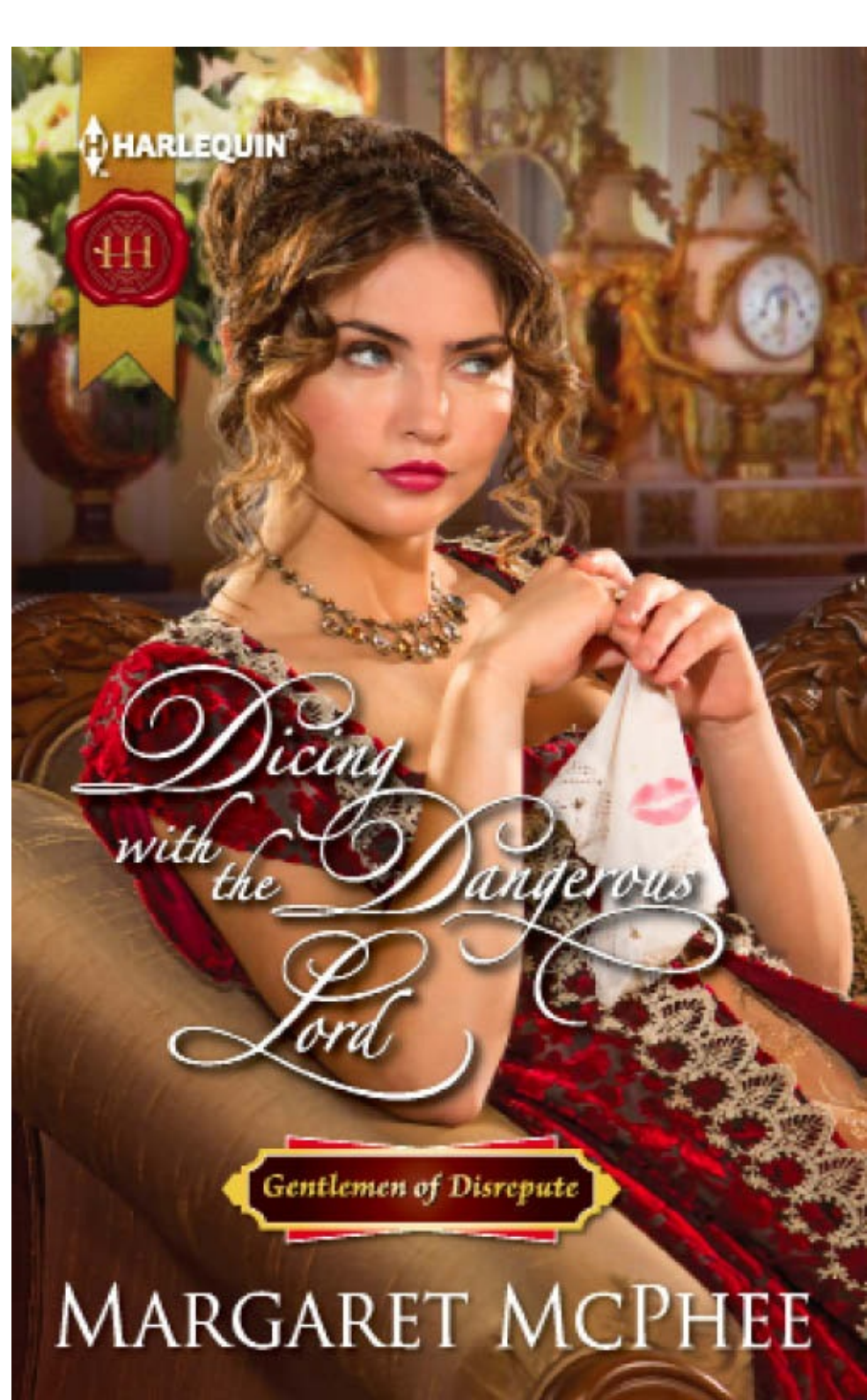




HARLEQUIN



*Dicing
with the Dangerous
Lord*

Gentlemen of Disrepute

MARGARET MCPHEE

SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY

Venetia Fox is London's most sought-after actress, darling of the demimonde and every nobleman's desire. But she's about to face her toughest role yet—seducing a confession from the devilishly handsome and very dangerous Lord Linwood to bring her father's murderer to justice.

She might have the whole of London fooled, but Linwood can see through Venetia's ardent attempts persuade him to open up. His past is murky, but he's no criminal. Her interest in him has Linwood intrigued—he might just have to play Miss Fox at her own seductive game....

“You know all my secrets, Lord Linwood.”

“Not all.”

“No, not all,” she said as she turned to look into his face.

He saw something flicker in her eyes—something that was not quite in keeping with the rest of her, something which he could not quite discern. But it was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

“I am intrigued, Miss Fox.” It was the truth. She was the most celebrated and coveted actress in all London. Bewitching. Beguiling. Yet cool. Her reputation preceded her. Linwood had never met a woman like her.

“By my secrets or by me?”

“Both. But I thought you desired flattery to be confined to the green room?”

She laughed, her eyes silver in the moonlight beneath the dark, elegant curve of her brows. “I will tell you one of mine if you tell me one of yours.” Her voice was husky and as alluring as that of a siren. Her gaze held his boldly. The sensual tension tightened as the silence stretched between them.

All around them was darkness as dense and black as the secrets he carried in his heart—secrets that he would take to his grave rather than spill.

“Would you really, Miss Fox? Tell me your darkest secret in exchange for mine?”

* * *

Dicing with the Dangerous Lord
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Author Note

This story picks up where *His Mask of Retribution* left off. As the dark-eyed Lord Linwood was cast in a rather villainous light in my previous books, I thought it was time for him to be the hero. Finding the right heroine was a challenge—until the sexy demimonde celebrity Miss Venetia Fox popped into my head. I knew at once she was going to be more than a match for Linwood in the very dangerous game they play together.

So here is the story of how Venetia and Linwood come to fall in love. I sincerely hope that you like it.

