

EXCERPT of MASKED DESIRE by Elaine Angelus Kehler

Amelia stared up at the twinkling stars. Tears filled her eyes, and she wanted to cry. She could not look at Raine yet. She did not want to see the disappointment, or worse, the pity she knew would be in his eyes. With her back to Raine, she sat up and tried to right her costume, but it was damaged beyond repair. She did the best she could to cover her breasts and smooth her wrinkled skirt. When Amelia finally stood to face him, it was not disappointment or pity she found. It was anger!

“You should have told me you were a maid,” Raine growled between tightly clenched teeth. “What game do you play at?”

What game do you play at? His question repeated in her mind. He thought she had planned this! Fury replaced her self-pity at the implication of his question. Without hesitation, Amelia drew her hand back and slapped his face as hard as she could. “You thought me a trollop!” she spat out at him.

Raine touched the spot where she hit him.

“No!” Raine glared at her. “I never thought so meanly of you, but I am no blackguard who goes about deflowering innocent maids.”

“What did you think then?” she asked vehemently. “Did you think me an easy diversion for a boring evening?”

“Do not dare try and rest this entirely at my door!” Raine glowered at her. He growled at her in frustration, “You came here alone and uninvited! The way you kissed me! You led me to believe you wanted ... you wanted...”

He hesitated.

“Your actions were too wanton to be mistaken as innocent.”

His words hurt Amelia to her core and did nothing to quell her anger. “Perhaps my actions were too bold, but I did not think—”

“Obviously, you were not thinking at all!” Raine interrupted impatiently. “I am ill at ease speaking to you with your face covered. Remove that infernal mask and tell me your name.”

“I will not!” Amelia refused indignantly. “At this moment your ease is of no concern of mine.”

“I must assume that you are from a family of some standing,” he interrupted her again. “This is no light matter, and the consequences may be very dear indeed! Your reputation and that of your family may be ruined. If someday you were to be made a legitimate offer... No gentleman of rank wishes to marry a bride he finds less than virtuous. This was incredibly reckless of you!”

Uncontrollable anger boiled with rage in Amelia.

“You arrogant, pompous, self-righteous oaf!” she said, unable to hide the contempt in her voice. “You profess outrage and concern that I was a maid? If I were not, I venture your conscious would be clear then? Would there be no trace of guilt at having taken a woman at the home of your betrothed? I should ask you ‘What game do you play at?’”

“You knew?” Raine exclaimed. “You knew all along of my engagement? Yet you came out here with me?”

“Yes,” Amelia answered.

“Were you sent here? Is this some calculated ploy with blackmail as its purpose?” Raine accused.

“You need not fear blackmail from me,” Amelia retorted. “I am of little threat to you.”

“You may feel differently if you find you are with child. Then you may change your tune,” Raine charged as he scooped up his cape, draped it around her shoulders, but did not release his grip.

“I doubt there is any cause for alarm on that score,” Amelia said unconvinced. “You need not fear any obligation!”

Amelia heard laughter from some guests in the garden as they came toward them and worried they might be found.

“I must leave now. Let me go!”

“No cause for alarm? Of course, there is cause for alarm. Of course, there would be an obligation,” Raine insisted. “If you find you are expecting I would have to provide for you both.”

He did not let go of the cape as he spoke. Amelia knew it would be too cruel to leave any man unsure if they had fathered a child.

“Very well, as to whether there is a child or not, I will find a way to have a message delivered to you,” Amelia promised in hushed tones. “Other than that, we must both forget this evening. Now let me go before we are discovered.”

Amelia’s panic rose as she heard the voices come closer.

“You must tell me your name!” Raine insisted. Amelia only shook her head. “You cannot leave me this way. Without knowing who you are...”

“If you care anything about my reputation, you will let me go.” Amelia tried to pull away, but Raine would not release his hold. Amelia begged, “We must not be seen together like this.”

“Tell me who you are!” Raine’s voice was as firm as his grip.

The voices came even closer, and Amelia could wait no longer. Hard as she could, she kicked Raine’s shin. He let her go with a yelp, and Amelia quickly disappeared through the maze.

Raine rubbed the spot where she kicked him and watched as the mysterious creature that stirred both his desire and anger slipped deeper into the maze.

“This is not over,” he promised. “I will find you.”