



Margaret McPhee



UNMASKING THE
DUKE'S MISTRESS



Mills & Boon Historical

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«HarperCollins»

McPhee M.

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THE MYSTERIOUS MISS NOIR... With trembling hands Arabella dons the mask of Miss Noir for her first night at Mrs Silver's House of Pleasures. Thinking of her young son, she prepares to smile prettily at the next gentleman who enters... Dominic Furneaux, Duke of Arlesford, is stunned to see that the woman who shattered his heart has fallen so low. He offers her a way out – by making her his mistress! The temptation to reacquaint herself with Dominic's body is hard to resist, but Dominic needs only to look into the Furneaux-blue eyes of her son to uncover Arabella's deepest secret...Gentlemen of Disrepute Rebellious rule-breakers, ready to wed!

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Arabella felt the wave of panic go through her. Her stomach revolted and she felt physically sick at the prospect of what she was about to do with one of these men—and for money. For one moment the desire to flee was overwhelming. She wanted so much just to run away. But then she remembered why she had to do this. And the memory resolved every trembling nerve in Arabella's body and lent her the strength that she needed. She stilled, took a deep breath, and raised her eyes to face the men.

It felt to Arabella as if she had just stepped off the edge of a cliff. The breath froze in her throat and she gripped tight to the back of the sofa, oblivious to the fact that her fingernails were digging into the expensive ivory material.

It cannot be. The thought was loud in her mind.

'It cannot be.' The words were barely a whisper upon her lips.

She stared all the harder, sure that she must be mistaken. But there was no mistake. She would have known the tall dark-haired man anywhere, even though she had not seen him in almost six long years.

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 FORBIDDEN MISS

UNLACING THE INNOCENT MISS

(part of *Regency Silk & Scandal* mini-series)

***Gentlemen of Disrepute* continues next month with Hunter's story in**

A DARK AND BROODING GENTLEMAN

Available October 2011

AUTHOR NOTE

This story was not the one I planned to write.

Indeed, I was writing a different tale altogether when Arabella popped into my head. And once she was there she wouldn't give me peace until I had written her story. So here it is, a little more spicy than my usual, but you can blame that on Arabella.

I really do hope that you enjoy reading about Arabella and how she comes to find her 'happy ever after' with Dominic.

For Patricia—

I hope that it's not too saucy for you!

Unmasking

The Duke's Mistress

Margaret McPhee



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Chapter One

April 1809

Within the large and tastefully decorated drawing room of Mrs Silver's House of Rainbow Pleasures in the St James's district of London, Arabella Marlbrook paced and tried to ignore the feeling of dread that coiled deep in the pit of her stomach.

The black silk dress she was wearing had been made for a thinner woman and clung in an indecent fashion to the curves of her hips and breasts and she was all too aware that she was wearing neither petticoats nor stays. Her skin was like ice to touch, yet she could feel the smear of clamminess upon her palms. And she worried that the black feathers of the mask across her eyes did not obscure her identity well enough.

There were five other women artfully arranged around the drawing room, each one in a different colour and all in attires that made Arabella look positively overdressed.

'Do sit down, Arabella,' Miss Rouge said from where she reclined in her scarlet underwear and stockings upon one of the sofas. 'You are making me quite dizzy. You would do better to save your strength for there'll be gentlemen aplenty and eager tonight. And some of what they'll ask for will be demanding, to say the least.' She gave a sly smile and from behind the bright red feathers of her facemask her eyes looked almost black.

'Leave her be, Alice. Think how you felt on your first night. It is only natural that she is nervous,' said pale pink Miss Rose who was leaning against the mantelpiece so that the flicker of the flames illuminated her legs through the pale pink silk as if she were not wearing a skirt at all. Then she looked across at Arabella. 'You'll be fine, girl. Don't you worry.'

Arabella shot Miss Rose a grateful look, before turning to Miss Rouge, 'Please do not address me by my given name. I thought we were supposed to use the names Mrs Silver told us.' Arabella had no wish for the man she must lie with this night—her stomach turned over again at the thought—to know her true identity. It was vital that not the slightest hint of her shame attach itself to those that she loved.

'It's only a name, Miss Noir, keep your skirt in place!' snapped Miss Rouge.

'Leastways till she gets her gent upstairs!' quipped the small blonde in the armchair who was all in blue. She cackled at the joke and all of the other women, except for Arabella, joined in.

Arabella turned away from them so that they would not see the degree of her humiliation, and moved to stand before the bookcase as if she were perusing the titles upon the shelf. Only when her expression was quite composed did she face the room once more.

Alice, Miss Rouge, was buffing her nails. Ellen, Miss Vert, yawned and closed her eyes to nap upon the day bed. Lizzie, Miss Bleu, and Louisa, Miss Jaune, were engaged in a quiet conversation and Tilly, Miss Rose, was reading a romantic novel.

Arabella studied the décor of the room in an attempt to distract her mind from the prospect of what lay ahead. It was a fine room, she noted, perhaps one of the finest she had seen. The floorboards were polished oak, and covered with a large gold-and-blue-and-ivory Turkey carpet. The walls were a pale duck-egg blue that lent the room a peaceful ambience. In the centre of the ornate plasterwork ceiling was a double-layered crystal-drop chandelier and around the room several matching wall sconces sat against large, elegant looking-glasses so that the light of the candle flames was magnified in glittering excellence. The furniture was mainly oak, all of it finely turned, understated and tasteful.

There were five armchairs, two sofas and a daybed, some of which were upholstered in ivory and duck-egg blue stripes, some in plain ivory and others in a pale gold material that seemed to shimmer beneath the candlelight. On a table in the corner of the room was a vase filled with fresh flowers, the blooms all whites and creams and shades of yellow.

It might have been a drawing room in any respectable wealthy house in London. Arabella marvelled at the contrast between the calm elegance of the décor and the crude reality of what went on within these walls ... and was faced once more with the stark truth of what she was here to do.

She dreaded the moment when some gentleman would arrive and buy her 'services.' Indeed, she had to fight every minute not just to walk out the door and keep on walking all the way home. But she knew she could not do that. She knew very well why she was here and the reason she must go through with this.

She closed her eyes and tried to calm the nausea and dread that was prickling a cold sweat upon her forehead and upper lip. A hundred guineas a week, Mrs Silver had promised. A fortune, indeed.

A hundred guineas to sell herself. A hundred guineas to save them all.

Dominic Furneaux, otherwise known as his Grace the Duke of Arlesford, swirled the brandy in his glass while he deliberated over the four cards held in his hand. Then, having made his decision, he drained the contents of the glass in a single gulp and gestured to the banker to deal him another card.

There was an audible intake of air from the smartly dressed men gathered around the Duke's gaming table in White's Gentlemen's Club. The pile of guineas heaped in the centre of the table was high, and most of it had been staked by the Duke himself.

The card was dealt with a flip so that it was placed face up on the green baize before the Duke.

Marcus Henshall, Viscount Stanley, craned his neck to look over the top of the heads of the gentlemen that stood before him.

The Ace of Hearts.

'An omen of love,' someone whispered.

The Duke ignored them. 'Five-card trick. *Vingt-et-un.*' He smiled lazily as if he cared and laid his cards upon the table for all to see.

'Well, I will be damned, but Arlesford has the very luck of the devil!' someone else exclaimed.

There was laughter and murmurs and the scrape of chairs against the polished wood of the floor as his friends threw in their cards and got to their feet.

'What say you all to finding ourselves some entertainment of a different variety for what remains of the night?' Lord Bullford said.

