice...’

But whatever he meant to say was lost as she gently took hold of his face, turned it to hers and kissed away the worry that she saw there.

Razeby retaliated in kind, his mouth passionate and warm and irresistible as the night he had first kissed her in the moonlight outside the theatre stage door.

Breaking the kiss, she watched him as she smiled, a mischievous smile this time, and let her hand stroke lightly over the hard bulge in his breeches. He swallowed and she felt the shiver that rippled through his body, felt the way it strained to meet her and heard the slight catch of the breath in his throat.

He caught her hand in his own and moved it away from temptation, his eyes darkening to that familiar smoulder that made the fire of desire twist and curl and dance all the more, low in her belly. ‘Alice, you are a wicked woman,’ he breathed in a velvet voice that tickled against her ear and sent a shiver tingling across her skin.

‘Very wicked, indeed, Razeby.’ Her top teeth caught at her bottom lip. ‘So wicked that you might need to put me across your knee and spank me.’

‘I would be remiss in my duty to you if I did not do so.’ She could hear the low stroke of desire beneath his words.

‘And the one thing about you, Razeby, is that you’re never remiss in your duty.’ Again she thought she saw the shift of a shadow in his eyes so she teased her skirts higher to flash him a glimpse of a stockings ankle, wanting to make him forget whatever was troubling him. And it worked.

‘Be careful, Miss Alice Sweetly,’ he cautioned.

‘I prefer to be reckless, James Brundell, Marquis of Razeby. But isn’t that the truth of why you like me?’ She arched an eyebrow and playfully unfastened the buttons at the top of her bodice, allowing the dress to gape and reveal the bulge of her breasts over the transparent linen of her shift.

Razeby’s eyes darkened. His focus narrowed and sharpened upon her. He swallowed, then wetted his lips. ‘Alice, you are a temptation I cannot resist.’

‘I hope so.’ She laughed, and one by one she plucked the pins from her hair, until the neatly coiled length of fair hair loosened and tumbled long and wanton over her shoulders.

Razeby discarded the neatly fitted dark tailcoat on the sofa behind him. His fingers moved to the buttons of his pale waistcoat, unfastening it and shrugging it off. Around his neck his white cravat was still neatly tied in a fashionable knot. She reached and tugged an end of it, pulling it free and draping it over the back of the sofa. Through the fine white lawn of his shirt she could see a hint of his flesh and the dark peppering of hair that covered it. Her eyes swept lower to the tight buckskin of his breeches that did little to disguise the extent of his arousal or the long muscular thighs beneath. And lower still to the glossy black riding boots that were coated with dust from his having ridden from his own town house in Leicester Square to the one he kept for her here in Hart Street.

She knew the body beneath those clothes, intimately, every inch of honey-coloured skin, every hard taut muscle. She knew the sweep of his tight buttocks and the breadth of his chest, the feel of his skin beneath her fingertips and the way his heart beat fast and hard after he had loved her. She knew the scent of him, the feel of him, the taste of him and the way he made her heart blossom with such warm tenderness. It just made her want him all the more.

She turned round and, sticking out her bottom, wiggled it to taunt him.

‘You are playing dangerously, Alice.’

‘Are you close to yielding?’ she asked over her shoulder.

He stepped towards her.

She skirted around the other side of the sofa so that they faced one another as opponents across that barricade.

‘When I catch you, Alice...’

‘If you catch me...’ She smiled and arched an eyebrow. ‘What are you going to do to me?’ she asked, as excited by the game she had instigated as he was.

‘I am going to pull up your skirts.’

‘Yes.’ she breathed.

‘And bend you over my knee.’

‘And then...?’ She felt breathless at the thought.

He stepped closer to the sofa, lowering his voice to little more than a husky whisper as he did so. ‘You know there is only one way this can end, Alice.’

‘Really? How might that be, my lord?’

He lunged over the sofa for her.

Alice dodged clear, making a run for the door of the drawing room. ‘You’ll have to be faster than that, Razeby!’

She made it to the first landing of the staircase before he caught her, his arm fastening around her waist and pulling her to him.

She gave a yelp and a giggle.

‘Minx,’ he whispered in her ear as he kissed the side of her neck, where the blood pulsed strong and wild.

He scooped her up as if she weighed nothing at all. Her breathing was loud and ragged while Razeby’s was barely changed at all. For all her squeals he threw her over his shoulder like some marauder from olden times abducting his woman and strode up the rest of the stairs.

‘Razeby!’ she protested and gave a wriggle, but all she got in return was a slap on the bottom before he kicked open the door to their bedchamber and threw her down upon the bed.

‘Now, woman of mine,’ he said. ‘We have a score to settle—a matter of some spanking, I believe.’

‘Oh, you think so?’ She laughed and, rolling on to her stomach, began to quickly crawl across the bed to evade him.

‘I will not let you escape me,’ he said in a strict voice as his fingers fastened around her ankle and hauled her back across the bed towards him, catching her skirts on the bedcovers and hitching them up her legs in the process. She was still lying on her stomach, her stockings revealed. He pushed her skirts higher to expose her naked thighs and bottom in full.

‘Now there is a sight to behold,’ he murmured and she caught her breath as his fingers traced down the curve of her hip.

The mattress dipped as he sat down upon it and she gasped as she felt herself hauled to lie across his thighs, her skirts twisted high around her hips, her buttocks bared for whatever he chose to inflict upon them.

‘Mercy, my lord Razeby, I beg of you,’ she pleaded, but she was smiling and the words were breathless with anticipation.

‘I swear, my love, that when it comes to you I have no mercy... or resistance.’ His hand stroked against the fullness of her buttocks, then he spanked her bare bottom, several small light slaps that were little more than cupped caresses.

She laughed again, as did he, as he turned her in his arms, cradling her to him and kissing her mouth. She wound her arms around his neck, kissing him with all the passion that was burning within her. He rolled her flat on to the mattress and she pulled him down on top of her, stroking his face, threading her fingers through his hair.

‘Alice,’ he whispered, and caressed her cheek. His eyes were a dark liquid brown, so filled with both tenderness and desire as they stared into hers.

‘Razeby,’ she said softly.

Their eyes held as he plucked a single deep intimate kiss from her lips.

He rose, long enough to divest himself of his shirt over his head and unfasten his breeches and drawers. Her fingers were still working upon the buttons of her bodice when he returned.

‘Allow me to assist,’ he offered, and then in a move that would have done justice to any Viking warrior in the midst of some rape and pillage Razeby took hold of the neckline and tore the length of the bodice open.

‘Such impatience, my lord,’ she chided.

‘It is the state you push me to, wench.’

‘You’ll be tying me to the bed next.’

He glanced up at the lengths of black silken cord that dangled from the headboard of the bed. ‘Let us save that game for later.’

‘If you insist, Lord Razeby.’

‘I do, Miss Sweetly.’

She smiled at that and felt the place between her thighs grow hotter at the thought.

He gave a growl as he pushed the flimsy torn linen and sprig muslin aside, exposing her nakedness to the hunger of his gaze.

‘Do you know what you do to me?’ She could hear the strain in his voice, see it in his face. He touched her lightly, trailing his fingers across her breasts, making their tips harden and grow unbearably sensitive.

‘I could hazard a guess,’ she murmured as he lowered his face, all the while keeping his gaze locked with hers, and flicked his tongue to taste her.

The gasp escaped her, loud and needful, and in response his torture grew only more exquisite.

She groaned her need of him, arching her back to thrust her breasts all the more into his mouth so that he suckled her in earnest. Her fingers threaded through the dark feathers of his hair, clutching him to her, wanting him never to stop, wanting this, and more, so much more. He laved her, worked each rosy nipple in full until it was bullet hard and so sensitive that she was in danger of finding the fullness of her pleasure before he had even touched between her legs. She tried to hold back, tried to resist, but, seeing how close she was teetering to the edge, he smiled.

‘No mercy, Alice,’ he said in his low, sexy velvet voice and then did something so clever with his tongue that rendered all resistance futile. She let go and exploded in a bliss that was blinding and overwhelming, making her body ripple and shimmer as the pleasure, absolute and all consuming, filled her from head to toe and she was gasping aloud with the wonder of it.

She was still pulsing inside as his face came up to hers. ‘Razeby,’ she whispered.

‘Naughty girl,’ he said and he was smiling.