I love to hear from readers: www.margaretmcphee.co.uk.

Margaret McPhee

Dicing with the Dangerous Lord



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**His Mask of Retribution* #1105

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†*Silk & Scandal*

**Gentlemen of Disrepute*

Also available in Historical Undone! ebooks

How to Tempt a Viscount

For my big Wee Sister, Andrea—
lots of spicy bits because I know you like them!

MARGARET McPHEE

loves to use her imagination—an essential requirement for a trained scientist. However, when she realized 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.

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Chapter One

*Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, London
November 1810*

The applause within the Theatre Royal at Covent Garden was deafening, even after the heavy red curtain had descended on Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, to shield London's most acclaimed darling of the theatre from the audience.

Miss Venetia Fox smiled and hugged her friend and fellow actress as they made their way from the stage. 'They are still on their feet, Alice.'

'I can't believe it! It's amazing! I've never seen a response like it.' Alice Sweetly's eyes were big as saucers. In her excitement her soft Irish lilt grew stronger.

Venetia laughed. 'You will get used to it.'

'You think this'll happen again?'

Venetia smiled at her protégée and nodded.

'You were right. Life doesn't get much better than this.' Alice's face was lit with the same euphoria that was flowing through Venetia's veins. Away from the glitz and glamour of the front of the house, the theatre's corridors were mean and narrow and the décor shabby, but it could not suppress the women's spirits.

Alice hesitated outside the door to the small dressing room that they shared and turned to look up into Venetia's face. 'Thank you, Venetia. For helping me. For persuading Mr Kemble to put me on stage with you tonight. For everything.'

'I knew you would be a star.' Venetia gave Alice another hug. 'After the green room we will celebrate.'

'Only after the green room,' Alice agreed. 'See, I'm learning to be professional, just like you taught me.'

Venetia laughed, and a joy welled up in her to see just how far Alice had come in the past year. Alice's face showed confidence, self-respect and excitement. Venetia felt like she was walking on air as she opened the dressing-room door.

She was still smiling as she stepped across the threshold and saw the bunch of roses that lay upon the dressing table. The smile dropped from her face and the lightness of her mood evaporated in an instant.

Alice chattered on oblivious, her face lighting even brighter when she saw the roses. 'Someone's ahead of the game tonight. Got in early before the others.' She touched a finger to the centre of the bouquet. 'Nice little quirk from the usual arrangement, too. Which one of us is the lucky girl, do you think?'

Venetia knew the answer to that question without reading the small white card that had been tucked within the brown paper wrapping the stems. There were twelve roses, soft and velvety and of the deepest darkest red, and nestling in the centre of their arrangement, in such contrast, was a single creamy white rose, just as Robert had said. It was the message for which she had waited these weeks past. It had been so long in the coming that she had almost forgotten what she had agreed to. Almost.

Venetia picked up the card with its scrawl of black ink.

~~'Looks like you've got yourself a new admirer. And one that hasn't signed so much as his initial.'~~

Alice raised her eyebrows suggestively. 'Very mysterious.'

Not mysterious at all. Venetia forced a smile, but it felt wooden upon her lips. Her eyes moved over the card and she read aloud the single word written upon it in handwriting that she could not fail to recognise—*Tonight*.

'Sounds intriguing,' said Alice. 'Who is he?'

'I have not the faintest idea,' Venetia lied and threw the card down on the dressing table carelessly as if it meant nothing.

'That'll put the cat amongst the pigeons with Hawick and Devlin,' said Alice. 'Hawick thinks he's about to close the deal.'

'Then Hawick is wrong.' Venetia did not rise to the bait.

'You're leaning towards Devlin, then?' There was a mischievous sparkle in her friend's eye.

'Alice!'

'I'm teasing you!' Alice grinned. 'But if I had a duke and a viscount fighting to make me their mistress, believe you me, I wouldn't be playing so hard to get.'

'Better to earn your own money than put yourself in a rich man's power,' Venetia said, but the rich man she was not thinking of was not the Duke of Hawick or Viscount Devlin, and the woman enslaved, not herself.

She moved her mind away from the past to focus on the evening ahead...and just how she must snare a different rich man's interest. According to Robert's covert floral message the man would be waiting in the green room at this very moment. He was just another arrogant lust-ridden nobleman, like any other. Except he wasn't. But she did not let herself dwell upon who he was and what he had done. Nor did she think about the danger. Instead, she focused herself with cool dispassion to the task that lay ahead.

'Hurry yourself and turn around, Venetia. They're waiting for us in the green room.'

'A little waiting will serve to whet their appetites all the more.' They were waiting. *He* was waiting. Venetia smiled a grim smile at the challenge ahead of her as she presented her back to Alice to unlatch the bodice of her stage costume.

* * *

'I should not have let you persuade me into coming here.' Within the green room of the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, Francis Winslow, or Viscount Linwood as he was known, moved his gaze over the mix of gentlemen and peers already flirting with those minor actresses who had come straight from the stage. The room was decorated in the rococo style, the green walls edged with elaborate gilded leafed plasterwork, and set with large ornate mirrors before which crystal-decked candles burned. From the centre of the ceiling a single chandelier had been suspended, studded with few enough candles to hide the shabbiness of the room's gentility.

'Why? Do you not want to see the celebrated Miss Fox, or Miss Sweetly?' The Marquis of Razeby raised an arrogant eyebrow.

'Some other time, perhaps.'

'Hell, Linwood, it will do you good and I tell you they are worth the seeing. If you thought they looked good upon the stage, wait until you see them up close. Miss Fox is all cool silver moonlight, and Miss Sweetly, all warm golden sunshine. Both divine in their own ways.' He moved his hands in

the outline of the curves of a woman's body. 'If you know what I mean.'

'So I saw.'

'Which would you go for?'

'I am not looking for a woman right now.'

'Been a while since the last one.' Razeby arched an eyebrow.

'It has,' agreed Linwood. 'I have had other things on my mind. I still have.'