The suggestion was met with raucous approval.

'I know just the place,' Lord Devlin chipped in. 'An establishment in which the wares are quite delicious enough to satisfy the most exacting of men!'

More laughter, and lewd comments.

Dominic watched as Stanley made his excuses and left, rushing home to his wife and baby. He felt a pang of jealousy and of bitterness. There was no woman or child awaiting Dominic. Indeed, there was nothing in Arlesford House that he wanted, save perhaps the cellar of brandy. But that was the way he wanted it. Women were such faithless creatures.

'Come on, Arlesford,' drawled Sebastian Hunter, only son and heir to a vast fortune. 'We cannot have you celebrating all alone.'

'When have I ever celebrated alone?' Dominic asked with a nonchalant shrug.

'True, old man,' said Bullford, 'But I will warrant the pleasures to be had in the house of paradise to which Devlin will take us will beat that offered by whichever little ladybird you have waiting for you in your bed.'

Dominic's smile was hollow. He had his share of women; indeed, he supposed that he truly did merit the title of rake that London bestowed upon him. But there was no ladybird waiting in his bed; there never had been. Dominic did not bring women home. He visited the beds of those women who understood the game and walked away afterwards. He gave them money and expensive gifts, but never anything of himself, nothing that mattered, nothing that could be hurt. And he was always discreet.

He had no notion to visit the establishment of which Devlin spoke. He glanced around the table, taking in how loud and bawdy and reckless was the mood of his friends. Too foxed and excited to

exercise any morsel of discretion, young Northcote more so than the others. As if to prove his point Northcote accepted the bottle of wine that Fallingham offered and drank from its neck, so that some of the ruby-red liquid spilled down his chin to stain the boy's cravat and shirt.

'Arlesford is on his best behaviour. Wants to impress Misbourne and his daughter. Nice little heiress and even nicer big dowry!' shouted young Northcote.

The party hooted and cheered.

'Since you obviously appreciate her merits, Northcote, you may have her. I have no intention of being caught in parson's mousetrap, as well you know.'

Fallingham sniggered. 'Old Misbourne doesn't think so. There is a hundred-guinea stake in the betting book in here that the Duke of A. will be affianced to a certain Miss W. before the Season is over.'

Dominic felt his blood run cold. 'A fool and his money are soon parted. Someone is about to be a hundred guineas lighter in the pocket.'

'*Au contraire*,' said Bullford. 'Misbourne was overheard discussing it in this very club. He is very determined to have you marry his daughter. Thinks it is some sort of matter of honour.'

'Then Misbourne has misunderstood both honour and me.' Dominic did not miss the meaningful glance Hunter threw him at Bullford's words. Unlike the others, Hunter knew the truth. He knew what Dominic had come home to find in Amersham almost six years ago, and he understood why Dominic had no wish to marry.

Devlin's eyes flicked to the doorway. 'Speak of the devil! Misbourne and his cronies have just come in, no doubt hoping to engage the prospective son-in-law in a game of cards,' he said with a chuckle.

'Time indeed that we departed for Devlin's house of pleasures,' murmured Hunter.

'And give young Northcote the education that he deserves,' Devlin laughed.

'With the amount Northcote has had to drink I doubt he'll be up for that manner of education,' said Dominic.

'That's monstrous unfair, Arlesford! I'll have you know that my chap is more than capable of standing proud. Indeed, he's stirring even at the thought of it.'

'Prove it,' sniggered Fallingham.

Northcote got to his feet and moved a hand to unfasten the fall on his pantaloons.

'Don't be such a bloody idiot,' snapped Dominic. To which Northcote belched and sat down again.

'You see you'll have to come, Arlesford. Who else is going to stop Northcote making a complete cake of himself?' said Hunter.

'Who indeed?' Dominic arched a brow, but the sarcasm was lost on Hunter.

Northcote was out of his depth in such company, and dangerously so. Dominic knew he could not just abandon the youngster. He supposed he could endure an evening of flirtation in an upmarket bordello for Northcote's sake.

Dominic followed his friends towards the doorway and walked past Misbourne with only the briefest of nods in the man's direction. As he had told his friends, he had no intention of entering the marriage mart.

Dominic Furneaux had learned his lesson regarding women very well indeed. And so he turned his thoughts away from the past to the rest of the evening that lay ahead.

Mrs Silver gave the women only a few minutes' warning before showing the group of four gentlemen into the room.

Arabella felt the wave of panic go through her. Her stomach revolted and she felt physically sick at the prospect of what she was about to do with one of these men and for money. For one moment the desire to flee was overwhelming. She wanted so much just to run away. But then she remembered

why she had to do this. And the memory resolved every trembling nerve in Arabella's body and lent her the strength that she needed. She stilled, took a deep breath and raised her eyes to face the men.

They were all young, not much older than her own four-and-twenty years; all used expensive tailors if their tight-fitting dark coats and pantaloons were anything to go by. Ruddy cheeked and bright eyed, and most definitely the worse for drink, especially the youngest-looking man of the group. She could smell the wine and brandy from where she stood at the farthest side of the room behind the striped sofa, as if the distance and the barrier of the furniture could save her from what lay ahead.

Her eyes began to move over them and she wondered which man would choose her. And the worry struck her that perhaps none of them would and then what would she do? Much as she loathed being here in this awful position, the thought of returning home empty-handed was even worse.

The men looked eager, salivating almost, so that she could not suppress the shudder that rippled through her. She turned her glance to the two taller gentlemen who were only just entering the room to join their friends . . . and her stomach sank right down to her toes.

It felt to Arabella as if she had just stepped off the edge of a cliff. The breath froze in her throat, her blood turned to ice and her heart hammered so hard and fast that she thought she might faint. She gripped tight to the back of the sofa, oblivious to the fact that her fingernails were digging into the expensive ivory material.

It cannot be. The thought was loud in her mind.

'It cannot be.' The words were barely a whisper upon her lips.

She stared all the harder, sure that she must be mistaken. But there was no mistake. She would have known the tall dark-haired man anywhere, even though she had not seen him in almost six long years.

He had not changed so very much. His shoulders were broader, his body carried more muscle and there were a few more lines of life etched upon his handsome face, but there could be no doubting that the man was most definitely Dominic Furneaux, or the Duke of Arlesford, as he was now.

His expression was one of boredom as he surveyed the room and its inhabitants. He looked as if he had no interest in being here in Mrs Silver's drawing room. His glance passed over her and then shot back to her face.

Please God, do not let Dominic, of all people, recognise her!

Her fingers touched the black feathered mask, checking that it was properly in place, but still he stared at her as if he could see right through it to the face of the woman beneath. His bored expression had vanished to be replaced by one of intense scrutiny.

The pop of the first champagne cork made her jump, but it was not the noise that set the tremor racing throughout her body. She averted her gaze and noticed that Mrs Silver was smiling meaningfully in her direction. Arabella saw the older woman gesture towards the glasses and suddenly remembered that she was supposed to be offering champagne to the gentlemen.

Miss Rouge had already dispensed with the first bottle and one of the men uncorked the second and began to pour. Arabella's hands trembled so much that she feared she would be unable to disguise it, but she knew she could not just stand there staring at Dominic. Perhaps if she busied herself he would stop looking at her with that too-seeing gaze.

She crossed the room towards Mrs Silver and collected two crystal-cut glasses of champagne as she had been told. And all the while her mind was reeling from the impact of seeing Dominic after all this time. She felt panicked, agitated, unable to think straight. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to marshal her thoughts, struggling to control the shock that was roaring through her veins.