She let her hands glide over the pale honey-coloured contours of his shoulders, over the muscles at the top of his arms. He was strong and lean from all the fencing and horse riding and pugilism, his body so different from hers, so much bigger, so masculine.

‘It’s all your fault,’ she said.

‘Guilty as charged,’ he admitted, and his eyes smouldered all the darker. He kissed all the way up the column of her neck, kissed the line of her jaw, kissed her chin.

Already she could feel the desire stoke again within her. Her woman’s place between her legs ached for him.

She scraped her teeth against the naked skin of his shoulder, licked him there, sucked him there while one hand slipped lower to caress the long hard length of him.

She felt the involuntary contraction of his muscles, heard the sharp intake of his breath as she stroked him.

‘Alice.’

She smiled and bit his shoulder.

Razeby took her mouth with masterful possession, plunging his tongue into its depths as she wrapped her legs around him and welcomed him home.

They moved in a dance as old as time itself. A man and his woman, mating, bonding, sharing all that was possible to share on this journey that could have only one destination for them both. Striving together until she was gasping and crying out his name as he spilled his seed within her and she pulsed around him and shattered into a myriad of stardust and magic that transcended all else.

And afterwards, as ever, he held her safe in his strong arms, curving his body around hers as if he would protect her from all the world. She could feel the stir of his warm breath against her hair and the possessiveness of his hand around her breast, the warmth of his hard masculine body preventing the cooling of her own lover’s rosy glow. His lips brushed against the top of her head and her heart gave a little dance of utter happiness and joy. She snuggled in closer and basked in the aftermath of their lovemaking.

But when she opened her eyes to look into his she glimpsed again something of that same pensive undercurrent that she had seen in the drawing room. She stroked her fingers against the faint blue stubble of his cheek. ‘What’s wrong, Razeby?’ He was not his usual self. He had not been entirely himself for the last weeks. ‘You’ve something on your mind.’ Please God, don’t let it be what she had been writing upon the desk. If he asked about that, she was not sure what she was going to tell him.

He looked into her eyes, studied them, and just for a moment she thought he was going to tell her. Then it was gone, replaced by that smile of his that made her melt inside.

‘Nothing that cannot wait a little longer.’ He caught her fingers from his cheek and pressed them to his lips.

But she was not so easily reassured. A little whisper of unease stroked down her spine. ‘Razeby,’ she began, but he rolled her on to her back and followed to cover her, staring down into her face all the while.

‘Please not yet,’ he said, and it sounded almost like a prayer; then he silenced any further protestations with a kiss. The kiss led to another, and another, until the passion that consumed them made all else fade away.

Chapter Two

Razeby stood by the window of his study in his town house in Leicester Square, observing all of normality go on in the street outside. A carriage rolled by, the Earl of Misbourne's crest painted upon its door. A coal cart rattled slowly out of the nearby mews, its load lessened following its delivery. Two gentlemen upon horseback had pulled over by the gardens to greet each other. Servants hurried along the pavements on errands for their masters. A nursemaid was taking a baby for a walk in a child's pushchair. He turned away from the window at that last sight.

The brandy decanter was sitting on his desk. The heavyweight crystal engraved with the Razeby coat of arms and motto—The Name of Razeby Shall Prevail—was a taunting irony. Regardless of the earliness of the hour he lifted the decanter, filled one of the matching engraved glasses, and took a sip.

The heat of the brandy hit the back of his throat, the smooth warmth tracing all the way down to his stomach. He took a deep breath and set the glass down upon the letter that lay open upon his desk. A bead of the rich tawny liquid trickled down from the glass's rim, slipping slowly, inexorably, down the stem to the base, where it finally crept upon the paper beneath to blur the inky words his cousin Atholl had written there—Atholl, who had defied all advice to buy a commission in the cavalry and taken himself off to fight against Napoleon. Yet another reminder. Everywhere Razeby looked there were reminders.

There was not a sound within the house. Only the slow steady tick of the tall clock in the corner, marking how quickly time was slipping away. He had left it so late, almost too late. He could leave it no longer.

He thought of Alice, his Alice, with her beautiful dark blue eyes and her passion and her warmth of heart and spirit, of how much she had been looking forward to the fireworks tonight. He thought of Alice and all that had been between them these past months, and felt an ache in his chest. His eyes strayed to the long, slim brown-velvet box that lay beside his pen holder. Just a momentary pause, as he steeled himself to the task. Then he slipped the box into the pocket of his tailcoat.

Razeby downed the remaining brandy in one go, but it did not settle the sourness or dread in his stomach.

The night sky was a canopy of clear midnight-blue velvet sewn with a smattering of diamonds that twinkled and glittered. The moon was a thin crescent hanging high in their midst. Although the winter had passed, the spring night air was cold, turning Alice and Razeby's breaths to smoke as they climbed from the little boat and walked hand in hand across the grass to Vauxhall Gardens.

Alice wrapped the cloak around her more tightly and felt Razeby's arm pull her closer.

'You are cold.'

'Only a little.' She smiled up at him. And he stared down into at her face with a curiously tender expression, as if he were branding her image upon his memory never to be forgotten. 'Why so serious? Hmm?' she asked, still smiling, and cupped his beard-scraped cheek.

He moved his lips to kiss the palm of her hand. 'It has been an unpleasant day.'

'Then we'd better make sure we enjoy tonight.'

'Every last precious minute.' The words were so softly murmured she had to strain to catch them. Then he seemed to shake off his megrims, and, taking her hand in his, led her to watch a host of entertainers: jugglers and knife throwers, dancers and musicians. A hurdy-gurdy man with a little monkey upon his shoulder, its tiny furry body all dressed up smartly in a fine coat and matching hat, was drawing quite the crowd. They could smell the food from the banqueting tables beyond, but the night seemed too chill for the wafer-thin cold ham and champagne that was being served to the guests.

'I'm glad we ate at home,' she said.

'Me, too.' Razeby pulled a bottle of champagne from his pocket. 'No glasses. I am afraid we will have to slum it. Even if it is the best bottle from your cellar.'

‘Your cellar,’ she said and laughed, as he timed the popping of the cork to merge with the explosion of the fireworks in the sky.

The froth exploded over the top of the bottle, cascading down the bottle’s neck as Razeby offered it to her.

Alice took a swig from the bottle and spluttered at the furious fizz of bubbles.

Razeby’s swig gave not the slightest hint of choking.

Then she leaned back against his chest as his arms wrapped around her waist, and together they looked up and watched the magnificent explosion of coloured lights and flashes fill the sky. All around them the crowd was ‘ooing’ and ‘aahing’ with amazement and appreciation at the spectacle. She could smell the sulphurous stench of the fireworks and catch the drift of the scent of smoke from the braziers not so very far away.

Razeby leaned down to kiss her and he tasted of the green grass and of strawberries and champagne, and of Razeby and all that was wonderful in life. They watched the fireworks and they drank the champagne and they kissed, not caring who saw them, because it was dark and because this was the slightly *risqué* Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, and because it would have been too much to keep their lips from one another. As the fireworks began to wane Razeby took her hand, not even waiting until they had finished in full, and led her back towards the boats so that they would not have to wait in the crush that would follow.

Within their bedchamber at Hart Street the glow of the firelight burnished the dark blonde of her hair a red-gold. He reached out and caught a vibrant strand that had loosened from her pins, running it between his fingers before tucking it behind her ear. His thumb stroked against the softness of her cheek. She closed her eyes and angled her face into his hand for the breath of a moment before stepping away beyond his reach.

He shrugged off the midnight-blue tailcoat he was wearing, throwing it to land on a nearby armchair. But as he did so the slim brown-velvet box fell from the pocket to land upon the rug beneath their feet.

Alice smiled when she saw it. ‘You bought me another gift. What did I tell you the other day?’ she demanded.

He picked up the box, kept his eyes on it and could not rise to her teasing.

‘Honestly, Razeby, you shouldn’t have.’

He gave a small tight smile and passed the brown-velvet box to her.

‘I’m mystified as to what it can be.’ She stared at the jeweller’s box, stroked her fingers once against its velvet, hesitating for a moment before finally opening the lid. The radiance of the diamond bracelet, lying within on its cream-velvet cushion, caught the firelight to glitter and sparkle and illuminate the room around them.

She gave a soft gasp. ‘Oh, Razeby! It’s beautiful!’ She pressed a kiss to his cheek. ‘It must have cost you a fortune.’

‘You are worth every penny, and more.’

‘I love it.’ Her hands came to caress his face, her eyes scanning his. ‘Thank you.’