Razeby persisted. 'Maybe. But I think what you need is an armful of something warm and curvaceous and soft to distract you...'

'I do not wish to be distracted.' There was only one thing on Linwood's mind right now. And he would have given the world if it had been something as frivolous and meaningless and pleasurable as a light-skirt. But those days were long gone and, given the mess his life was in now, he knew they would never return.

'I have been working on Miss Sweetly and she is ripe for the plucking, but Miss Fox, well, she is a different story altogether. Sweetness versus sophistication. Can you imagine having both of them together? At the same time?' Razeby blew out a sigh.

He understood Razeby was only trying to help, but his friend knew nothing of the truth, of what had happened, of the things he had done. He pushed away the thoughts, the memory of that final scene with Rotherham. 'I will leave you to your actresses and your imagining,' Linwood said. 'And wait for you on the balcony.'

'Miserable sod!' Razeby smiled in his good-natured way and shook his head.

Linwood's lips curved in the ghost of a smile.

* * *

Venetia knew exactly how to identify the man for whom she was looking. *He carries an ebony walking cane topped with a silver wolf's-head in which the eyes are two set emeralds.* Robert's words rang in her head as she worked her way through the men around the green room, all the while scanning for the walking cane. There were canes aplenty, but not the one that she sought. Yet both it and its owner were here; Robert would not have sent the message had he not been certain. And then she noticed the dark red curtain, masking the French doors to the balcony, sway slightly in the breeze. A *frisson* of uneasiness whispered within her at the realisation of having to do this alone with him, out there in the darkness.

It took thirty minutes to reach the curtain, via Razeby and Haworth and Devlin. But then at last she was able to slip unnoticed behind it. The door was only slightly ajar. She took a deep breath, pushed it silently open and, closing it quietly behind her, stepped out into the cool dampness of the London night.

The moonlight silhouetted him where he stood looking out over the lamp-lit street; a dark, lithe figure, silent and unmoving as if he were carved of the same Portland stone as the balustrade that contained the balcony. Her gaze moved over the dark beaver hat and gloves held in his left hand, and then on to the walking cane in his right. The tip of it touched to the leather of his glossy black riding boot and beneath his hand she could see the glint of the stick's silver wolf's-head handle and the glow of two tiny green gems within. And in that small moment before he moved, all of Robert's warnings about this man and what he had done seemed to whisper in her ear, making her blood run cold. But even then she did not consider changing her mind. She stepped forwards, relishing the challenge.

He glanced round, half turned to her.

‘Do you mind if I...?’ She gestured towards the coping that topped the balustrade just along from where he stood.

‘Not at all.’ It was a smooth, low, well-spoken voice, not harsh and cold as one might have imagined for such a man. ‘I was just leaving.’ His expression was serious, unsmiling, nothing of the hopeful flirtation that was upon every other male face within the green room.

‘Not on my account, I hope.’ She kept her voice low and lazy and seductive as she strolled over to the balustrade, stopping, not too close to him but close enough, and looking not at him but out over the same view he had been watching. ‘Who would have thought such a spot could offer such refuge?’ She knew the way to draw a man into conversation, to entice his interest by offering a little of herself. It was a necessary skill of any successful actress and Venetia had spent years perfecting the method.

‘Refuge?’ he asked.

She kept her gaze fixed on the lamp-lit streets below. The breeze breathed its chill against her cheeks, against her exposed décolletage.

‘A few precious moments of calm in a night full of frenzy and demand.’ She watched the carriages and the groups of gentlemen with their mistresses on their arms. ‘I often come out here before the performance...and after. To think. I find it helpful.’

‘You do not enjoy acting?’

‘I enjoy acting very much. But not that which goes with it.’

‘You mean the green room?’

‘And more. But—’ she inhaled deeply and slowly released the breath, and the chill of the night air lent it a misty quality ‘—it is all part of my job. Written into my contract, would you believe?’

‘To entice and delight.’

‘Some may call it that.’ She leaned slightly closer to him, presenting him with a better view of her cleavage. ‘But in reality to generate interest in, and donations to, the theatre. You paid more to visit the green room than you did for your theatre ticket, did you not, sir?’

‘I did.’

‘To be seduced.’

‘By you, Miss Fox?’

‘Perhaps...’ She let the word hang in the air as a suggestion before lowering her voice as if they were two conspirators speaking secrets. ‘Or then again, perhaps not. We actresses are not supposed to tell. Such truths quite spoil the illusion.’ She smiled, but only because the role called for it, then glanced across at him, and looked at the murderer properly for the first time. At his olive-skinned face with its chiselled angles and planes that lent him a handsomeness she had not expected. At his dark hair that hung in ebony-sheened waves, and his eyes that were black as midnight and held such dark brooding intensity within that had nothing to do with their colour. His gaze met hers and it was as if he had stroked a finger down the naked length of her spine.

She stared into those dark compelling eyes and her heart gave a stutter and her stomach turned a somersault. She stared, shocked and unable to look away. The moment stretched between them and all the while he held her imprisoned in that steady, scrutinising gaze as surely as she did any other man. Her heart was pounding as she finally managed to tear her eyes away and lower her gaze. With a determination of iron she masked the fluster, reined herself in, but all the willpower in the world could not suppress the shiver that rippled right through her. It took every ounce of her experience upon the stage to regain her poise before she could look at him once again.

‘The nights grow colder and an actress can hardly wear her woollens and flannels to work,’ she said by way of excuse, knowing that he had seen the shiver.

‘Indeed.’ His eyes moved over her dress, over the bare skin it revealed and the pale swell of her breasts before coming back up to her face. ‘That would not do at all.’

Play the part. It is just another role. He is just another man. ‘So...what is your excuse?’ She held her gaze, her appearance once more the cool, calm, enticing Miss Fox, but beneath the surface her composure was still ruffled. ‘Why are you braving the chill of a November evening instead of enjoying the hospitality of the green room?’

His eyes moved back to the Bow Street view. ‘I have things on my mind.’