Of all the places to see him again, when she had learned to live with the weight of that which had almost crushed her. Maybe he would fix his attention on one of the other girls. Maybe. But would it be any easier to stand here and watch him take Miss Rouge or Miss Vert or any one of the other women upstairs? Could she feign a smile, pretend a flirtation and go willingly with another man, knowing that he was here? She shook her head in an infinitesimal movement of denial. This night

had promised to be the most difficult and degrading of Arabella's life. Dominic's presence made it nigh on impossible.

A hand touched against her sleeve and she opened her eyes to find Mrs Silver looking at her with both warning and concern.

'One hundred guineas a week,' she mouthed almost silently. 'Think of the money.'

Arabella gave a tiny nod at the reminder and reined in her emotions with a will of iron. A deep breath ... and then she turned around.

Dominic was standing right before her.

'Miss Noir, I presume.' His gaze swept slowly over the transparent dress before coming back to rest upon her face. 'Arlesford, at your service, ma'am.'

So he did not know her after all. *Thank God!* She breathed a silent sigh of relief at that small mercy and steeled her nerves to play the role of a woman she was not.

'Your Grace.' She forced the words to her lips and curtsied, but she could not bring herself to smile. Every bone in her body felt chilled to the marrow, every inch of her skin cold and bloodless. This was the meeting, albeit not under such circumstances, she had prayed so hard first for and then against. All her beliefs that she was over him, that she no longer cared, had been a delusion. She cared so much that it was as if the air had been knocked clean from her lungs.

They stared at one another and for Arabella it was as if the years had rolled back and she was looking at the man she would never manage to forget no matter how hard she tried. She averted her gaze, lest he see even a grain of her riotous emotions in her eyes, and glanced around the room.

The other women were smiling and conversing in coquettish teasing tones, each paired with a single gentleman. From the corner of the room Mrs Silver was looking at Arabella with a look of exasperation. The older woman gestured with her eyes from Dominic to the two glasses of champagne, that Arabella was still gripping for dear life, and back again.

There was no way out, no room for retreat. Arabella held her head high and forced her gaze back to Dominic. 'Would you care for some champagne?'

He ignored her question and studied her with those dark brown eyes that were so disturbingly familiar. The seconds seemed to stretch to minutes as they stared at one another, the champagne seemingly forgotten. But then his eyes darkened and he accepted the glass from her hand.

'I should ...' She glanced round for another gentleman to whom she might pass the second glass but all of the men were already drinking and their attentions most definitely engaged in so obvious a manner that made Arabella feel as embarrassed as if she had been an innocent.

'It is for you, I believe,' Dominic said. He paused and the dark gaze held hers once more before adding, 'Perhaps we can drink our champagne together ... upstairs?'

Arabella's heart stumbled and missed a beat before galloping off at full tilt. The breath caught in her throat. The whole world seemed to turn upside down.

She knew what his suggestion meant.

Dominic had chosen her.

Her whole body trembled at the knowledge and she did not know whether it was the worst thing that could have happened or the best. Nearly six years, and yet it was as if her lips still burned from his kisses, her body still tingled from his love-making. To give herself to him again, and for money, flayed her pride more than anything.

Her hand itched to dash the contents of her glass in his face, to shout at him, to refuse him in the cruellest of terms. A vision of him standing there, his face and hair soaked from her champagne, his pride slurred before his friends swam in her mind, and that imagining was the one glimmer of light in the grim darkness of what was happening. But Arabella did not indulge her fantasy; she could not afford to. Even through the force of all that raged within her, she did not forget the stark truth of why she was here at Mrs Silver's House of Rainbow Pleasures. She had her responsibilities.

And she was honest and practical enough to admit to herself that, if she must couple with a gentleman this night it was better that it was Dominic rather than some stranger.

She glanced again at the other men in the room, at their faces glistening with sweat and flushed from drink and the greedy lust and excitement in their eyes. No matter how much she was loathe to admit it, the knowledge that it would be Dominic, and not one of them, was something of a relief, albeit a bitter one.

And if she kept the mask in place he would never know the identity of the woman for whom he was paying. And that at least would make it tolerable.

Arabella swallowed her pride. Her eyes met his. She nodded and turned to lead the way to the room Mrs Silver had shown her.

Within the black-clad bedchamber Dominic could not take his gaze from Miss Noir. He knew that he was staring and still he could not stop. His intention of watching over Northcote had been forgotten the moment he had set eyes on her downstairs in Mrs Silver's drawing room. God help him, but he could no more have turned away from her than stop breathing. It was as if the years had not passed and it was another woman standing before him.

'Is something wrong?' she asked.

Hell's teeth, he thought, but she even sounded like her.

Miss Noir's fingers fluttered nervously around the edges of her mask.

'Forgive my manners, but your appearance stirs memories from my past. You have the very likeness of someone I once knew.' It was the reason he was standing here with her now in the bordello's bedchamber and the very same reason why he should have turned his back and walked away. The pain had returned, and the bitterness, but when he looked at this woman he wanted her with what could only be described as desperation.

He wanted her because she looked like Arabella Tatton.

She did not smile or simper or offer playful seductive words. She did not unlace her bodice or stand before the fire to reveal the outline of her legs or lie upon the daybed with her skirts arranged to show her stockings. Rather her expression was serious, and her manner, for all she tried to hide it, was one of unease. She just stood there and watched him, all calm stillness, yet the white-knuckled clasp of her hands gripping together betrayed that she was not as calm as she was pretending. And beside her on the small occasional table, amidst the coil of dark silken ropes and the feathers and fans, the bubbles sparkled and fizzed within her untouched glass of champagne.

He drained the contents of his own glass in an effort to dampen the strength of emotion the woman's startling resemblance stirred.

'You seem a little nervous this evening, Miss Noir.'

'It is my first night here. Forgive me if I am unfamiliar with the usual etiquette. I ...' She hesitated and seemed to have to force the remainder of the sentence, 'I wish only to please you.' Her head was held high and the glint in her eyes belied the subservience of the words. She raised her chin a notch and everything of her stance was as defiant and tense as if she were facing a combatant rather than a man whom she was trying to seduce. 'Do you wish me to undress now?'

He rose, setting his empty glass down next to her full one.

She looked so like Arabella that he felt like he had been kicked in the gut. His blood was rushing too hot, too fiercely. And no matter how hard he tried to suppress them, the memories were as strong and vivid as if all that had happened between them had been only yesterday.

The depth of his desire shocked him for he would have thought his anger at her to have long since tempered that. Yet his body was already hard and throbbing with impatience ... as if it really were Arabella standing there. And because she looked so like Arabella, Dominic knew that he would not reject what she offered. He gave not another thought to Northcote and stripped off his tailcoat.

'There is more pleasure for us both if I undress you,' he said, never taking his eyes from hers. Her lashes swept low, not in a teasing manner, but as if she sought to hide something of herself from his scrutiny. He resolved to stop staring. But he could not.

'As you wish.' She walked to stand before him, and the dress she was wearing seemed to accentuate rather than hide the curves of her figure. In this, at least, she differed from Arabella, for although Arabella had been quite as tall as this woman, she had been more slimly built.

Arabella. Her very name seemed to whisper through the silence of the room. And the images were flashing through his mind, of Arabella lying beneath him, of her laughter and her smile; of him burying his face in the golden silk of her hair spread across his pillow, and his mouth whispering words of love upon hers while his hands stroked a caress over the naked satin of her skin.