His heart squeezed tight.

Slowly she touched her lips to his.

‘Alice,’ he murmured and, pulling her into his arms, he kissed her.

He kissed her and he could not stop. He kissed her and lost himself in her, as ever he did. She made him forget everything else, all of his responsibility that weighed upon his shoulders, all of the darkness that was coming. Her eyes were filled with a passion and need that matched his own.

‘Make love to me, Razeby.’

He could not deny her. He could not deny himself, or all that he felt for her.

He undressed her in silence, their eyes clinging together all the while, and laid her down gently on the bed. He never took his eyes from hers even while he stripped off his waistcoat and shirt and cravat. Nor while he unfastened the fall of his breeches and freed himself from his drawers.

He took her tenderly, with reverence, with meaning, all of which seemed to make the force between them only stronger and rawer. Claiming her as his own, gifting her all he could, so neither of them would ever forget. And she rose to meet him. He opened himself to her entirely, gave all, held nothing back. And in Alice's reply he felt her do the same, this woman for whom he would pluck both the sun and moon from the sky and give them to her if he could.

Their bodies had been made to be together. To merge. To be as one. She was his complement, and he hers. Together they found another place distinct from the world. But the lovemaking between them tonight took them further than he had ever known. It was poignant, special, a bonding between them like no other. As if she touched an even deeper part of him he had not known existed. They clung together, strove together, looking into one another's eyes as their bodies reached a new nirvana, and together stepped over the edge to tumble into a shared climax the force of which made them capture each other's merging cries. And afterwards, he could feel her heart and his beat in time, as they lay entwined together watching the flicker of the firelight dance upon each other's naked skin.

Her fingers gently caressed the muscle at the top of his arm.

'Alice...' he said, and there was a terrible pressing tightness in his chest.

'Did you get the tickets for tomorrow night's show?'

'I have the tickets.'

'Well, that's a relief.' She smiled but Razeby could not reciprocate. 'We'll have a grand time. Ellen says the horses are amazing. That a body wouldn't believe they could be trained to do such tricks.'

He closed his eyes, took a breath, forced himself to say the words aloud before he could not. 'I cannot accompany you to the show tomorrow night.'

'I thought you said you had the tickets.'

'I do, but there is... another occasion... which I am obliged to attend.'

'What occasion?'

The small silence hissed loud.

'A ball at Almack's.'

'Almack's is not usually one of your haunts.' She gave a little laugh. 'All those débutantes and fierce matrons intent on landing eligible husbands for their daughters. Is Devlin finally on the hunt for a bride?'

'I am not going with Devlin, but with Linwood.' Viscount Linwood, who almost six months ago had married Alice's best friend and London's most celebrated actress, Venetia Fox.

And he felt the withdrawal of her body and saw in her face that she realised the truth even before he said the words he did not want to say, 'We need to talk, Alice. There is something I have to tell you.'

Chapter Three

Razeby fixed his drawers and breeches into place before sitting up in the bed. Leaning his spine against the massive carved-oak headboard, he stretched his long still-booted legs out before him over the counterpane.

Alice felt the rush of cold air fill the space where he had been. She shivered at its icy touch as she pulled the sheet to cover her nakedness and sat up next to him, leaning back to rest against the headboard in the same manner.

And even though he moved his hand to cover hers, threading their fingers together, her stomach dipped and a cold draught moved across her heart. She waited, knowing what Razeby was going to say and willing with all her heart and mind and soul that it would turn out to be something different, that later she would laugh over this foolish pound of her heart and tight fear in her throat.

‘You best get on and tell me then.’ She smiled as if dread were not trickling like ice through her veins.

‘I have a duty, Alice, to my title, to my estates and the people upon them. A duty to safeguard them for future generations. And part of that duty is to marry and produce an heir. I was raised for that purpose. I must produce a son who will do the same. I must marry.’

‘Of course you must.’ She had always known it, they both had. But he would marry at some distant time in the future, not now, not when what they had together was still so fresh and vital. ‘But you’re young enough yet. Surely you don’t need to step upon that path right now?’

‘I’ll be thirty in six months’ time.’ He glanced away and raked a hand through his hair.

‘What’s the significance of thirty? Is there some kind of stipulation that you have to be married and breeding an heir by then?’

A shadow moved in his eyes as he glanced away. ‘Something like that,’ he said. ‘Atholl will be coming home on a stretcher. It could too easily have been a coffin.’

‘Your cousin who got shot in battle.’

‘As it stands he is my heir, Alice.’

‘I thought he was on the mend.’

‘He is. Now. He very nearly was not. What happened to Atholl... it has forced me to reconsider things. I have deferred my duty for too long. I can defer it no longer. I have to find a bride for Razeby.’

Their fingers still lay entwined together. Neither of them had moved, both just sat leaning back against the headboard of their bed, as if this was just an ordinary conversation, one of the thousands they had had before, when it was anything other. She sat motionless, feigning relaxation, pretending that she was not shocked and reeling from his words.

‘So is this you giving me my *congé*?’ She smiled with the incredulity of it, half-expecting him to deny it, to tell her they could still go on as before. On the ivory of the bedcover she could see where the dust of his riding boots had smudged dark.

But he made no denial. ‘I am sorry, Alice.’

She slipped her fingers from his. Looked round at him, but he stared straight ahead, as if seeing into the distance, and did not meet her eyes.

Not five minutes ago they had been making love, their breaths and bodies and hearts merged as one in that ultimate act of intimacy. Now he was sitting there dismissing her. It felt like she had just been punched in the stomach.

She glanced down at the diamond bracelet that glittered as beautiful as a night sky full of stars. ‘That’s why you bought me the bracelet!’ She laughed a mirthless laugh. ‘As a pay off.’

The silence hissed.

Her fingers unfastened the latch and slipped it from her wrist. The diamonds sparkled and cast shimmering lights against the shadowed walls as she let it fall on to the pale counterpane.

She could not think straight. Her thoughts swayed and staggered as she struggled to understand. 'You were going to tell me the other day, weren't you? That's why you came round unexpectedly.'

Again he did not deny it.

She gave an ironic laugh and shook her head.

His eyes were dark and serious.

The tide of emotion threatened to engulf her. She turned her face away, barely able to conceal her anger and incredulity, and the splintering unbelievable hurt. How could she have been so blind? Six months of thinking that everything was happy and good and wonderful. And believing that he had felt the same. She could barely take it in that he was telling her it was over.

'You can stay here as long it takes to find other lodgings. There is no rush to leave.'

'How kind of you.'

He ignored the irony. 'I will, of course, make a settlement of money on you.'

'I don't want your money, Razeby.'

'It is part of our contract.'

'Oh, so it is.' She thought of the piece of paper with its fancy black writing, secure and tied neat within its green ribbon. 'How could I have forgotten?'

The silence seemed to pulsate between them. There were so many thoughts running through her head, so many words crowding for release upon her tongue. She closed her mouth firmly to prevent their escape.

Climbing from the bed, she grabbed an old dressing gown from where it hung over the back of a chair, pulling it on and tying the belt around her waist as she walked to stand by the window and stare down on to the lamp-lit street below. In the continuing silence she watched the occasional group walking along the pavements. Theatre goers who had gone elsewhere after a late show. Women who, despite the quality of their dress, were ladies of the night, plying their trade; Alice could pick them out with an expert eye—like could always recognise like. A carriage passed and then a gentleman on a horse.

She heard him move and glanced round to see him get to his feet, all six feet of him, with his tight dark breeches and his naked chest, and that ruggedly handsome face. And, despite what he had just told her, her traitorous body reacted with the usual rush of desire for him.

'Arrangements like ours are not meant to last,

Alice.'

'They're not,' she agreed.

'I have to do my duty, Alice.' His mouth, which had always been so warm and smiling, was unhappy and determined, the expression in his eyes unreadable.

Her heart was beating harder than a horse at full gallop. 'Maybe you should have considered your duty six months ago.' When he had pursued her while the play in which she and Venetia had starred together took London by storm. When he had wooed her and swept her off her feet and made her his mistress within weeks of their meeting.

'Maybe I should have,' he said.

His quiet admission stripped her raw.

They stared at one another. He was grim-faced, serious in a way she had never seen him before.

'For what it is worth, I really am sorry, Alice.'

'So you said.'

He swallowed. 'Thank you for everything.' His eyes clung to hers. He took a step towards her, reached a hand as if he meant to touch her.