‘You disappoint me. There was me thinking that you had come outside alone to wait for me.’ He glanced round at her and she curved her lips to show that she was teasing him, even though her heart was still beating that bit too fast. ‘Things from which an evening at the theatre cannot distract you?’

‘Quite.’

‘They must be serious or perhaps it is a comment upon Miss Sweetly’s and my acting abilities.’

‘Rest assured your acting abilities remain unchallenged.’

‘You flatter me. And flattery is not permitted out here. I have a rule that it must remain confined to the green room.’

‘The truth is quite the contrary, Miss Fox. I enjoyed the performance very much.’

She smiled a wry smile and let her gaze wander back to the view. ‘In that case I am intrigued as to precisely what it is that so preoccupies your mind, sir.’

The sounds from the streets below drifted up to her. The silence seemed so long that she wondered if she had gone too far in asking so blatantly.

‘Trust me, you do not wish to know.’ And there was something in the way he said it, a dangerous, haunting honesty that quite chilled her to the bone.

She turned her gaze away, watching the view once more so that he would not see the truth in her eyes. ‘We all have things on our minds.’

‘Learning your lines, or deliberating in your choice of Hawick or Devlin?’ he asked.

‘Not quite,’ she said, and thought with irony of just what she had come out here to do to him.

‘Then what, may I ask?’

She looked at him across the small distance and wondered, just for the tiniest of moments, what he would do if she were to tell him and the thought made her smile in earnest. ‘You are asking me to spill my secrets and you have not even told me your name, sir.’ She arched a perfectly groomed eyebrow, the ultimate *femme fatale*. ‘What manner of woman do you take me for?’

He glanced at her again, the dark eyes studying her face.

Their gazes held and even though she was prepared this time, the same prickling sensation stroked against her nerves. Her heart was racing and not only because she feared that he meant to walk away.

‘Forgive me,’ he said at last and gave a small bow of his head. ‘I am Linwood.’

‘I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Lord Linwood,’ she said with mocking polite formality.

‘And I yours, Miss Fox.’ Just the sound of his voice, rich and dark as chocolate, sent goose bumps erupting over her body.

She focused. Breathed. Let her gaze drop to his lips, to linger there for the smallest moment before returning to his eyes.

‘So now we are properly introduced.’ She lowered the pitch of her voice.

‘We are,’ he agreed.

She smiled, a slow, seductive, suggestive smile.

‘You can go ahead and tell me what is on your mind,’ he said.

‘Oh, you really do not wish to know, Lord Linwood. Trust me.’ It was a parody of the words he had

used to her.

~~‘*Touché*, Miss Fox.’~~ There was a hint of amusement in his voice, although his face betrayed nothing of it.

Her mouth curved as she turned her attention once more to the London streets beyond and below. ‘So what brings you to the green room tonight? I have not seen you here before.’

‘I accompany my friend Razeby. To use your own words, he wishes to be seduced, or, perhaps more accurately, to do the seducing.’

‘And you?’

‘I am not in the market for a mistress, Miss Fox.’

‘Nor I in the market for a protector.’ Her eyes were cool and disdainful with truth.

‘Hawick and Devlin seem to be under another impression.’

‘Hawick and Devlin are mistaken.’ She let just enough steel show.

His eyes slid to hers. He paused. ‘And had I come outside alone to wait for you...?’

‘Just the two of us, out here, alone in the darkness...’ She raised her eyebrow ever so slightly. ‘Who knows what might have happened?’

Neither made any move, only looked at one another across the small space of darkness. She stood still, calm, everything of her posture inviting, alluring, sensual. And in her eyes and on her lips was the merest suggestion of a smile and so much more.

The balcony door opened. ‘Linwood, I—’ Razeby halted at the sight of her. ‘Forgive me, I did not realise—’

‘If you will excuse me, gentlemen.’ Only then did she break the gaze that bound her and Linwood together, and took her time over a small desultory curtsy. ‘Lord Linwood.’ Her eyes met his one last time before moving to Razeby. ‘Lord Razeby.’ And as she passed Linwood she leaned close enough to smell his cologne and whispered softly for his ears alone, ‘Until the next time, my lord.’

She walked past Razeby into the green room, without a backward glance at either man, even though she could feel the weight of both their gazes following her.

And just like that, the matter was begun.

Chapter Two

Venetia's heart was still thudding too fast as she closed the door behind her and made her way across the room.

What had just happened between her and Linwood was something which, despite all the men she had dealt with, Venetia had never experienced before. Linwood was not what she had expected. Yes, he was most definitely dark and dangerous, but there was something about him. Something both disturbing and fascinating. She quashed the thought in its inception, unwilling to admit even to herself exactly what it was she had felt on looking into Lord Linwood's eyes. It was too late to change her mind, and even were it not, she had no intention of turning away from this. The first step of the plan had been completed. She and Linwood were introduced. The seed had been sown. It had begun. And the next time it would be easier...now that she knew what she was up against.

'Are you all right, Venetia?' Alice whispered by her side, her eyes scanning her face.

Venetia smoothed her expression into its small calm smile, betraying nothing of her thoughts. 'Of course.'

'Hawick and Devlin have competition tonight.' Alice gestured with her eyes to the corner of the room. 'More admirers.'

Venetia followed her friend's gaze over to the group of gentlemen waiting there, some holding large bouquets of flowers, others clutching bottles of champagne. Their faces were flushed from too much drink, their eyes arrogant and eager and lustful as they met hers. Men used to using women, men used to holding all the power. Men over whom she now held power of a sort. Walking away was not an option. Not for any actress, least of all for her. She had not lied to Linwood in that respect. Just the thought of him sent ripples of unease spreading through her, like a pebble thrown into a still lake.

As if summoned by her thoughts she saw Linwood and Razeby slip back into the room from the balcony. Linwood's dark gaze sought hers across the room. She met his eyes and held them for just a second longer than was decent. Her heart missed a beat, stuttered, but no one in the room would have known. She was as poised and confident as ever she was—an act perfected by years of practice and determination.