And for all the anger in his heart, Dominic's body grew harder. With an effort he reined himself back under some measure of control. Arabella Tatton. He despised her. He should walk away from this woman, she, whose resemblance to Arabella had unleashed all that he had hidden away in the dark recesses of his mind. The logical part of his mind knew that with absolute certainty. Yet Dominic did not leave.

Instead, he reached over and untied the laces of her dress, loosening them until the bodice gaped wide to reveal the lush perfect breasts beneath. They nosed at the fabric, the nipples a rosy pink beside the pale perfection of her skin. And when his fingers brushed against them he felt the nipples harden and peak.

He leaned down and touched his lips against the soft skin of first one cheek and then the other, and when he looked through the holes cut within the feathered mask he saw her pupils widen, black as ebony, within eyes that were the same colour as Arabella's, the true clear blue of a sunlit summer sky.

Arabella. The pain was in equal measure to the depth of his desire.

His mouth traced down the slender column of her throat, to kiss each hollow of her collarbone as he eased the dress halfway down her arms. The laces were undone enough to expose her breasts in full and he moved his mouth over them so close yet without touching. Her nipples beaded harder as he caressed them with his breath. Slowly, teasingly he touched his tongue to her.

She closed her eyes and tried unsuccessfully to catch back the rush of breath that escaped her. Beneath his lips he felt the shiver pass right through her.

Very gently, very slowly he laved her, sucked her, measured the weight of each delicious breast within his hands. He could feel the fast hard beat of her heart and, more surprisingly, the slight tremor within her body.

And when he drew back her cheeks were faintly flushed and behind the mask her eyes were open again, and just for a moment he saw that they glittered with desire before she hid them once more from his view. She slid the rest of her dress from her arms and unfastened the buttons by her waist so that the skirts slithered down her legs to pool upon the floor. She stepped out of the pile of silk, naked save for her high-heeled shoes and stockings, and the mask upon her face.

Miss Noir did not posture to encourage him, not that she needed to. She just stood there, proud and watchful.

Arabella, he wanted to whisper, and even though the name had never left his memory for all of these years past, having this woman who bore so much of her resemblance had slashed the bindings on all of those old wounds. And yet he wanted her more than ever. He wanted her as if she were Arabella herself.

Dominic shrugged off his waistcoat, unfastened his cravat and peeled off his shirt. He saw Miss Noir's gaze move over his chest and down to take in the bulge of his manhood straining in his pantaloons. And when her eyes met his again there was the strangest expression in them, one that he could not quite fathom.

He closed the distance between them and, pulling her into his arms, kissed her as thoroughly as he had wanted to from the moment he had laid eyes on her. She was rigid at first, but then she

succumbed to his kisses and melted against him, and it was just like having the real Arabella in his arms. He did not even have to close his eyes to pretend it was her.

He kissed her as if she were the woman that he had loved. He kissed her with all the anguish that was in his soul ... and in the answer of her lips he was shocked to feel an echo of how it had been between Arabella and himself. He stilled and eased back that he might look into her eyes but, just as quickly, Miss Noir turned away and bent to unfasten the garters of her stockings.

Dominic stayed her. 'Leave them,' he murmured. 'I want to look at you.'

She misunderstood and took a few steps away, opening up a small distance between them so that he might view her. He could not ignore the invitation, swallowing hard as his gaze swept over the long white legs that rose out of her dark stockings, over the smooth curve of her hips and the small triangle of fair hair that sat between her legs, and the soft feminine belly.

She blushed beneath his scrutiny, as if she were not a well-practised courtesan that rode different men every night of the week, as if she really were his Arabella. His manhood strained all the harder against the fine wool of his pantaloons.

She made no move to unfasten the mask from her face, nor did he ask her to do so, for he had no wish to shatter the illusion that had him standing here in the first place.

He stripped off his clothing and then took her in his arms once more.

Arabella, he mouthed silently against her throat as she wound her arms around his neck.

Arabella, as he carried her to the bed and laid her down. The contrast of her pale naked skin against the black silken sheets seemed to emphasise her similarity to Arabella all the more. He wanted her so much he was aching for her, so much that he could think of nothing else. His body covered hers, one hand thrumming at her nipple as he positioned himself between her legs.

She was open to him, moist and ready, and he was rock hard as he stroked against her. Everything of her—the scent, the taste, the feel—was so like Arabella that as he slid into her silken heat in his mind it was Arabella he was entering. And when he rode her it was Arabella he was riding until both their breaths were ragged and their bodies were slick with sweat. He rode her until he found the relief of his climax, pulling out of her just before he spilled his seed.

Such exquisite torture.

But the minute that his body was spent he rolled off her, already regretting his decision to come upstairs with her.

She was not Arabella, and all that he had done was tear asunder ill-healed wounds of the past. He felt as empty and alone and unhappy as ever he had been and longed to be gone from this place. Throwing the covers back, he climbed from the bed.

'Thank you,' he said awkwardly, but could not bring himself to use the woman's name. He walked away, found his shirt and pantaloons and pulled them on.

A faint breathy noise sounded from the bed, a noise that sounded suspiciously like a silenced sob.

Dominic looked back at the bed and the woman who lay there so still and unmoving. And as his gaze found hers, she turned quickly away, rolling on to her side to present him with her back, as if she sought to block him out.

His eyes traced the golden tendrils that had escaped from the pile of curls pinned upon her head, over her pale shoulders and down the straight line of her back. Her waist was narrow before the flair of her hips and her perfect bottom.

His fingers froze in the act of fastening the buttons of his pantaloons. His blood turned to ice. He could not move, could not so much as take a breath. He stared at the fullness of her rounded buttocks, stared at the soft white skin ... and the distinctive dark mole upon her right cheek that he remembered so well.

The shock was as explosive as if someone had taken a pistol and shot him at point-blank range. Everything else in the world seemed to diminish. Dominic gaped with utter incredulity, staring at a truth so blatant that he marvelled he had not realised right from the very start.

‘Arabella?’ His whisper was barely more than a breath, yet it seemed to resonate within the room as loudly as if he had roared it at the top of his voice.

Every line of her body stiffened and tensed, the reaction confirming the suspicion his mind had been too slow to form. He saw the small shiver that rippled through her before she pulled the top cover free and then, holding it against her body to cover her nakedness, climbed from the bed. Only then did she turn to face him.

They stared at one another across the rumpled mess of sheets, and the very air seemed to vibrate with a barely contained tension.

Even now his mind could not accept the enormity of the discovery. Even now he thought she would deny it. But in her silence and stillness there was nothing of denial.

Dominic reached her in an instant. With one hand he pulled her to him, barely noticing that he had displaced the bedcover from her in the process. He was too busy untying the ribbons of her face mask, too busy tearing it from her. Even as she gasped, the black-feathered object tumbled to lie at their feet. And he stared down with horror into the shocked white face of Arabella Tatton, or Arabella Marlbrook as she was now.

Chapter Two

Arabella's naked body was hard against the length of Dominic's, their hips so snug that she could feel the press of his manhood. For a moment the shock of him discovering her was so great that she could do nothing other than stare right back into the eyes of the man she had loved. But then she recovered something of her wits and struggled to free herself.

'Arabella!' He tried to still her.

She hit out at him and tried to escape. But Dominic caught her flailing arms and hauled her back to him, securing her wrists behind her in a grip that was gentle yet unbreakable.

'Arabella.' Quieter this time, but no less dangerous.

'No!' she cried, but Dominic was unyielding. He stared down at her with implacable demand.