Alice recoiled, sweeping her eyes over his extended hand with its long manly fingers and its lightly tanned skin. It was a hand that had caressed her lips and stroked against her naked skin, a hand that had touched her in the most intimate of places. It was all she could do to stop herself from striking it away with every ounce of strength in her body.

She raised her gaze to meet his with fierceness.

He swallowed, glanced away, let his hand drop to rest by his side. 'If there is anything more you need—'

'There isn't. You should go now,' she said with feigned calmness before turning away again to the window. Clutching her dressing gown all the tighter around her, she stared down at the gas-lit street, seeing nothing of it, waiting only for him to leave.

But he did not leave.

She heard him come up behind her. He did not touch her, but she could feel the heat of his proximity scorch the length of her spine.

'Alice...' there was a straining pause 'I hope I have not... hurt you.'

She turned to him, held her head up to look him defiantly in the face. 'Hurt me? Don't flatter yourself, Razeby. It was nice while it lasted, but...' She gave a shrug as if she did not care and bit hard at her bottom lip to stop the threat of the betraying tremor.

She saw the bob of his Adam's apple in his throat, the way his dark eyes studied hers.

'That at least is something.' He gave a nod. 'Goodbye, Alice.'

'Goodbye, Razeby.' The words were tight. She forced a smile and turned away to the window again as if she were more interested in the dark view.

He turned and walked away, but she could see the reflection of his leaving in the glass of the window pane and her own face watching, pale and haunting as a ghost.

The bedchamber door closed with a quiet click that seemed louder than an almighty slam.

She stood there and listened to the stride of his booted footsteps along the corridor and down the stairs. Her breath caught in ragged gasps, but she caught her hand to her mouth to silence them. Five minutes later the front door shut. Only then did she let herself sag back to lean against the wall and allow the sob to escape.

For what remained of that night Alice sat in the little blue armchair by the fireplace and stared into the flames. They licked high around the fresh coal she had thrown on to it, devouring the black rocks with a ferocity that matched the force of emotion whirling and tumbling through her. It did not matter how much heat they threw out, it did not warm the chill from her bones. Nor did the dressing gown or the woollen shawl clutched tight around her shoulders. It was the shock, she thought to herself. And the anger. And that feeling that she had drunk ten cups of coffee and that it did not matter if she lay on the bed and closed her eyes; her thoughts were running so wild she would never sleep again.

Don't you dare shed a single tear for him!

But her eyes were swimming and she felt she could have wept a waterfall. She swallowed down the lump in her throat, but no amount of swallowing could shift the boulder from her chest that felt like it was crushing her.

It was just sex. It had always been just sex. And the way she was feeling now, so scraped and raw and bleeding, was down to the shock of it; that was all. Razeby's words had come out of nowhere, catching her with her guard down.

She breathed, calmed herself. Stared into the flames. She had survived worse things than this. She thought of her family back in Ireland, of her coming to London to find a job that she might help them, of the hunger and the desperation. She thought of playing the role of the masked Miss Rouge in Mrs Silver's high-class brothel, her identity hidden from the world. So few people knew. But Razeby did. God only knew why she had told him. She was regretting that now.

Her eyes glanced across at the bed with its sheets still rumpled from their lovemaking. Amidst them she could see the sparkle of the diamond bracelet, so brilliant and beautiful and expensive. She gave a shaky laugh and shook her head at what a fool she had been.

Never let them see how much they hurt you. Her mother's words, drummed into her across a lifetime, played in her head. *The bastards can't take your pride away from you unless you let them. Look life straight in the face, Alice, and always, always keep smiling.*

Alice was not clever. She was not smart. But she was practical and hard-working and determined. And she still had her pride, every damn inch of it.

She turned her face away from the bed and, staring into the low golden flickers amongst the red glowing coals, made her plans.

Chapter Four

Within the hallowed grounds of Almack's ballroom, the chandeliers sparkled beneath the flames of a thousand candles. The walls were painted a soft cream and outlined in antique gold. The ceiling had recently been reworked in an array of white plasterwork. In its centre was a line of three elaborate roses, from each of which hung an enormous crystal chandelier. There was a three-piece matching peering glass set above the fireplace, with candles fitted to the fronts and a series of matching mirrored wall sconces positioned at regular intervals around the room. Small chairs and tables were seeded around the periphery. The musicians played from the balcony above, the music floating sweet and melodic to fill the ballroom and haunt Razeby.

'I was not sure they were going to let you in,' he said to Linwood standing by his side.

'I did have to call in a few favours.'

'I am glad you did,' he admitted.

There was a small silence as the two men let their eyes wander to the other side of the dance floor and the crowd of white-dressed débutantes there that posed and giggled and chattered amongst themselves while their stern-faced turban-wearing chaperones looked on.

'Does Alice know you are here?' Linwood asked.

'It is over between me and Alice.' Razeby felt the weight of Linwood's gaze, but he did not shift his own, just kept his face impassive and remained staring straight ahead so that nothing of his feelings showed.

'I am sorry about that.'

'So am I.'

There was the music and the droning hum of surrounding conversations and the tinkle of women's laughter.

'You could have kept her on at least until you found—'

'No.' Razeby did not let him finish. 'A clean severance is for the best.' He met his friend's eyes.

Linwood raised an eyebrow. 'I was under the impression that you and she dealt very well together.'

'We do.' He glanced away and corrected himself. 'We did.' He swallowed to ease the sudden tightness in his throat. 'But she was my mistress, Linwood. And now it is time to find myself a wife.'

Linwood looked at him with that too-perceptive gaze of his, as if he could see the way that Razeby's stomach clenched at just the mention of her name. He was doing the right thing, the thing that had to be done. The thing he should have been doing six months ago, before Alice Sweetly came into his life and changed his best-laid plan. Six months and he could regret not one day of it. Six months and... He changed the subject, pretending something of his usual lightness of spirit when what he felt was anything but.

'See what you missed out on by not playing the marriage mart?'

Linwood smiled, which was a sight that was a deal more common since his recent marriage. 'I would rather be tried for murder and catch a wife in the process,' he said, referring to exactly what he had done just a few months ago. 'Scandalous and dangerous—but more than satisfying in its end result.' He smiled again and there was a softening of his expression so that Razeby could tell he was thinking of his wife, the former star of the Covent Garden stage, Venetia Fox. Venetia, who was Alice's best friend.

A vision of Alice swam in his mind. Alice, with her mischief and her heart and her laughter. Alice standing in their bedchamber looking at him with that expression of shock in her eyes as he told her it was over. Something churned in Razeby's stomach. He forced that last image away and turned his gaze to the hordes of white-frocked débutantes across the floor, one of whom by the end of the Season would be his wife, in his bed and carrying his child. He felt numb at the thought, but

it had to be this way. He had had his fun and Alice had been more than he had ever anticipated, but now it was time to bite the bullet and do his duty... before it was too late. He turned his mind from all other distractions and summoned a cold determination.

‘So which lucky *débutante* are you going to ask to dance?’ asked Linwood.

‘The first one I come to,’ replied Razeby with a smile that did not touch his eyes and, setting his champagne glass down on the silver salver of a passing footman, he made his way across the room.

The day had been a long one, following a night in which she had not slept, but Alice was not tired.

It had been a mammoth effort and one which had seen her travel round half of London. But it had been worth it.

The large travelling bag lay open at her feet.

‘Shall I help you, ma’am?’ The maid hovered awkwardly in the doorway as if afraid to enter the bedchamber. The girl’s cheeks were flushed with embarrassment, her manner awkward. Alice saw the way her eyes dropped to take in the travelling bag before meeting her face.

All of the servants knew, even though she was sure that Razeby would have told them nothing of it. Alice had two sisters in service in Dublin. She knew that servants always knew these things.

‘No, thank you, Mary. I’ll see to myself. But if you could have Heston see that a hackney carriage is summoned for me.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ The girl bobbed a curtsy and hurried off to update the rest of the staff.

Alice went through the wardrobe, pulling out a minimal selection of clothes, all of which she had brought with her when she had come to this house, and ignoring the expensive silk dresses and accessories that Razeby had paid for.

She made short work of gathering up the rest of her possessions. There were not many. Alice travelled light. She preferred it that way.

It was when she moved to close the wardrobe doors that she stopped, her eyes drawn, as if not of their own volition, to the dress hanging on its own at the very end of the row. She hesitated, bit her lip, knowing that she should shut the door upon it just like all the rest, but unable to do so. Before she could think better of it, she slipped the emerald-silk evening dress from the hanger and folded it into her bag.