He drew her the slightest incline of the head in acknowledgement.

And in return she let the hint of a smile play on her lips before deliberately turning her attention to Alice while he still watched.

'They're coming over.' Alice's focus was fixed on the gentlemen in the corner.

Venetia nodded. This was her job and she was good at it. It paid her well—very well—and let her run her own life. With a single look she could quell a conversation when it had overstepped the mark and stay a wandering hand. She sparkled and enticed and then enforced her limits with an iron hand and was trying to teach Alice the same.

'Have a care over Quigley, he is not so harmless as he appears,' she whispered the warning to her friend. Pushing Linwood from her mind, Venetia turned to face the men and the rest of the night.

* * *

It was at Viscount Bullford's ball two nights later that Linwood saw the enigmatic Venetia Fox again. He watched her in the ballroom, with her almond-shaped eyes, smiling that small seductive smile. There was definitely something fluid and feline in the way she moved. Men watched her with greedy eyes of which she was either unaware or did not care. She appeared relaxed, polished, comfortable in her own skin; seductive, but not in the way he had thought she would be. Not blatant and too readily available. Rather, tantalising but untouchable. The dress she wore was the colour of a glass of red wine held up and viewed before firelight—a deep translucent red that made the darkness of her hair only darker and the whiteness of her skin a shimmering pearl pallor.

He watched her manage Razeby and Monteith, Bullford and Devlin, and even Hawick, flirting with each of them in turn, if it could be called that, for despite the smoulder in her eyes he noticed that she kept each one at arm's length. Venetia Fox was very much in control of the situation. And although every man in the room was panting after her, she allowed not one of them to touch her as they must have been longing to. No wonder men were willing to bid so highly for her. And then he remembered what she had said of illusion and this flirtatious socialising being a part of her job. It was a dangerous game for any woman to play, but especially for one as beautiful as Venetia Fox.

He watched her because she was fascinating. He watched her because she was the only thing in all of these weeks past that, for the few moments he had been with her, had stopped him thinking of other darker, things. It was the reason he was here tonight. *She* was the reason he was here tonight. Not that he had any intention of taking this flirtation any further.

Her gaze met his across the room and held for just that moment too long before she turned it back to the man with whom she was speaking.

He waited until she slipped out onto the balcony before following her. She was standing there, staring out over the moonlit garden when he appeared. He did not say a word, just walked up and leaned on the balustrade's stone coping just along from her and looked out over the garden.

'We have to stop meeting like this,' she said without looking round and he could hear the tease in her voice. 'People will start to gossip.'

'Are you afraid of gossip?'

'On the contrary, you know that I am obliged to court it.'

'Then you should be glad that I am here.'

'Should I, indeed?' She turned her head and looked at him then. There was an edge to the words that made him unsure if she were glad or angry to see him. Her eyes held his and there was a certain coolness in them before it faded. He watched her gaze drop to his hat and gloves he carried in one hand and his cane in the other. She arched a sultry brow as if questioning if he meant to leave.

He set them down on the flat coping surface before him.

She returned her gaze to wander over the darkness of the garden, but not before he saw the small satisfied curve of her lips. They were not the small rosebud lips so sought in women, but full, passionate lips that reminded a man of the erotic pleasures a woman's mouth could bring.

'Another refuge?' he asked.

'You know all my secrets, Lord Linwood.'

'Not all.'

'No, not all,' she said as she turned to look into his face. He saw something flicker in her eyes, something that was not quite in keeping with the rest of her, something which he could not quite discern. But it was gone as quickly as it had appeared. 'And I do have so many.'

'I am intrigued, Miss Fox.' It was the truth. She was the most celebrated and coveted actress in all London. Bewitching. Beguiling. Yet cool. Her reputation preceded her. Linwood had never met a

woman like her.

‘By my secrets or by me?’

‘Both. But I thought you desired flattery to be confined to the green room.’

She laughed, her eyes silver in the moonlight beneath the dark elegant curve of her brows, her skin pale and perfect as porcelain. ‘I will tell you one of mine if you tell me one of yours.’ Her voice was husky and as alluring as that of a siren. Her gaze held his boldly. The sensual tension tightened as the silence stretched between them.

All around them was darkness, as dense and black as the secrets he carried in his heart, secrets that he would take to his grave rather than spill.

‘Would you really, Miss Fox? Tell me your darkest secret in exchange for mine?’

She glanced towards the star-scattered inky blue of the night sky, before returning her gaze to him. Her eyes seemed to glitter in the moonlight. ‘No,’ she said softly, surprising him yet again with her candour. ‘I would not. Would you?’

‘I think you already know the answer to that question.’

‘I do.’

‘It seems we are two of a kind.’

‘Perhaps, when it comes to secrets.’ She looked directly into his eyes and again there was that coolness and distance. ‘But then again, I doubt you are anywhere as good at guarding your secrets as I am at guarding mine.’

‘I think you underestimate me, Miss Fox.’

‘No, Lord Linwood, I assure you the underestimating is all on your half.’

‘That sounds like a challenge.’

‘I do like a challenge,’ and her eyes held his and seemed to smoulder. The silence stretched between them, brimful with desire, before she turned her gaze to the garden once more. He felt the stirring of excitement, the need to know more of her. He studied her profile and did not want to take his eyes from her.

‘Were you on stage tonight?’

‘I am on stage every night. And every hour of every day. It is the price any actress must pay if she wants success.’

‘Are you on stage now, Miss Fox?’

She did not hesitate in her answer. ‘Of course.’ Another answer so contrary to everything he expected. And through him, over him, in him, he could feel the pull of the power that she held over men.

‘Are you always so honest?’

‘I am an actress, Lord Linwood. I am never honest.’ She smiled again and this time so did he, he who in all these past months had so rarely smiled.

‘And what of the real Venetia Fox, as opposed to Venetia Fox the actress? What of her?’ Questions he would never have asked any other woman. And yet he asked her, for he found that he wanted to know the answer.