'What the hell are you doing here?' His eyes had darkened to a black glower that smouldered within the pallor of his face. And there was about him a simmering, barely contained rage so unlike the man she remembered.

She strove to stay calm, but her breath was as ragged as if she had been running at full pelt and with every breath she took she could feel the swollen tips of her breasts brush against his unfastened shirt.

'At least grant me the honour of allowing me to clothe myself before we have this conversation,' she said with a calmness that belied everything she was feeling.

His gaze dropped to rove over her nakedness with deliberate and provocative measure so that she thought he meant to refuse her but, just as she thought it, she felt his grip loosen and drop away.

She gathered up the black dress from where it lay on the floor and, turning her back to him, quickly garbed herself. She stretched around and tightened the laces of the bodice that she could reach, but had no other option than to leave the remainder loose. The dress gaped from the untied laces, revealing far too much of the pale swell of her bosom. It was the antithesis of respectable clothing, but it was better than facing him naked. She hoisted the neckline of the dress and clutched it in place. Dominic had finished his own dressing and now watched her with eyes burning with a shock that mirrored her own and an unmistakable anger.

'I will ask you again, Arabella,' he said with a quietness that was deadly, 'what are you doing here?'

'The same as any woman does in a place such as this.' She faced him defiantly, and with a determination to hide the shame and wretchedness beneath that façade.

'Whoring.' His voice was harsh.

'Surviving,' she said with as much dignity as she could muster and stared down his contempt.

'And where in damnation is Henry Marlbrook while you are "surviving" in a brothel? What manner of husband is he that you have been reduced to this?' His voice changed, hardened, as he spoke Henry's name and the word 'husband.'

'Do not dare to mention Henry's name.' Arabella would not stand here and hear it.

'Why ever not?' he threw back at her. 'Frightened that I find him and run him through?'

'Damn you, Dominic! He is dead!'

'Then he has saved me the trouble,' he said coldly.

Arabella gasped at Dominic's cruelty and then, before she could think better of it, she slapped him hard across his face. The crack resounded in the room around them and was followed by silence. Even in the soft flickering candlelight she could see the mark her palm had left upon his cheek.

His eyes had been dark before, but now they appeared as black and deadly as the night that surrounded them. But Arabella would not back down.

'You deserved that.' For everything he had done. 'Henry was a good man, a better man by far than you, Dominic Furneaux!'

Henry had been kind.

And Arabella had been grateful.

She saw something flicker in the darkness of Dominic's eyes.

'Just as he was all those years ago,' he said in a chilled voice. 'I have not forgotten, Arabella, not for one single day.'

Neither had she. With those few words all the past was back in an instant. Of the joy of losing her heart to Dominic, of her happiness and expectations for the future, of the lovemaking they had shared. Lies and illusions, all of it. It had meant nothing to him. *She* had meant nothing to him, other than another notch upon his bedpost. At nineteen she had not understood the base side of men and their desires. At four-and-twenty Arabella knew better.

'You wasted no time in wedding him. Less than four months from what I hear.'

She could hear the accusation in his voice, the jealousy, and it fanned the flames of her ire. 'What on earth did you expect?' she shouted.

'I expected you to wait, Arabella!'

'To wait?' She stared at him in disbelief. 'What manner of woman did you think me?' Did he honestly think that she would have welcomed him back with open arms? That she would have given herself to him again after he had discarded her in such a humiliating way? 'I could not wait, Dominic,' she said harshly. 'I was—' Her eyes sought his.

His gaze was dark and angry and arrogant, every inch the hard, ruthless nobleman she knew him to be.

'You were ...?'

She hesitated and felt the pulse in her throat beat a warning tattoo.

'A fool,' she finished. A fool to have believed his lies. A fool to have trusted him. 'You have what you came here for, Dominic. Now be gone and leave me alone.'

'So that you might rush down to Mrs Silver's drawing room to offer a "glass of champagne" to the next gentleman who is doubtless already waiting there.' Contempt dripped from his every word. 'I do not think so.'

How dare he? she thought. *How damnably dare he stand there and judge me after what he has done?* And in that moment she hated him with a passion that was in danger of driving every last vestige of control from her head. She wanted to scream at him and hit him and unleash all of her anger, for all that he had done then, and for all that he had done now. But she hung on to her self-control by the finest of threads.

His eyes held hers for a moment longer and the very air seemed to hiss between them. Then he walked over to stand behind one of the two black armchairs by the fireplace.

'Sit down, Arabella. We need to talk.'

She gave a shake of her head. 'I think not, your Grace,' she said and she was proud that her voice came out as cold and unemotional as his, for beneath it she was shaking like a leaf.

'If it is the money you are concerned over, rest assured that I have paid for the whole night through.' He looked at her with flint in his eyes.

There was a lump the size of a boulder in her throat that no amount of swallowing would shift. She faced him squarely, pretending she was not ravaged with shame, pretending that she was standing there completely untouched by the fury of emotion that roared and clashed between them.

Pretending that she had no secrets to hide.

He gestured to the armchair before him. 'Come, Arabella, sit. After what has just passed between us there is no room for coyness.' His voice was harsh and his face was set harder, more handsome, more resolute than ever she had seen it. And she knew that he would not change his mind.

'Damn you,' she whispered and the scars throbbed as if they had never healed and his reappearance, after all these years when Arabella had thought never to see him again, sparked fears that she was only just beginning to grasp.

Only once Arabella was seated did Dominic take the chair opposite hers.

‘Did you know it was me from the start?’

‘Of course I did not!’ The fury he felt for both her and himself made his voice harsh. It did not matter what she had done, he would never have taken her out of vengeance.

‘Then how did you realise?’

‘How did I not realise sooner?’ he demanded, but the question was not really for her but, rather, for himself. ‘Me, who has known every inch of your body, Arabella.’ *One flimsy black-feathered mask alone had been enough to fool him*, he thought bitterly, and knew that was not quite true. It was the fact that this, a bordello, a bawdy house, a brothel, was the last place on earth he would have ever thought of finding her.

The thought of what she had become shocked him to the core. The thought that he had treated her as such shocked him even more. He had dreamt of finding her, both longed for it and dreaded it. But never in all of his imaginings had it been like this. He raked a hand through his hair, trying to control his feelings.

He glanced across at her. Her face was pale, her expression guarded.

Time had only served to ripen her beauty so that she was now a beautiful woman when once she had been a beautiful girl. There was about her a wariness that had not been there before. Then, she had been innocent and carefree and filled with an irrepressible joy. Now what he saw when he looked at Arabella was a cold, angry, determined stranger he did not recognise. And then he remembered the muffled sob he had heard and the sheen of tears in her eyes ... and something of his own anger died away.

‘You said Marlbrook died.’

She gave a cautious nod. ‘Two years since.’

‘And left you unprovided for?’ He could not keep the accusation from his tone.

‘No!’ The denial shot from her lips in her desperation to defend the bastard she had married. ‘No,’ she said again, this time more calmly. ‘There was money enough left for a careful existence.’ She hesitated as if deliberating how much to tell him.

The questions were crowding upon his lips, angry and demanding, but he spoke none of them, choosing instead to wait with a patience that he did not feel for her explanation.

But Arabella’s explanation was not forthcoming. Her expression closed. Her mouth pressed firm and she glanced away.

The seconds ticked by to become minutes.

‘Then you are here by choice rather than necessity?’ he said eventually and raised an eyebrow.

‘Yes.’ She tipped her chin up and met his gaze unflinchingly, almost taunting him. ‘So now you see the woman I have become, have you not changed your mind about leaving?’