Of all the gifts that Razeby had given her, she took only one, opening the lid of the long thin cherrywood box just long enough to check that the engraved silver pen was inside. But she did not look at it. She did not touch it, just snapped the lid shut and stuffed it into the travelling bag with a tortoiseshell comb and the rest of her toiletries before buckling the bag closed. Then she swept the black-velvet cloak over her shoulders and lifted the travelling bag.

One final glance around the bedchamber, at the dressing table and its peering glass, at the wardrobe and the armchairs and the pretty little table with its ivory vase of deep-pink roses that had had their day. The heads were blown, the petals starting to fall. But their perfume was still sweet and lingering in the room. She moved her gaze to the bed, which she and Razeby had shared, let her eyes rest there for only a moment. Then, with her bag in hand, she walked away, down the stairs and out into the waiting hackney carriage.

The driver flicked the reins and the carriage drove off into the sunset. Alice kept her focus on the glorious rosy-streaked sky. She clutched her hands tight around the travelling bag and kept her mouth set firm with determination.

And not once did she look back at the house.

Razeby lost track of the number of women he danced with. They all seemed much the same. He made conversation. He went through the motions. But all the while he could not get last night’s scene with Alice out of his head.

She knew more than most how the games between men and women played out. She had been under no illusions. Neither of them had. And yet.

I don't want your money, Razeby.

The words whispered again in his ear. It was that one phrase more than any other that worried him.

Last night had been about a clean, quick break. It was the only way. The best way for them both. Just as he had told Linwood. The theory of it had been easy, the practice anything but. He had handled it badly. More than badly. He wondered if he could have handled it worse.

Alice had been good to him, good for him. She was like no one he had ever known. It explained the gnawing feeling he had felt since telling her. Guilt. He should make sure she was all right, now and for the future. He should up the sum of her severance payment from that which his lawyer had specified in the contract, regardless of what she said.

He delivered Miss Thomson back to her mother. And bowed.

Hurt me? Don't flatter yourself, Razeby. He was not sure he believed her. The thought niggled him. He felt the guilt gnaw harder, even though he had spoken the truth to her. Arrangements like theirs were not meant to last. But he could not stop wondering how she was.

'Leaving so early?' Linwood raised an eyebrow. 'The night is still young, Razeby.'

'Breaking myself in gently, Linwood,' he lied. 'There are only so many *débutantes* a man can endure in one evening.'

'Do you want to go to White's to recover?'

'Another night,' said Razeby.

The lights glowed through the blind-shuttered windows. The house in Hart Street looked as welcoming as ever it had done. He wondered if he had made a mistake in coming here. But he needed to reassure himself that she was all right.

'What do you mean she is gone?' It had been the early hours of this morning when he had left her here alone. Not even twenty-four hours had elapsed since that botched confrontation.

He saw the awkwardness of the butler's expression before the man remembered his professional decorum and schooled his face to the usual attentive impassivity.

'Miss Sweetly was out all day, my lord, returning earlier this evening to pack a travelling bag.'

Something twisted in his chest. 'Did she leave a note?'

'There is no note, my lord.' There was something in the way the old man's eyes looked at him that made him feel even more of a bastard. He paused before adding, 'She gave instructions that she would not be returning.'

'And did Miss Sweetly say where she was going? Or leave a forwarding direction?' Razeby knew in his heart what the answer to those questions would be, but he asked them in the hope that he was wrong.

'No, my lord, she did not.'

'But she must have given a direction to John Coachman?'

'Miss Sweetly did not travel by your lordship's coach when she left.'

He understood the significance of that very clearly. She did not want him to find her, and, in truth, he could not blame her.

Razeby dismissed the butler and climbed the stairs to the bedchamber they had shared. Everything looked just the same as it always did, as if last night had been just some bad dream. The wall sconces on either side of the fireplace were lit, the flames of their candles reflecting soft and subdued in their adjoining looking glasses. The roses he had brought her not a week ago were still in their vase. A small fire burned on the hearth, making the room cosy and warm. The scent of her was in the air, the sense of her entwined in the very fibres of the place.

Her jewel casket still sat upon her dressing table, beneath the lid all of what he had given her lying neat in their own little compartments.

He walked to her wardrobe, opened up the door. There were only a few spaces where garments no longer hung. The myriad of coloured dresses that he had paid for from Madame Boisseron's were

still there. Their matching slippers and shoes sat in neat pairs at the bottom of the wardrobe. On an impulse he opened his own matching wardrobe and saw all of his clothes just as he had left them.

He closed the doors over, letting his eyes survey the rest of the room. Nothing was out of place... except... His gaze stilled when it came to the ivory bedcovers, neat and smooth upon the mattress, for laid carefully upon them, in their very centre, was the brown-velvet box opened to reveal the cream-velvet cushion and the diamond bracelet that lay sparkling upon it.

He felt his jaw clamp tight and a cold realisation seep through his blood. Alice had gone. He did not know where. Without her severance payment. Without a single thing he had bought for her. And there could be nothing for the best about that.

'I came as soon as I got your message.' Alice's best friend and mentor, the woman who had saved her from her life in Mrs Silver's bawdy house and set her up as an actress, Venetia Fox, or Viscountess Linwood as she was now, handed her cloak to Alice's new maid and followed Alice through to the drawing room of her new home in Mercer Street.

'You must have dropped what you were doing and come straight away. I only sent the boy half an hour ago.'

'You are my friend, Alice. What else did you expect I would do?' There was a concern in Venetia's face that made Alice feel guilty.

'I didn't mean to worry you, Venetia. I was just letting you know where I was.'

'I am glad that you did. I really have been worried.' Venetia sat down next to her on the sofa and took her hands in hers. 'What happened?'

Alice smiled as if the words were easy to say. 'He gave me my *cong e*. Said it's time he found himself a bride.'

'Oh, Alice, I am so sorry.'

'Don't be. It had to happen one day. I'm an actress. He's a marquis. How else was it going to end?' She shrugged and gave a little laugh. 'Besides, I was tired of him. I fancied a bit of a change, myself.' The joking words tripped easily from her lips.

Venetia did not look convinced. 'Neither of you could have anticipated what happened to Atholl. I suppose it made Razeby see things differently.'

'Atholl was a grand excuse for the both of us.' An excuse for Razeby, more like. She knew now what had been bothering him all those weeks and months leading up to it and she was more fool for being worried over him. 'Our time was on the wane.'

'You left Hart Street very quickly.'

'Striking while the iron's hot.' She smiled. 'I've got myself sorted out. What do you think of the new rooms? I've had my eye on them for a little while.' The smile broadened to become a grin. 'Nice and handy for the theatre. And not too high a rent.'

'They are very nice. But I did not come to see the rooms, Alice,' Venetia said carefully.

'You did warn me not to become his mistress. Do you remember?'

Venetia gave no reply, only held her gaze with eyes that were filled with compassion.

Alice hated to see it. It made her feel angry and even more determined. She did not want anyone's pity, not even Venetia's. 'You told me it was better to earn your own money than put yourself in any man's power.'

'And did you put yourself in his power, Alice?' Venetia asked softly.

'Of course not! I'm not that daft. I knew the score with him. Just as he did with me. With my background, how could I not?' The secret of her scandalous past whispered between them. She smiled again as if it meant nothing. 'I kept my hand in at the theatre, didn't I? Doing the odd appearance. Which is why Kemble's agreed to take me back full time.'

'I am glad of that.' But whether Venetia's gladness was due to Kemble taking her back full time or her attitude over Razeby was not clear. 'But there is more to power than money, Alice.' Venetia

looked at her. 'I do understand something of how it has been between you and Razeby. How it was even in the very beginning.'

'You're imagining things, Venetia.' Alice gave a dismissive laugh. 'What was between Razeby and me was a kind of mutually beneficial business arrangement, nothing more. Great sex and a good time, and money, of course, lots of money.'

'It seemed as if there was a lot more than that.'

'I'm a good actress. What can I say? You trained me well.' She smiled again.

'You are,' said Venetia, 'a very good actress.' There was no edge to the words. Alice did not know why they brought a blush to heat her cheeks.

The little clock on the mantel ticked, reassuring and steady.

Alice busied herself in pouring tea into the pretty bone-china cups that came with the fine furniture and everything else in these rented rooms. She added a lump of sugar to each and a few drops of cream before passing one small cup and saucer to Venetia.