‘What *of* her?’ She looked at him.

‘Is she content to stay hidden in the shadows of the divine Miss Fox?’

‘Divine...? You are flattering me again.’

‘And you are not answering my question.’

‘Then the answer is that she is very content to stay hidden.’

‘May I meet her?’

‘You would not care for her in the slightest.’

‘Why not let me be the judge of that?’ He was flirting with her, angling to catch just a little more of this fascinating woman—Linwood, to whom flirting and women should have been the last thing on his mind.

‘Expose myself to a stranger?’ She arched one perfectly shaped dark brow and leaned towards him ever so slightly so that he could not prevent his gaze sweeping down to the luscious curve of her breasts and imaging them naked and exposed before him. He knew she was toying with him, just like she toyed with all the others, but right at this moment in time he did not care. She was all that stood between him and the dread and bitterness of his memories and thoughts.

‘Maybe we will not always be strangers, Miss Fox.’ His gaze held hers.

‘Maybe,’ she said and smiled a slow sensual smile.

The music floated out from the ballroom, the notes so sweet and clear on the night air. ‘The Volga,’ she said. ‘My favourite dance.’

His eyes held hers. ‘I am afraid I do not dance tonight, Miss Fox.’ How could he, when so much hung in the balance?

She stepped towards him, slowly closed the distance between them until the hem of her dress was practically touching the toes of his boots. She angled her face up to his, and her eyes glittered full with secrets, and her lips made him want to place his own against them, to kiss her, to taste her, to take the temptation that she offered. It had been such a long time since he had had a woman. But when he would have yielded she moved her mouth away to whisper against his ear, and he could feel the warm caress of her breath against his cheek and smell the bittersweet heady scent of neroli, her lips so close yet not touching.

‘I was not asking,’ her whisper enunciated so clearly that it stroked the nerves that ran from his neck all the way down to his manhood. His blood stirred hot.

She paused before retreating beyond his reach.

‘Perhaps...we might go for a carriage drive one afternoon.’ The words were spoken before he could think better of them.

She held his gaze, her eyes the cool white-blue of sunshine on a winter sea, alluring and remote both at once so that he was sure that she meant to refuse him.

‘Perhaps,’ she said enigmatically. The light in her eyes changed to a teasing smoulder before she hooded them beneath her long black lashes and walked away, with that signature slow sensual sway of her hips, back into the ballroom.

* * *

The clock in the small parlour chimed eleven as Venetia topped up first Alice’s coffee cup and then her own.

‘In answer to your question, yes, it went very well last night. Razeby has offered me a thousand pounds a year to be his mistress. That, and a house in Hart Street, just over the back from here. Imagine that. We’d almost be neighbours. And he’ll see that the house is furnished with only the best so he says. It’s nowhere near what Hawick offered you, I’m sure, but more money than I’m ever likely to see.’

‘Do not rate Hawick’s offer so highly, Alice.’

‘I heard on the grapevine that he offered you ten grand.’

‘You should know better than to listen to gossip.’

‘But it must have been a high sum all the same.’

‘Good enough, but nowhere near what you imagine,’ Venetia lied and thought of the astronomical amount of money the Duke of Hawick had actually offered her. Some men thought they could buy anything, that it always just came down to the price. It was all she could do to stop her lip curling at the thought.

‘And still you turned him down.’

Venetia sipped at her coffee and knew she must be careful in what she said. Alice’s attitude was understandable. It was Venetia who, for her own very personal reasons, was at odds with what was considered normal within the acting profession. ‘What answer did you give Razeby?’

‘I told him I needed time to consider his offer. I wanted to speak to you first.’

‘And what are you thinking?’

‘Whether to hold out for more money.’

Venetia looked into her friend’s eyes.

‘Please don’t look at me like that.’ Alice averted her gaze to the corner of the room. ‘I already know what you think of a woman selling herself to a man. But...a thousand pounds a year is so much.’

‘It is. But after your success in this run, Mr Kemble will increase your wages. He has no choice if he wishes to compete with other theatres who would offer you better. I know that you send money to your mother. If you need some help financially...’

Alice shook her head. ‘I couldn’t allow you to do that. You’ve already done so much for me, Venetia. Besides, it isn’t just about the money. Razeby’s a marquis and he’s young and handsome and I...I like him. It would be no hardship to be his mistress.’

‘Alice, Razeby may be all those things, but do not be fooled by his charm, he is a rake, every bit as much a gentleman of disrepute as the rest of that crowd. You have to be aware of that.’

‘I’m under no illusion, Venetia. Believe me, with my history I know how these things work. I’m not a fool, just practical. And I may as well get the best price I can.’

‘Well, in that case...’ Venetia gave a sigh ‘...hold out for more. Do not name your price. Do not appear persuaded or that you have reached a decision. Entice him with less rather than more. And, most importantly, do not so much as let him touch you until you have the arrangement legally drawn up, signed and a copy of it in your own hand.’

‘Yes, ma’am!’ Alice grinned. And then the grin faded, to be replaced with a thoughtful look. ‘Razeby said something...about you and Viscount Linwood. I saw Linwood in the green room the other night, but I hadn’t realised that you were with alone with him out on the balcony.’

Venetia did not deny it. Nor could she explain what she was involved in. Not even to Alice. She gave a tiny shrug as if it meant nothing.

‘You’re never alone with men in private places, Venetia. It’s the thing you’re always warning me against.’

‘I made an exception for Linwood.’

Alice frowned. ‘You should be careful of him.’

‘Why?’ she asked slowly. ‘Do you know something of him?’

The pause before Alice answered was just that little bit too long. She shook her head and glanced away. ‘Not really.’ Then bit her lip. ‘You aren’t...*interested* in him, are you?’

Venetia smiled to reassure her friend. ‘I am as interested in him as I am in Hawick or Devlin or any of the others. Which is not at all.’ But she was lying. She was very interested in Linwood, just not in the way that Alice thought. She did not allow herself to think of the unprecedented response she had felt on looking into his eyes, on being close to him, on spending just that short time within his

company. 'What have you heard of him?'