‘I am staying, Arabella,’ he said, his eyes still holding hers with every inch of the determination he felt.

She bowed her head and glanced away, sullen and angry.

‘What does your father make of your chosen profession?’ he demanded. ‘What does your brother?’

‘My father and Tom were taken by the same consumption that claimed Henry.’

‘I am sorry for your loss,’ he said. The news shocked him, for he had known the family well and liked them. ‘And Mrs Tatton? What of her?’

‘My mother was brought low by the disease, but she survived.’

‘Does she know that you are here, Arabella?’

A whisper of guilt moved across her face. ‘She does not.’ She tilted her chin, defiant again. ‘Not that it is any of your concern.’

In the ensuing silence they could hear the faint rhythmic banging of a bedstead against a wall. Neither of them paid it the slightest attention.

His eyes raked hers. There was another question he needed to ask, even though he already knew the answer by the very fact that she was here in Mrs Silver's House of Rainbow Pleasures.

'There is no other man since Marlbrook? No new husband or protector?'

'No,' she said in a tight voice and eyed him with unmistakable disdain. 'But if there were, it would be no business of yours.'

Their eyes held for a moment and a storm of anger seemed to fire and crackle between them before she rose and moved away to stand over by the long black curtains that covered the window.

Arabella could not just sit there and let the questions continue, not when she feared where they might lead. Besides, Dominic had no right to question her. He had forfeited the right to know anything of her life when he had made his decision all those years ago. Let him think the worst of her if it prevented his questions and made him leave. Let him think she was the whore he had just made her. Better that than the alternative.

She could not bear for him to see how much she was hurting. And she could not bear for him to know the truth of her situation, of the desperation that had led her to this place. Better his contempt than his pity, and better still that he left knowing nothing at all.

The chink of night sky, between the edge of the curtain and the wall, was very dark. There were no stars, and the street lamps outside remained black and unlit and everything seemed to be waiting and edged with danger. And when she glanced round at Dominic he was sitting staring into the small flames that flickered amongst the glowing coals, the expression upon his face as dark and brooding as the night outside.

'I cannot believe that I have found you here ... in a damnable brothel!' Dominic was still reeling from the shock of it. All these years he had imagined that one day he might find her. He had imagined a thousand different scenarios, but not one of them had come close to the reality. She was a lightskirt in an upmarket bordello. Miss Noir, in Mrs Silver's rainbow selection for those men who had enough blunt to pay. He felt sick at the thought.

'Then walk away and pretend that you have not,' she said in a low voice, but she did not look round.

In the silence there was only the crack from the remains of the fire upon the hearth.

'You know that I cannot do that, Arabella.' It did not matter how aggrieved he was, she did not deserve life in such a place.

He glanced across at her standing there in the flimsy black silk that revealed more of her figure than it covered, and the nakedness of her back where the laces hung loose and, despite everything, he felt desire.

It disgusted him that he could still want her after her faithlessness with Marlbrook and after all he had already taken from her this night in such despicable circumstances. He was not proud of having treated her like a whore, even if that was what she was. And he swore to himself that, had he known that she was Arabella, he never would have touched her. But it was too late for that. He had done a great deal more than touch her.

'Why not? It is what I want. For you to leave ... and not come back.'

Dominic felt the stab of her words, but he did not retaliate, nor did he take his eyes from the fire. A section of the molten embers cracked and collapsed and in the space where they had been one small flame remained, burning hotter and more brightly than all the other.

'For the sake of what was once between us, Arabella—'

'I do not want your pity, Dominic!' She swung round to face him, standing there with her hands on hips, her face proud and angry. 'And whatever was between us is long dead.'

'Oh, I am more than well aware of that, Arabella.' Her eyes flashed with a fierceness he had never seen there before. Her lips were flushed and swollen from his kisses, and the creamy swell of her breasts rose and fell with the raggedness of her breath. His gaze dropped to where her rosy nipples were beginning to peep over the black silk.

She saw his gaze and, with a fury, wrenched the bodice higher and held it in place.

‘It is a bit late for that, Arabella.’

She might pretend otherwise but, unlike him, Arabella had known with whom she was coupling and Dominic had felt the spark in the response of her lips to his, an echo of what had once been. The love might be dead, but there was still a physical desire that burned strong between them.

His gaze dropped from her back to the fire.

He had not forgiven her, but he could not leave her here.

He could not forgive her, yet he wanted her still.

An idea started to form in his head, one that might finally allow Dominic to purge the demons that drove him.

She was watching him when he got to his feet and moved towards her. He saw the shiver that ran through her body and he found his coat and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Her eyes met his and he saw the surprise and wariness and unspoken question in them.

‘You do not have to do this, Arabella.’

‘I’ve already told you that what I do is none of your concern.’ Her voice was curt and her eyes cold.

‘I could help you.’

‘I do not need your help, your Grace,’ she countered.

‘That may be, but you will hear me out just the same, Arabella.’

She stared at him, her expression closed, yet he could sense her caution and suspicion.

‘It would mean that you would not have to sleep with one different man after another, at the mercy of whatever demands they might make of you. You would not fear to be cast out into the streets. Indeed, you would never want for anything again.’

She frowned slightly and shook her head as if she did not yet understand.

‘I would give you a house, as much money as you need. You would be safe. Protected.’

‘Protected?’ She echoed the word and he saw her eyes widen.

‘We would come to an arrangement that would be mutually beneficial to us both.’

‘You are asking me to be your mistress?’ She gaped at him.

‘If that is what you wish to call it,’ he said.

The silence was tense. From outside the room came the sound of a woman’s giggle and a man’s booted steps receding along the passageway.

He saw the shock so stark and clear upon her face and knew that whatever Arabella had been expecting it had been nothing of this. And just for a minute he thought he saw such a look of sadness in her eyes, of a pain that mirrored the one he had carried in his heart all of these years past, but it was gone so fast that he was not sure if he had imagined it.

‘Arabella,’ he said softly and could not help himself from touching a hand to her arm.

He felt the slight tremor that ran through her body before she snatched her arm away.

‘You think it to be done so very easily?’ she asked. Her tone was cynical and when she raised her face to his again there was the glitter of some strong emotion in her eyes.

‘It can be done easily enough,’ he said carefully. ‘I would pay off Mrs Silver; she would give us no trouble, I assure you.’

He saw her swallow, saw the way she gripped her hands together as if it was such a difficult decision to make.

‘I have come into my father’s title, Arabella. I am a very wealthy man. I would rent you a fine town house, furnish it as you wished. Your every want would be satisfied, your every whim met. I am offering you *carte blanche*, Arabella.’

‘I understand what you are offering me,’ she said and her voice was cool and her expression unmoving.

‘Well?’ he asked. ‘Will you give me your answer?’

'I need time to think,' she said stiffly. 'Time to fully consider your offer.'

'What else can you have to consider?' He smiled a cynical smile. 'Have I not covered it all already?'

Her pause was so slight that he barely noticed. A heartbeat of time in which their eyes met across the divide. And there was something in her gaze that was contrary in every way to the strong cold woman standing before him. A flash of misery and hurt and ... fear. But as quickly as it had arrived, the moment was gone.

'Nevertheless, your Grace, I will not give you an answer until I have had some time to think about it.'

Her sullen resolution irked him, as did her whole attitude of contempt. Any other woman in her position would have been eager for such an offer.

