

## Excerpt from "Lord Libertine" by Gail Ranstrom

Isabella O'Rourke fought back her gag of revulsion as the black haired man kissed her. He had a definite finesse, but the fact remained that she had permitted this intimacy with a stranger. And she knew, now, all she needed to know.

This was not the man who had killed Cora.

She drew away with a show of reluctance and placed one palm against his chest to keep him at a distance. "La! You quite take my breath away, Mr. McPherson. I shall have to watch myself around you."

He laughed and gave her a crisp bow. "Do not watch yourself, madam. I shall do that for you."

She smiled and drew her closed fan down the side of his right cheek. "I shall think upon it, sir. Now off with you." She made a shooing motion toward the ballroom and waited until he disappeared.

Alone, she exhaled and waited while a bottomless shudder passed through her. She turned to the console table in the alcove and found an abandoned glass of rich amber liquid. Whiskey? Brandy? It didn't matter. With barely the slightest hesitation, she lifted it and took a deep drink, holding it in her mouth until it burned. God grant it would burn away the last traces of her humanity so that she could finish what she'd begun.

She swallowed, closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the wall, waiting for the warmth to spread through her.

"That little shudder of revulsion, madam? Was it for yourself, or your partner?"

Myself! She straightened and turned to face the intruder in the alcove. He was watching her, one shoulder propped against the wall and a cynical smile

curving his deeply sensual mouth. His eyes, dark and intense, bore into her, and she suspected he saw clear to her soul. Oh, that would never do!

"You find a kiss revolting, sir?" Her question was not an answer, but she hoped he would not pursue one.

"I do not, but your reaction proves different." He bowed, a mere mocking of manners. "Andrew Hunter at your service, madam."

She gave him an equally mocking curtsy but did not volunteer her name. What would he say if he knew she'd only had her first kiss a week ago? "My reaction aside, Mr. Hunter, I do like kissing. That is why I do so much of it." Oh, how smooth her lie was. How convincing.

He grinned as if deriving some satisfaction from her reply. "So, Lady Lace, is that your game? Gathering kisses?"

She was not surprised that he knew her alias. She was well on her way to becoming notorious. She considered lying to him but realized it would be futile. If she was any judge, this man had told enough lies in his life that he would surely recognize hers. "Perhaps I am too countrified, sir, but I am always amazed when I realize how entitled complete strangers in the city feel they are to the intimate details of one's life."

He gave her a slight nod. "I gather I am not the first to inquire into your background. But a name is hardly intimate, madam."

"There is no need to grant anyone permission to use it, since I do not plan on being long in London."

He reached out and lifted the domino from her face, dropping it on the console table. "Do I look like the sort of man who needs permission?"

No, he certainly did not. His very presence unnerved her. He was dark and handsome. He was strong and commanding. He was dangerous. He was a man just like the one who had killed Cora. And then she realized what she

had to do. She would come to it sooner or later, so it was best to have it over and done with now.

She closed the short distance between them, slipped her arms around his neck and lifted on her toes to reach his mouth. She felt his little shock of surprise in the sudden stiffening of his spine, but when she pressed her lips to his, he softened, wrapping his arms around her and turning with her until her back was pressed to the wall. No escape.

No mercy.

His kiss was consuming and powerful. It was undeniable, making her head swim and her senses reel. And then, when her resistance weakened, it turned coaxing, teasing with little flicks of fire at the edges. Her breasts, flattened to his chest, began tingling and aching, quite unlike anything she'd experienced before. Somewhere in the back of her mind, it registered that she was losing herself to this kiss--losing her very will to resist.

Oh, dear Lord, she'd lost control of this situation! She summoned the few senses remaining to her and fought to regain that tenuous hold. Alas, Andrew Hunter had no intention of relinquishing it. His tongue met hers and merged with a hot demand. She wanted to retreat, but there was nowhere for her to go. With the wall at her back and Mr. Hunter at her front, she was trapped as effectively as if she'd been caged. And in another minute, she would crave captivity. She slid her fingers up his neck and stroked the soft wave of dark hair at his nape and arched against him, wanting more of the breathless feelings he elicited.

And then he went still and stiff. He surrendered her mouth with a low growl and reached up to disentangle her arms from around him and turned away. Had she disgusted him?

"You have bewitched me, Lady Lace," he said as he turned back. "But I prefer to conduct such activities in private."

She realized that she had somehow wandered from her original purpose, but she didn't know how. She could only stand there, looking at him, unable to speak.

"Name your price. And please do not disappoint me by asking me what I mean."

Oh, that much, at least, was clear. She could only hope he thought she was a courtesan rather than a common whore. "I understand, sir, but I fear you have misread me. I am not for sale. Not at any price."

"Then you are looking for a husband."

"No."

"Just as well, my sweet, since no *respectable* man would marry a woman who'd kissed half his friends and more."

She gave him a self-deprecating laugh and looked away, wondering if there was another abandoned glass of liquor nearby. "Perhaps the man I am seeking is not respectable."

"Then you and I are ideally suited, madam, since I am not the least bit respectable."

She might have thought he was teasing or cajoling, if his tone had not been completely serious. Oh, and she could believe him. One could not kiss like that without years practice and miles of experience. But there was something darker in his voice, something frightening. She turned back to find him uncomfortably close. She raised one hand to hold him apart.

"No words of affection? No declaration of fidelity or undying love? No pretty manners or promises? What sort of courtship is this, sir?"

"Have I not said you've bewitched me? I could tell you lies, Lace, but I hoped you were not the sort to require such twaddle. How could I love you when I

barely know you? How could I swear fidelity when we both will be on to the next lover as soon as our affair palls? But if that is what you need, I shall give it to you, though be warned--I won't mean a word of it, and I won't have you crying 'foul' afterward."

He was honest, at least. Of the four similar proposals she'd garnered, not one of them had been honest enough to tell the truth. "N-nevertheless, Mr. Hunter. I am not for sale."

"If not money or marriage, name your terms."

Searching for words, she shrugged. "When...when I know them, sir, I shall tell you."

"Please do. When I want something, I am not a very patient man."

"Thank you for the warning."

He grinned, bowed and took his leave. When he was halfway across the ballroom, he turned to look at her again. She could feel his gaze sweep her from head to toe. His admiration was clear, but the open sexuality of his gaze unnerved her.

She glanced at her domino on the console table. How would she ever hold him at bay? She had better find her quarry soon.