'Nothing specific.' Alice did not meet her gaze. 'Only that he's a dangerous man to get involved with. And, as they say, there's no smoke without fire, Venetia.'

'Indeed.' Venetia had listened to Robert's suspicions about Linwood and a fire that had razed an entire building to the ground and destroyed the possessions accumulated across a man's lifetime.

The two women moved to talk of other things.

* * *

Venetia did not see Linwood the next night. She left Alice to Razeby and the green room and slipped out of the theatre by the stage door into Hart Street. Her carriage was waiting outside as usual, to take her home. As her footman opened the coach door she drew him a nod and, pulling the long black cloak tighter around her shoulders, climbed inside. The door closed behind her with a quiet click and the carriage was pulling away along the street before she saw the man lounging in the corner of the opposite seat. For a moment she thought it was Linwood and gave a small shriek before realising the man's identity.

'Robert!' she chided, pressing her hand to her chest. 'You frightened me!'

'You need not be so jumpy, little sister. I am not Linwood.'

'You should have warned me you were coming.'

'I could hardly do that now, could I?'

She gave a sigh, knowing her half-brother was right.

'How do matters progress with the viscount?' he asked.

'I have secured his interest.'

'I did not doubt it. Your talent is unsurpassed. Who else could feign an interest in such a man?'

She looked away, unable to meet his eyes in case he saw the truth in them. She did not tell him that Linwood was a man who could have had his pick of many women. Not because of his handsome look but because of the danger and darkness and mystery that emanated from him. He was what other men were not. Acting an attraction to him was uncomfortably easy, even knowing what he had done.

'This is one role I do not like playing, Robert.'

'Understandably so. But it is the best way.'

'As you said.'

'I hate asking this of you, Venetia.' Robert's face looked grim. 'Maybe I should call the villain out and be done with it.'

Venetia looked across the carriage at him. 'He would kill you.'

'Such confidence in me,' he said drily.

'We both know of what he is capable and I would not have you risk your life.'

'I know and I am glad of your concern for me.' He took her hand in his and gave it a little squeeze of reassurance before releasing it again. 'We must proceed as planned. It is our best chance of bringing Linwood to justice.'

She nodded.

'Have you learned anything of use yet?'

'Nothing so far, except that he is definitely brooding upon something dark.'

'I expect murder on his conscience might have such an effect.' Robert's voice was low and serious. 'But a beautiful woman can always make a man lower his guard and loosen his tongue, even a man as careful as Linwood.'

She said nothing, just kept her mind focused on why they were doing this.

‘When are you seeing him again?’

‘He does not know it yet, but Monday night. At Razeby’s dinner party.’

‘Good.’ Robert rapped on the roof of the carriage with his cane and the carriage drew to a halt. He looked at her through the dim light. ‘You will be careful, won’t you, Venetia?’

‘Am I not always?’

Robert gave a low laugh before kissing her cheek and disappeared like a shadow into the darkness of the night. And when the carriage drove on, Venetia thought of Linwood. A man who had killed. A murderer. The only man that stirred a whisper of desire through her. She pulled the soft fur-lined cloak all the tighter around her, but it did nothing to warm the chill that crept in her bones.

Chapter Three

Linwood stood alone in the crowd of Razeby's drawing room and wondered if it was Razeby or Venetia Fox who had lied. Razeby's words from that afternoon played again in his head.

'I am not gammoning you! I tell you, Miss Fox *did* send a note not two hours since. She will attend my little dinner on the proviso that she is seated next to you.' There was an excitement in Razeby's eyes as he had paced the drawing room of Linwood's apartment. 'So much for your denials that anything happened between the two of you on the green-room balcony, you sly dog!'

'We exchanged polite conversation, nothing more.'

'I do not know what you said to her, but evidently she liked it. She has never attended one of my dinners previously. Indeed, she has never attended any dinner held by a gentleman.' He had given a wry smile. 'God only knows why, but it seems that the divine Miss Fox is interested in you, Linwood.'

Linwood had shaken his head to deny it, but Razeby's words had kindled something within him. Since then the pulse of desire that he felt for Venetia Fox had beat all the harder. What man would not respond to a woman like her?

'Naturally I sent a note back by return, saying that the seating arrangements would be to her preference and that I looked forward to seeing her.'

The two men had looked at one another.

'You cannot let me down, Linwood. You will have to come now.' Razeby smiled before adding, 'To have Venetia Fox grace my little soiree will be quite the coup. And you do owe me one.'

And so here Linwood was, waiting only for her.

He stood alone, the glass of champagne in his hand untouched, the bubbles rising in a riotous frenzy through the pale golden liquid. All around him the conversation buzzed loudly. Snatches of other people's conversations reached his ears. Men's talk of horses, gaming and politics. Women's, of fashion and wealth and men. There was the chink of glass and silver as footmen glided silently through the small crowd, topping up glasses. And the high, tinkling, affected laughs of the women, mistresses and actresses and courtesans, not a respectable one amongst them. The latter were all beautiful creatures, all expensively and provocatively attired, their necklines so low as to reveal nipples that had been rouged to attract even more attention, the skirts revealing, even transparent in some cases. It was most certainly a *demi-monde* affair. And then all at once the talking seemed to fade away to leave a hush.

He saw the almost imperceptible effect that rippled through the room the instant she appeared. All eyes riveted to the door. In the men there was a sudden gleam of both interest and appreciation, a puffing out of chests, a preening, a sharpening of expression that was almost predatory. And beside them the change did not go unnoticed by the women who stood by their sides. While their men's darkened with desire, the women's eyes narrowed. Linwood did not need to look to know that it was Venetia Fox that stood there in the doorway, but he looked anyway...and was not sorry that he did. The murmur of conversation began again.