'You seem as if you have everything in hand, Alice.'

'I have, indeed.'

'If there is anything I can do to help.'

Alice glanced across the room to the side table, where the folded cream paper lay with its red ribbon tied around it. 'Actually, there is one thing you could do for me, Venetia, as you're here. Kemble's given me the contract for the theatre. I was going to come and see you. But I was waiting for a quiet time.' She fetched the document over and set it down next to the coffee tray.

'You can come round any time, you know that.' But that was not true. They both knew it.

'We move in different worlds now, Venetia. You're no longer an actress, but a viscountess. If I'm seen visiting, it wouldn't look good for you. Reputation is everything in the *ton*. They're starting to accept you. It's going well. I don't want to ruin it.'

'You will not ruin it. You are the very height of discretion.'

'I try.' She laughed. 'Well, only where you're concerned, if I'm honest.'

'I am glad you are keeping your spirits up.' Venetia smiled.

'Why wouldn't I? Razeby's in the past. Ahead there's only the future. And the future looks good for me.' She smiled again. 'I'm planning to throw myself into the theatre life. Make a real go of it. You have to get on with life, don't you?' Another of her mother's teachings. Very easy to say, not so easy to do. But Alice would do it. She was very determined of that.

'You do,' Venetia agreed. Then she lifted the document Alice had set before her and slipped off the red ribbon that bound it.

A small companionable silence opened up as they sipped their coffee and Venetia read the wording of the theatre contract.

'Is it all in order?'

'It seems to be. You are in a strong position, Alice. Your return to the stage full time will fill the theatre. You could push Kemble to pay you more.'

But Alice shook her head. 'I'm happy with what he's offered me. I just want to get on with it. Get started.'

'If you are sure?'

'I am. Although I must confess to being a little nervous at playing so many leading roles.'

'You will be fine upon that stage, Alice. More than fine. You will be great. I know you will.'

'I hope so.' Alice bit at her lip and her cheeks turned pink at the compliment.

'Kemble has told you the plays that are scheduled?'

'Right up to the summer. There's nothing new, nothing I haven't done before, thank the Lord.'

Venetia met her gaze. 'If something new does come up... any new part to be read, come to me.'

Alice gave a nod. 'I will.'

The two women looked at one another, bound by more than this secret that they shared. By sensitivity and friendship and past histories that were too much alike.

Alice took a deep breath. 'Go ahead, sign it,' she said.

Venetia gave a nod and then, moving the tray aside, she lifted the plain black pen, another one of the house's possessions, from its holder and dipped the tip into the ink well. Very carefully she signed at the end of the contract, *Alice Sweetly*, then sprinkled some fine sand upon the still-wet ink of the signature.

'It is done, Alice,' she said.

They both knew that it was more than the signing of the contract Venetia was referring to. This commitment to going back to the theatre full time was the drawing of a line under all that had gone before with Razeby. It marked the end of that chapter in Alice's life and the beginning of a new one. She was fortunate to have such an option, and more fortunate still to have such a friend as Venetia who had helped her. Alice knew that, so she smiled and held her head up. 'It is,' she agreed. 'Thank you, Venetia.'

'I will come and see you in your first performance.'

'You do that. I'll be looking out for you.' Alice smiled.

They walked towards the front door.

The thought was pounding in Alice's mind, and the words whispering in her ear, and Alice tried not to say them. But once Venetia walked out that door it would be too late and Alice had to be sure.

Just as Venetia was about to leave, Alice placed her hand on her friend's arm and said quietly, 'If Razeby should enquire, which I'm sure he won't, you won't tell him the direction of my new rooms, will you?'

There was the tiniest of hesitations in which Venetia looked into her eyes in a way that made Alice regret speaking the words.

'Rest assured I will tell him nothing, Alice.'

There were no accusations. No denials or admissions. Just a hug of understanding. And a farewell.

Chapter Five

Within the study of Razeby's town house in Leicester Square, Collins answered the question he had just been asked. 'Two maidservants, no menservants. Apart from that, no one.'

'Thank you, Mr Collins.' Razeby slid a neat pile of folded bank notes across the gleam of the mahogany desk top.

The wiry, sharp-eyed man pocketed the money without counting it. It was not first time the Bow Street Runner had undertaken a little work on the side for Razeby. Although it was in all probability the last, thought Razeby with a macabre sense of humour.

'All in a day's work, Lord Razeby.' Collins made no comment as to the information he had just given Razeby, although he could not have been unaware of its significance. The Bow Street Runner was too smart for that. It was why Razeby had used him. 'I will bid you good day, my lord.' Collins gave a small bow and left, closing the study door silently behind him.

Razeby sat where he was, staring at the panels of the door without seeing them. A man had his duty and his fate. And honour. None of which he could escape, no matter how much he willed it. That knowledge was ever present in his mind these days.

A few thousand pounds and his duty to Alice would be discharged, all monies owed paid. The severance between them finalised. And after that maybe then he would be able to stop thinking of her, maybe then he would be able to focus on the task in hand. Finding a bride. Breeding an heir.

His gaze lowered to the desk, to the scrap of paper that Collins had given him. He looked at it again, his eyes lingering on it even though the words written there were already imprinted on his memory. There could be no room in his life for sentimentality or faltering. Only getting the job done. He knew that, but he still folded the paper carefully and stowed it safely in the pocket of his waistcoat before ringing the bell for his valet and moving to ready himself for tonight's dance.

In the days since Venetia's visit Alice had done just as she had said and thrown herself into the theatre. She was working hard in preparation for her opening night at Covent Garden's Theatre Royal. The enormity of the challenge before her left little time for that. She rose early and tumbled into bed late, exhausted. She loved the smell of the theatre, that dusty polished scent unique to the grand stage. The way it gave her a purpose on which to focus.

Every day brought new challenges, refreshing herself as to the plays and the roles, running through lines last heard a year past. She took home scripts at night and returned them the next morning, pretending she had read them, as if she could, but Alice had no need to read a single line. She only had to hear something once to remember it for ever. It was her special gift. And she was truly thankful for it.

All day, every day was spent at the theatre, with Mr Kemble and the other actors and actresses, rehearsing. Everything that she feared she might have forgotten of the art of playacting came back to her as easily as if she had last stepped upon a stage in a leading role only yesterday. Even the feeling of fear but also of excitement, like walking a knife edge. It made her concentrate, made her focus. It took away the luxury of time during which she might dwell upon Razeby.

Alice was about to leave for rehearsals one morning when the maid brought her a letter.

'A footman has just delivered this, ma'am.'

She lifted the letter from the maid's small silver salver, wondering who had written. So far, only Kemble and Venetia knew the address of her new rooms. Kemble she saw in person each day and Venetia knew better than to write. But as soon as she turned the letter over in her hands she knew without opening it, without needing to be able to read a single word of it, the identity of the sender.

'Have him wait, Meg,' she instructed.

The thick red-wax seal impressed upon the back was a crest she recognised too well. One that made her pulse thrum uncomfortably hard and her heart beat too fast with anger and too many other

emotions she would rather not name. She swallowed, torn between not wanting to open it and the need to know what lay beneath that seal. Wetting her lips, she swallowed again and cracked the wax. The letter unfolded. Inside was a cheque with Razeby's name signed against a sum she could not read. The letter itself was blank other than signed with his name. That familiar bold black scrawl—Razeby.

It was her severance pay, a common enough negotiation between mistresses and the men in whose keeping they had been. A lump sum to tide them over until they found their next protector. Or to keep them for life. But for Alice there would be no new protector. And she would keep herself, earn her own money. Venetia had been right in that. Too late she realised just what her friend had been warning her against.

She stared at the cheque. She might not know the figure written there, but she knew it was high. Common sense and practicality told her she should accept it. Take it to the bank this very day. You had to be careful with money. Save it. Look after it. The future was never certain and life without money could be very hard indeed. Who better than Alice knew that? But when she looked at the cheque, Razeby's money, and all that it meant, she could not bring herself to do it.

Folding the cheque within the letter just as it had been, she heated a blob of rich red wax and let it drip to cover and melt away Razeby's crest. Within a few moments it had cooled and the letter was sealed once more, the wax disc smooth and even.

She took it out to the footman who waited in the hallway. A footman she recognised from Razeby's town house in Leicester Square. He recognised her, too, although he said nothing. If he knew the contents of the letter, he gave no sign.