'You may play your games, Arabella, but we both know that whores do as rich men bid, and I am now a very rich man. It is a new day. You have until my return tonight to make your decision. And in the meantime Mrs Silver will be paid so that you are not touched by another. What I have, I hold, Arabella. And what is mine, is mine alone. Be sure you understand that fully.'

Her lips pressed firmer as if she sought to suppress some sharp retort. She slipped his coat from her shoulders and handed it to him.

Dominic donned the rest of his clothing, gave a small bow and left.

And as dawn broke over the city he walked away from Mrs Silver's House of Rainbow Pleasures, leaving behind its black-clad bedchamber with its dark drawn curtains. But his mind was still on the woman that he had left standing there, with the black silk dress clutched to her breasts.

Chapter Three

It was only a few hours later that Arabella made her way up the stairwell of the shabby lodging house in Flower and Dean Street. The early morning spring sunlight was so bright that it filtered through the windows, that the months of winter rain and wind had rendered opaque, and glinted on the newly replaced lock of the door that led from the first landing into her rented room.

The damp chill of the room hit her as soon as she opened the door and stepped over the threshold.

'Mama!' The small dark-haired boy glanced up from where he was sitting next to an elderly woman on the solitary piece of furniture that remained within the room, a mattress in the middle of the floor. He wriggled free of the thin grey woollen blanket that was wrapped around his shoulders and ran to greet her.

'Archie.' She smiled and felt her heart shift at the sight of his face. 'Have you been a good boy for your grandmama?'

'Yes, Mama,' he answered dutifully. But Arabella could see the toll that hunger and poverty had taken in her son's face. Already there were shadows beneath his eyes and a sharpness about his features that had not been there just a few days ago.

She hugged him to her, the weight of guilt heavy upon her.

'I have brought a little bread and cake.' She emptied the contents of her pocket on to the mattress. Everything was stale as she had pilfered it last night from the trays intended for Mrs Silver's drawing room. 'Wages are not paid until the end of the week.'

Arabella split the food into two piles. One pile she sat upon the window ledge to sate their hunger later, and the other she shared between her mother and son.

It broke her heart the way Archie looked at her for permission to eat those few stale slices, his brown eyes filled with a look which no mother should ever have to see in her child.

There was silence while they ate the first slice of bread as if it were a sumptuous feast.

Arabella slipped off her cloak and wrapped it around her mother's hunched shoulders before sitting down beside her on the edge of the mattress.

'You are not eating, Arabella.' Her mother noticed and paused, her hand frozen en route to her mouth, the small chunk of bread still gripped within her fingers.

Arabella shook her head and smiled. 'I have already breakfasted on the way home.' It was a lie. But there was little enough as it was and she could not bear to see them so hungry.

The sun would not reach to shine in here until later in the day and there was no money for coal or logs. The room was cold and bare save for the mattress upon which they were now sitting. Empty, just as they had arrived home to find it four days ago.

'How was the workshop?' Mrs Tatton carefully picked the crumbs from her lap and ate them. 'They were satisfied with your work?'

'I believe so,' Arabella answered and could not bring herself to meet her mother's eyes in case something of the shame showed in them.

'You look too pale, Arabella, and your eyes are as red as if you have been weeping.' She could feel her mother's gaze upon her.

'I am merely tired and my eyes a little strained from stitching by candlelight.' Arabella lied and wondered what her mother would say if she knew the truth of how her daughter had spent the night. 'A few hours rest and I shall be fine.' She glanced up at Mrs Tatton with a reassuring smile.

Mrs Tatton's expression was worried. 'I wish I could do more to help.' She shook her head, and glanced away in misery. 'I know that I am little more than a burden to you.'

'Such foolish talk, Mama. How on earth would I manage without you to care for Archie?'

Her mother nodded and forced a smile, but her eyes were dull and sad. Arabella's gaze did not miss the tremor in the swollen knuckled hands or the wheeze that rasped in the hollow chest as Mrs Tatton reached to stroke a lock of her grandson's hair away from his eye.

Archie, having finished his bread and cake, wandered over to the other side of the room where there was a small wooden pail borrowed from one of the neighbours. He scooped up some water from the pail using the small wooden cup that sat beside it and gulped it down.

Mrs Tatton lowered her voice so that Archie would not hear. 'He cried himself to sleep through hunger last night, Arabella. Poor little mite. It broke my heart to hear him.'

Arabella pressed a fist to her mouth and glanced away so her mother would not see her struggle against breaking down.

'But this new job you have found is a miracle indeed, the answer to all our prayers. Without it, it would be the workhouse for us all.'

Arabella closed her eyes against that thought. They would be better off dead.

Archie brought the cup of water over and offered it to her. Arabella took a few sips and then gave it to her mother.

And when the food was all eaten and the water drunk, Archie and Mrs Tatton lay down beneath the blanket.

'It was noisy last night,' Mrs Tatton said by way of explanation. And Arabella understood, the men's drunken shouts and women's bawdy laughter echoing up from the street outside would have allowed her son and mother little sleep.

Arabella spread her cloak with her mother's shawl on top of the lone blanket and then climbed beneath the covers. Archie's little body snuggled into hers and she kissed that dark tangled tousel of hair and told him that everything would be well.

Soon the only sounds were of sleep: the wheeze of her mother's lungs and Archie's soft shallow rhythmic breathing. Arabella had not slept for one minute last night, not after all that had happened. And she knew that she would not sleep now. Her mind was a whirl of thoughts, all of them centred round Dominic Furneaux.

When she thought of their coupling of last night she felt like weeping, both from anger and from shame, and from a heart that ached from remembering how, when she had given herself to him before, there had been such love between them. And the anger that she felt was not just for him, but for herself.

For even from the first moment that he had come close and she had smelled that familiar scent of him, bergamot and soap and Dominic Furneaux, she had been unable to quell the reaction of her body. And when he had taken her, not out of love, not even knowing who she was, her traitorous lips and body had, in defiance of everything she knew and everything she felt, welcomed him. They had known his mouth, recognised his kiss and the caress of his hand, and responded to him. And the shame of that burned deeper than the knowledge that she had sold herself to him.

She thought of the offer he had made her. To buy her. To be at his beck and call whenever he wished to satisfy himself upon her. Dominic Furneaux, the man who had broken her heart. Lied to her with such skill that she had believed every one of those honeyed untruths. Could she put herself under the power of such a man? To be completely at his mercy? Could she really surrender herself to him, night after night, and hide the shameful response of her body to him, a man who did not love her, a man who believed her a whore for his use?

She clutched her hands to her face as the sense of despair rolled right through her, for she knew the answer to each of those questions and she knew, too, the ugly truth of the alternative.

Arabella relived the moment that the group of gentlemen had entered Mrs Silver's drawing room, and it did not matter how hard she had tried to deaden her feelings, no matter how much she could rationalise the whole plan in her head, when it had come to the point of facing what must happen she had felt an overwhelming panic that she would not be able to go through with it. She closed

her eyes against the nightmare, knowing that there was only one decision she could make. Even if there were certain aspects of the negotiations that she would have to handle very carefully.

And as she lay there she could not help but think how differently things might have turned out if Dominic Furneux had been a different sort of man. If he had loved her, as he had sworn that he did, and married her, as he had promised that he would, how different all their lives would have been.

Dominic arrived at Mrs Silver's early and alone. The drawing room was filled with a woman of every colour of Mrs Silver's rainbow, every colour save for black. He knew with one sweep of the room that Arabella was not there and he felt a whisper of foreboding that perhaps everything was not going to go quite how he had planned.