* * *

Venetia saw Linwood almost immediately. He was standing by the farthest window, alone, unsmiling emanating an air of such dark, brooding intensity as if to ward off any that might approach him. Their eyes met through the crowd and her stomach tumbled and swooped and that tiniest of moments stretched and expanded to fill the room and render it empty save for the two of them. With every beat of her heart she could feel something of him calling to her, every thud that reverberated through her chest; inside knowledge spinning a false sense of connection between them.

‘Miss Fox, so delighted you could come this evening.’ Razeby’s voice smashed the illusion, bringing her back to reality, allowing her to break free from Linwood’s gaze. She smiled at Razeby with gratitude.

‘It is a pleasure to be here.’

‘A glass of champagne, first, and then allow me to introduce you to a few of my friends before we go in to dinner.’

She saw the way his eyes flickered towards Linwood before coming back to hers.

She met Razeby’s gaze boldly, almost daring him to say something of the request she had made, a hint of amusement playing around her lips. She knew that he would have told Linwood.

Razeby made no mention of it; he was too shrewd for that. She drew him a small wordless acknowledgement and accepted the crystal glass of sparkling wine, touching its rim to her lips without actually drinking anything of it. Then she allowed Razeby to make his introductions without a single word or glance in Linwood’s direction. And all the while, she prepared herself and focused her mind on what she was here to do—to see that a man guilty of murder did not evade justice. It was the least she owed to Robert and to the man she could only ever call Rotherham, even if he was so much more.

The forest-green silk she was wearing had cost her a fortune, but was worth every penny. Both the cut and colour suited her well and gave her a confidence in her appearance. The skirt clung just a little to her hips and legs, the neckline showed the promise of her breasts. To Venetia it was like donning her armour. She knew her weapons well and wielded them with expertise.

She exchanged pleasantries with Fallingham, Bullford and Monteith. Spoke to Razeby and Alice, who, having taken her advice, was wearing an almost-virginal gown of cream silk that Razeby seemed to be having trouble keeping his eyes from. Until, eventually, she found Linwood before her.

‘I believe that you have already been introduced to Lord Linwood?’ Razeby said for the benefit of those that surrounded them. She knew her every move was being scrutinised, that who she spoke to and what she said had every chance of appearing in tomorrow’s gossip sheets.

‘We have met,’ she said and her eyes touched Linwood’s and, despite how much she had steeled herself against it, she felt that same nervous fluttering in her stomach.

‘If you will be so kind as to excuse me, for a moment...’ Razeby melted away, leaving her and Linwood alone in the crowd.

‘Miss Fox,’ he said, his eyes never leaving hers.

‘Lord Linwood.’

The dinner gong sounded before Razeby’s butler announced that dinner was served in the dining room.

‘Allow me to take you in to dinner.’ Linwood’s voice was low, the words polite, assertive rather than forceful, but there was something in the way he was looking at her that made a shiver run over her skin.

‘What a pleasant suggestion,’ she said and arched an eyebrow ever so slightly. Both of them knew had been her suggestion. He was cleverer than most men, she thought, more perceptive.

‘I thought so.’ His smile was small, secret, the jest shared between just the two of them.

She flexed her lips in return and, tucking a hand into the crook of his arm, let him lead her into the dining room.

* * *

The food was exceptional, as it ever was at Razeby's table, guinea fowl and peacock, goose and a pie of turkey and ham combined. A medley of the sweetest quinces, potatoes sliced and scalloped in a cream sauce with capers, rabbit jelly, spiced leeks and ginger-fried cabbage, and an enormous tart, each slice of which contained a different honeyed fruit, and on a fine glass dish all of its own a rich plum pudding. But afterwards, had he to say what they had eaten Linwood could not have told them. His attention was too much on the woman by his side.

She did not flirt. Indeed, she did nothing of what he expected. Rather, the conversation between them flowed easily and naturally. They spoke of Bonaparte and the war that was raging across the Continent, of the exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts and Captain Diamond's wager with Milton. Anything and everything, but nothing that touched anywhere near the subject of Rotherham and all that worried him.

The time passed too quickly, too comfortably. Just an hour in her company and already he felt something of the darkness lift from him. The burden that he carried grew light. She engaged him completely, making him forget in a way that his family and friends and everyday life could not. And when the plates were cleared away and the table brushed down, he found that he did not want her to leave.

'I believe our evening is at an end, Lord Linwood.' Even just the sound of her voice stroked against him to both soothe and excite. He breathed in the scent of neroli that seemed to follow wherever she went and watched her beautiful face and those clear pale eyes that only hinted at the mysteries that lay beneath.

'It does not have to be,' he said in a voice that was for her ears only.

They looked at one another, her eyes scanning his as if she would take the measure of him.

At the head of the table, Razeby got to his feet. 'And now I have a surprise. Something new to bring to my table. A feast for both the eyes and the lips.'

The double dining-room doors opened and six footmen, three on each side, carried in what looked to be a long silver salver on which lay a masked naked woman who had been strategically and artistically decorated in fruit. Sliced oranges overlapped sliced lemons and limes, apples, green grapes and red ones, blackberries and gooseberries—the rainbow medley lay against her skin and over it all a fine white powder of silvered icing sugar had been dusted. He doubted that any of the men would be wondering where the hell Razeby had found such a variety of fruit so late in the year.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Miss Vert.' Miss Vert, whom no gentleman in the room could fail to be aware of, was a courtesan from the London's most famous high-class bordello, Mrs Silver's House of Rainbow Pleasures.

Razeby's footmen placed the salver on the table before them.

Linwood felt Miss Fox stiffen beside him. He glanced round at where she sat on his left-hand side and caught the look that passed between her and Miss Sweetly. Miss Sweetly gave a tiny shake of her head and smiled at Miss Fox, then the younger actress's gaze shifted to his, lingering there for only a moment, before moving back to Razeby by whose side she was seated. He saw Razeby thread his fingers through hers where their hands lay on the table, uncaring of who saw it.

He and Miss Fox were seated close to Razeby at the head of the table. Miss Vert's head lay on the

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