'If you would be so kind as to return this to Lord Razeby.'

'Certainly, Miss Sweetly. Is there a message you wish relayed?' he enquired.

'None other than what is within the letter.' She smiled at him.

'Very good, miss.' He bowed and left.

Alice watched him go.

It had taken Razeby less than a week to find her. Just for a minute she wondered if Venetia had told him. But she knew in her heart her friend would never have broken her word. Razeby was a marquis, a man of power and money and contacts, all of which he had clearly used.

But he could keep his money. She would not touch a damn penny of it.

Chapter Six

Razeby had checked every entry in the estate account books. The task kept his mind from wandering to other thoughts he had no wish to think. Thoughts of the future. And even more thoughts of the past... with Alice.

Lifting the pen, he made to enter the figure in the column at the bottom of the open page and found the inkwell dry. He opened the top drawer of his desk to find a fresh bottle of ink and saw, lying there, the cheque he had written to her.

He stilled, his eyes fixed upon it. Four thousand pounds, twice what was specified in their contract, and she had sent it back as if it were some kind of insult. Some men might have construed it as a means of angling for more money, but Razeby knew in his gut that it was not. There was a finality about it, a closure rather than an opening of negotiation, and it made him uncomfortable. Had she asked for three times the sum he would have felt happier. Maybe then he would not be worrying over her.

The memory came again of the expensive dresses still hanging in the wardrobe at Hart Street, all the jewellery still in its casket, the diamond bracelet abandoned upon the bed. And the same uneasiness rippled through him, the gnawing feeling that it was all wrong, the unmistakable essence that there were layers between the two of them that he dare not explore. He quelled the feelings, reassured himself that he had done everything he could. He could no longer be a part of Alice's life, nor she a part of his. What she chose to do was no longer his concern. Lifting out the bottle of ink, he turned his eyes from the cheque and shut the drawer.

He had just blotted the entry and closed the books when the butler announced that Linwood had come to call.

'Were we supposed to be riding this morning?' Razeby asked.

Linwood shook his head. 'Not this morning. I came to ask if you are attending the Lords this afternoon.'

'I am.'

'It is the debate on Wellesley-Pole's circular letter.'

'The Irish issue.' Razeby could almost hear the whisper of Alice's Irish accent, so soft against his ear.

'I heard that there are plans to bring up the fact that you are biased on the matter.'

Because of Alice. The words went unspoken between them.

'Do they not know she is no longer my mistress?' he asked.

'I am sure they are well aware, but they will still use the association against you. Feelings are running high on the subject. Better be prepared, Razeby.'

'I will,' he murmured. 'Sit down. You'll take a brandy?'

'A trifle early in the day, Razeby.' It was, but he needed it.

'Coffee, then?'

Linwood gave a nod.

They spoke about horses and other inconsequential things while waiting for the coffee. He waited until they were sipping their coffee, bitter and strong, before he asked what he could no longer stop himself from asking. It was natural, he justified. Any reasonable, fair-minded gentleman would do the same, although the words perhaps would not have clamoured so desperately for release.

'Have you heard anything of Alice?' He did not meet Linwood's eye.

'She opens tonight in Covent Garden's Theatre Royal, playing Lady Macbeth,' said Linwood. 'Kemble has made quite a fanfare. It has sold out. There is not a seat to be had in the house.'

'So I saw in the newspapers.' He paused. 'Has Venetia seen her?'

'I believe so.' Linwood sipped at his coffee. 'They are as much friends as we two.'

The silence was loud between them Razeby swallowed, wondering how far he dare go without raising his friend's suspicions. 'How is she?'

'I understand that she is well.'

Razeby gave a nod and cleared his throat. There was another awkward pause. 'If you should ever hear otherwise...'

'Do not worry, Razeby,' Linwood said quietly. 'Should that be the case, I would let you know.'

'Thank you, Linwood.' He breathed a little easier.

There was a rap on the dressing room door. The same dressing room she had shared with Venetia all those months ago, before Venetia had married Linwood and Alice had become Razeby's mistress.

'Five minutes to curtain up, Miss Sweetly.'

'Thank you.'

It was Alice's opening night, her grand return to the Theatre Royal as a full-time actress.

Her palms were clammy with nerves, her stomach turning somersaults at the prospect of walking out on that stage alone before a packed house. It had always been this way. But it had not been as bad when Venetia was here as the leading lady and Alice just sharing the spotlight. And thereafter, during her occasional appearances, there had been Razeby. Just his presence, with his easygoing manner and his smile, with his utter belief in her and the way he could rub that little spot at the back of her head that, no matter what, relaxed her tension and made all of her nerves and worries fade away.

There was no Razeby tonight. She sat alone and looked at her painted face in the peering glass, lit bright with candles. She looked strong and capable and determined, even if she said so herself.

She inhaled slowly and deeply. She could do this. She would do this. Pour all of everything she did not feel over Razeby into the part. It was a simple strategy.

Another deep breath and Alice rose and walked out of the little dressing room, along the corridor and through the wings.

'Miss Sweetly on stage in five, four, three, two...'. They counted her down with every step she took. 'One.' She walked out on that stage before a packed Theatre Royal.

Her eyes slipped unbidden to Razeby's box.

It was empty. And she was glad of it.

She shifted her eyes to Linwood's box. And there, beside Linwood, was Venetia. Just as she had promised.

Alice smiled, and when she opened her mouth to speak she was not Alice any more but Lady Macbeth.

The clock ticked on the mantel. The sunlight streamed into the study, catching on the crystal drops of the wall sconces on either side of the fireplace and making them shimmer and sparkle with a rainbow of colours. From somewhere in the house there was the quiet opening and closing of a door.

Razeby noticed nothing of it. He stood, rather than sat, at his desk, his focus trained on the newspaper spread open on his desk before him, more specifically on the article about the woman whose return to the stage had taken Covent Garden by storm. London was in awe, as it regaled the delights of the previous night's play with Alice in the role of the leading lady. His eyes followed down the printed column, reading each and every word.

Since her separation from a certain Lord R., Miss Sweetly's acting talent has blossomed and taken on a new and vibrant dimension. She has a passion and realism that quite transfixed the audience and left them shouting, nay, begging, for more.

He had always known she had such wonderful talent upon the stage and he was truly gladdened by her success. But beneath his happiness for her was also an ache.

A subtle rap of knuckles against his study door and then his butler was there, showing his lawyer in.

‘Mr Ernst of Ernst, Spottiswoode and Farmer, my lord.’

Razeby’s eyes lingered on the words for only a second longer. Then he closed the newspaper and set it aside.

‘You sent for me, Lord Razeby, to undertake an audit of the Razeby estate and monies.’

Razeby did not allow himself to think of Alice, but only of what lay ahead.

He took his seat at his desk. ‘Please sit down, Mr Ernst.’

Alice was in the middle of removing her stage make-up after her fifth evening of performing when Sara, her fellow actress and mistress to Viscount Fallingham, popped her head round the door of Alice’s dressing room.

‘Hawick asked if you’ll be coming with us tomorrow. There’s a little outing arranged to Hyde Park, a promenade at the fashionable hour. I’ve already run it past Kemble and he’s all for it. There’s me and a couple of the other actresses, Hawick, Monteith, Frew, and Fallingham of course, not that he doesn’t trust me.’ She smirked.

Alice thought of her theatre contract. Being seen with the top gentlemen of the *ton* was all part of the promotion she was required to undertake. And now that the performances had started there was no longer any reason to avoid this side of it.

‘You don’t need to worry, Alice. Razeby won’t be there. I checked for you.’

Alice felt her blood run cold. ‘You checked?’ she said softly.

‘I didn’t think you would want to bump into him any time soon.’

It was the truth, but she knew she could not let the comment go unchallenged. ‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s only been a couple of weeks since.’ Sara glanced away awkwardly.

‘He gave me my *congé*,’ Alice finished for her with a smile. ‘You can say the words. I’m perfectly fine with it.’ She knew whatever she said to Sara would be all round the theatre by this time tomorrow.

‘I thought that you and he... the way the two of you were together... that maybe you were loved up on him.’

Alice dreaded that was what they were all thinking. She gave a scornful laugh. ‘Don’t be daft. It was an arrangement, nothing more.’ She still had her pride.

‘But the way you looked at one another. If Fallingham looked at me like that.’ Sara fanned a hand before her face as if just the thought brought her out in a scorching flush.