'Variety is the spice of life, your Grace. Perhaps I could tempt you with another colour from my assortment?' Mrs Silver smiled at him and gestured towards the girls who had arrived looking a little breathless and rushed following his early arrival.

'I find I prefer black,' he said. 'Miss Noir ...' He stopped as the thought struck him that perhaps following his discovery of her Arabella had gone, fled elsewhere, to another part of London, another bordello ... somewhere he could not find her.

'Will be here presently, your Grace, I am sure,' the woman said with supreme confidence but her eyes told a different story.

He had not contemplated that Arabella would choose this wretched life over the wealth and comfort he had offered. That she would actually run away had not even occurred to him. His mouth hardened at his own naïvety. A man was supposed to learn from his mistakes.

'If you are content to wait for a little.' Mrs Silver smiled again and gestured to one of the sofas.

Dominic gave a curt nod of his head, but he did not sit down. He stood where he was and he waited, ignoring the plate of delicacies and the glass of champagne by his side.

Five minutes passed.

And another ten. The women ceased their attempts to engage him in seductive conversation.

What would he do if she did not come?

By twenty minutes he was close to pacing.

By forty minutes there was only Miss Rouge and himself left in the room and a very awkward silence.

At fifty minutes, Miss Rouge was gone and he felt like he had done that day almost six years ago—angry and disbelieving, a fool and his wounded pride.

He had requested his hat, cane and gloves and was about to leave when Arabella finally arrived.

'Miss Noir, your Grace,' announced Mrs Silver, all smiles and solicitude as she brought Arabella into the room and left.

The door closed behind Mrs Silver.

The clock on the mantel punctuated the silence.

Dominic's glass sat beside it, the champagne flat and untouched.

She was wearing the same scandalous dress, the same black feathered mask and beneath it her face was powder white. She came to stand before him and he found he was holding his breath and his body was strung tight with tension.

He swallowed and the sound of it seemed too loud in the silence between them.

He waited, not daring to frame the question, any certainty of what her answer would be long forgotten.

'I accept your offer, your Grace,' she said and her voice was low and dead of any emotion. She seemed so pale, so stiff and cold, that he had the absurd urge to pull her into his arms and warm her and tell her everything would be well. But then she moved away to stand behind the cream-coloured armchair and the moment was gone. 'Let us discuss the details.'

He nodded and, like two strangers arranging a business deal, they began to talk.

When Arabella returned to the little room in Flower and Dean Street later that same night it was to find Mrs Tatton and Archie curled again upon the mattress.

'It is only me,' Arabella whispered in the darkness, but Mrs Tatton was already struggling to her feet, armed with the chamber pot as a makeshift weapon.

'Oh, Arabella, you startled me.'

'Forgive me, Mama.' Arabella made her way across the room by the light of a nearby street lamp that glowed through the little window.

'What are you doing home so early? I had not thought to see you until the morning.' Her mother's hair hung in a heavy long grey braid over one shoulder and she was wearing the same crumpled dress she had worn for the last five days. Then her eyes widened with fear. 'The workshop have turned you off!'

'There has been a change of plan, it is true,' Arabella said and quickly added, 'But you need have no worry. It is for the better.'

'What do you mean, Arabella? What change?'

'It is an arrangement that will ensure we do not end up in the workhouse.' She glanced towards the sleeping form of her son. 'We will live in a warm furnished house in a good respectable area, wear clean clothes and have three square meals a day. I will have enough money that Archie need not go without. And you, Mama, can have the best of medicines in London. We will not be cold. We will not be hungry. And ...' She glanced towards the footsteps that passed on the landing outside. She lowered her voice, 'We will be safe from robberies and fear of assault.'

Her mother set the chamber pot down on the floor and came to stand before Arabella, staring into her face.

'What manner of arrangement?'

Arabella felt herself blush and had to force herself to meet her mother's gaze. She had known this moment would come and could not shrink from it. Better they spoke of it while Archie was not awake to hear. They would be moving out of here in a few days and there was no way that Arabella could continue her pretence. She had to tell her mother the truth ... just not all of it.

'With a gentleman.'

'Oh, Arabella!' Her mother clasped a hand to her mouth. 'You cannot!'

'I know it is a very great shock to you,' she said in a calm reassuring voice that belied everything she was feeling. 'And I am not proud of it.' She was ashamed to the very core of her being, but she knew in order to make this bearable she must hide her true emotions from her mother. She must stand firm. Be strong. 'But believe me when I tell you it is the best of the choices available. Do not seek to dissuade me from this, Mama, for my mind is quite made up.'

'There was no workshop, was there?' her mother asked in a deadened voice.

'No.' She saw the tremble in the old swollen hand that Mrs Tatton still clutched to her mouth and felt as bad as if she had just reached across and dealt her mother a physical blow.

'And the gentleman?'

Arabella swallowed and averted her gaze. 'It is best that he remains nameless for now.' If her mother knew it was Dominic to whom she was selling herself there would be no force in heaven or on earth that could stop the awful cascade that would ensue.

'Really?' Mrs Tatton said in a hard voice that revealed to Arabella everything of her mother's disillusionment and hurt. 'And have you told him yet of Archie and of me?'

'No,' said Arabella quietly and her heart was racing and all of her fears rushed back as fast and frantic as a spring tide racing up a shore. 'He need know nothing of either of you.'

'It will be his house, Arabella. Do you not think he will notice an old woman and a child cluttering his path to his fancy piece?' Mrs Tatton's nostrils flared, revealing the extent of her distress.

Oh, indeed, Dominic would more than notice Archie in his path, Arabella thought grimly.

'It will be a large house and he will not visit very often.' She had been very careful in her negotiations with Dominic, forcing herself to think only of Archie's safety and not the baseness of what she was doing, laying out her demands like the most callous of harlots. 'All we need do is keep you both hidden from his sight when he does come.' Words so simply spoken for her mother's sake, but Arabella knew that they would have to be very careful indeed to hide the truth.

'You think you are so clever, Arabella. You think you have it all planned out, do you not?' Mrs Tatton said. 'But what of the servants? It is the gentleman's money that will pay their wages. They will be loyal to him. At the first opportunity they will be running to him behind your back, eager to spill your secrets. And he shall send Archie and me away.'

'Do you think I would stay without you?' she demanded. 'It is true that it is his money that will pay the servants. But it is also true that if I dissolve our agreement, which I would most certainly do were they to tell him of your and Archie's presence, then they shall be out of a job as much as me. I shall put it to them that it is in their interest, as much as mine, that we keep your presence secret from the gentleman.'

'For men like him there are plenty more where you came from. Do not hold yourself so precious to him, Arabella,' her mother warned.

The smile that slipped across Arabella's face was bitter. 'Oh, Mama, I know that I am not precious to him at all. Do not think that I would ever make that mistake.' The word *again* went unspoken. 'But he will take the house and the servants for me. And were I to leave, he would let them go again just as easily.'

'Then we best pray that you are right, Archie and I.' Mrs Tatton turned her face away but not before Arabella saw the shimmer of wetness upon her cheeks.

Mrs Tatton did not look round again, nor did she return to bed. She just stood there by the empty black fireplace, staring down on to the bare hearth. And when Arabella would have placed an arm of comfort around her mother's shoulders, Mrs Tatton pulled away as if she could not bear the touch of so fallen a woman.

Arabella's hand dropped back down to her side; inside of her the shame ate away a little more of her soul. She wondered what her mother's reaction would be if she knew what the alternative had been. And she wondered how much worse her mother's reaction would be if she ever learned that the man in question was Dominic Furneaux.

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