‘We had a good time.’ Alice gave a shrug of her shoulders as if it was nothing so very special. ‘But these things aren’t meant to last.’ A parody of the words Razeby had said to her, standing there in that bedchamber.

‘Was it an amicable separation?’ Sara’s curiosity was getting the better of her. She looked surprised, making Alice wonder just what the gossipmongers had been saying, given that they had so little to go on. Maybe she needed to give them a little grist for their mill.

‘Sorry to disappoint the girls, but, yes, it was.’

‘We thought you were upset, you’ve not been seen out anywhere on the town.’

‘I’ve been busy. Give me a chance. I’ve not even finished my first opening week!’

‘I suppose so,’ said Sara.

‘And I’m not upset in the slightest.’ Alice smiled to prove it.

Sara gave a grin and looked like she believed her. ‘So you’ll come tomorrow?’

‘I’m looking forward to it already.’

The door closed behind Sara.

Alice took a deep breath. There could be nothing of avoidance. Avoidance was tantamount to admitting that she cared, that she was hurt, that she could not bear to face him. And none of that was the case, as London would see soon enough.

She was getting on with her life. And if Razeby happened to cross her path, then so be it.

It would make not one jot of difference to her. *He* would make not one jot of difference to her.

Within Hyde Park Miss Pritchard was strolling by Razeby's side, her concentration more on the people in the park who were looking at them than anything else. Behind them, Mrs Pritchard, her younger daughter by her side, was espousing on the merits of good breeding and outlining a detailed Pritchard family lineage in the process.

The Pritchards were wealthy and well connected. A suitable alliance for Razeby. But Razeby did not know if he could suffer Mrs Pritchard's incessant boasting. Or, indeed, Miss Pritchard herself. All he had to do was marry her and bed her. It should be simple enough, especially for a man like him who had bedded no shortage of women in his life. But the prospect left him cold. He stared into the hazy afternoon distance and tried to not to think about it.

The last time he had been here in Hyde Park was with Alice. She had shunned the use of his curricule and insisted they walk. She did not care about being seen on his arm or not. What she had cared about were simple things—the glory of the sunshine, the freshness of the air, the birdsong and the furls of new green buds on the trees; riches for the eyes, as she called nature or art or anything that she liked to look at. He had been unable to prevent his fingers from curling in hers. And she had smiled and not given a damn about who was watching them.

The memory made his heart swell.

He felt Miss Pritchard's hand upon his arm stiffen. Mrs Pritchard was still talking, but he could hear the increased arrogance and volume of her tone, that sudden slight edge of superiority and distaste.

And then he saw the reason why. Ahead, rounding the corner was a small party of men and women, out taking the air and being seen at this most fashionable of hours in the park. But not just any men and women. The men were some of the highest in the *ton*. Of the women, Razeby only noticed one. A woman who stood out from the others because she was golden and beautiful and she just seemed to glow with life and with happiness. He could hear the playful banter within the little party, the laughter, the teasing, flirtatious air.

Alice, clad in her plain pale-yellow walking dress and contrasting cream spencer and gloves, was walking by Hawick's side, listening to something the duke was saying to her. Perched at a jaunty angle on her head was a small stylish hat he had not seen her wear before. Beneath it her fair hair, so haphazardly pinned up, had allowed pale golden strands to escape and waft artlessly around her neck. It was fresh and simple. He had watched her so many times twist her hair up and pin it all within a minute, only to have him unpin it and slip his fingers through those long silken skeins and take her into his arms and kiss her.

She looked comfortable, confident and yet with that same slight shyness that had always intrigued him. Her eyes were lowered as she listened to something that Hawick was saying, but she was smiling. The sight of her made Razeby feel things he did not want to feel. Not now that it was over and he had set his mind to doing what must be done. There was the hard thud of his heart. The fast rush of his blood.

And the awful sinking sensation of his predicament.

Miss Pritchard was by his side, her mother and sister walking behind. Razeby realised what he was going to have to do. What any gentleman in his position would have to do. And the prospect of it sent a chill all the way through him.

Alice had been his mistress. The woman walking by his side could be his wife.

Duty. The word seemed to resonate with every beat of his heart.

Du-ty.

Du-ty.

Du-ty.

He had no choice.

He turned his eyes away from Alice. Kept his focus steadfastly elsewhere. Cutting her, as the rules of polite society dictated. As if she were some stranger. As if she were not the woman he had loved every night of the past six months.

But he could see her in his peripheral vision, that blur of yellow and cream and blonde, slight beside the tall loom of Hawick's darkness. And he could hear the rustle of the silk of her skirts, hear the distinctive lilt of her softly spoken words, smell the faint scent of her perfume.

His heart beat faster.

He could sense her, feel her, the awareness as sharp as if his eyes were studying her every detail.

He measured every step that brought them ever closer on this path, knowing that they must pass one another, that it was far too late for retreat. Neither of them could turn away from this.

He knew that Alice's attention was all fixed on Hawick. As if she had not even noticed Razeby. As if she were cutting him every bit as much as he were cutting her. And he should be glad of it. Truly he should. But it was not gladness that he felt as the little group strolled towards him and his party through the sunshine.

Every step brought her nearer.

Five feet... She was so close now that he could hear the soft breathiness of her laughter at Hawick's joke.

Four feet... Everything sharpened. Everything focused. The hushed ripple of grass blades in the breeze. The sweep of her eyelashes, soft as a butterfly's wing.

Three feet... The sound of his breath. *Alice.*

Two feet. The beat of his heart... and of hers. *Alice.*

One foot... Razeby turned his gaze to Alice. And in that very last moment, that second in which all of time seemed to slow and stop, she raised her eyes to meet his.

The jolt hit his stomach and rippled right through his body. It was as if they were the only two people in the park. As if all of the past six months flashed between them in stark vivid clarity. As if the dark blue depths of her eyes swallowed him up and submersed the whole of him in this moment and this woman and all that was beating through him.

Their gazes locked and held. And he could not look away, not if all of the future depended on it, which in a way it did.

And then the moment was past.

She was past.

Walking on with Hawick and the others. Walking away from him.

His steps never faltered. He kept on walking. As if nothing had just happened.

No one else noticed. Everything else went on just the same. Miss Pritchard's fingers still lay upon his arm. Mrs Pritchard was still selling the family pedigree behind him, her younger daughter chipping in smart little comments here and there.

But Razeby was not the same.

Something had just happened and the force of it shook him more than he wanted to admit. Something had just happened, something which Razeby did not understand.

Alice did not hear what it was that Hawick had been saying to her, all she could hear was the rush of her own blood too loud in her ears and all she could feel was the tremor that vibrated through her body. She deliberately kept her gaze low as if playing coy with Hawick, when in truth, it was to hide the storm of emotion suddenly raging within her.

She had seen Razeby and his party, the rich, beautiful young woman clinging so possessively to his arm, and the women who could only be her mother and sister walking so proudly behind, the minute she had rounded the corner. And she had prepared herself. Knowing that he had no choice but to cut her. Knowing she had no choice but to not give a damn. To cut him right back.

And she had almost done it. Would have done it, despite the pound and throb of her heart, and the raw rush of air that rasped in her lungs, and the tight knot that worked itself ever tighter in

her stomach, except for that last moment, when it felt like his voice had whispered her name, calling her. The sound of it stroking right down her spine. Tingling against her skin. And she had answered without pausing to think. Yielded to it instinctively.

And when she looked, those liquid brown eyes had been on hers, not looking away, not cutting her, only holding her as intensely as they ever had done, perhaps even more so. As if all that had gone between them had not ended, but grown only stronger. Her heart was still beating nineteen to the dozen.

By her side Hawick shifted infinitesimally closer.

‘So you will come, Miss Sweetly?’ he was saying.

She calmed herself, hid the shock of what had just passed between her and Razeby. By the time she raised her eyes to meet Hawick’s she had herself under control again.

She smiled at him, although she had not the slightest idea of what he had just invited her to. ‘If I’m free,’ she said. ‘I’ll need to check my diary.’ Truly the consummate professional. Venetia, her teacher, would have been proud of her.

Hawick smiled, too, with a particular interest in his eyes that made her want to shiver in the warmth of the spring sunshine. She hid the urge, along with all the others.

The party walked on through the park.

Hawick began another story, but Alice was not listening to Hawick or his story. She was thinking of Razeby and why, despite everything, it felt just like it had done when she had seen him for the very first time.

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