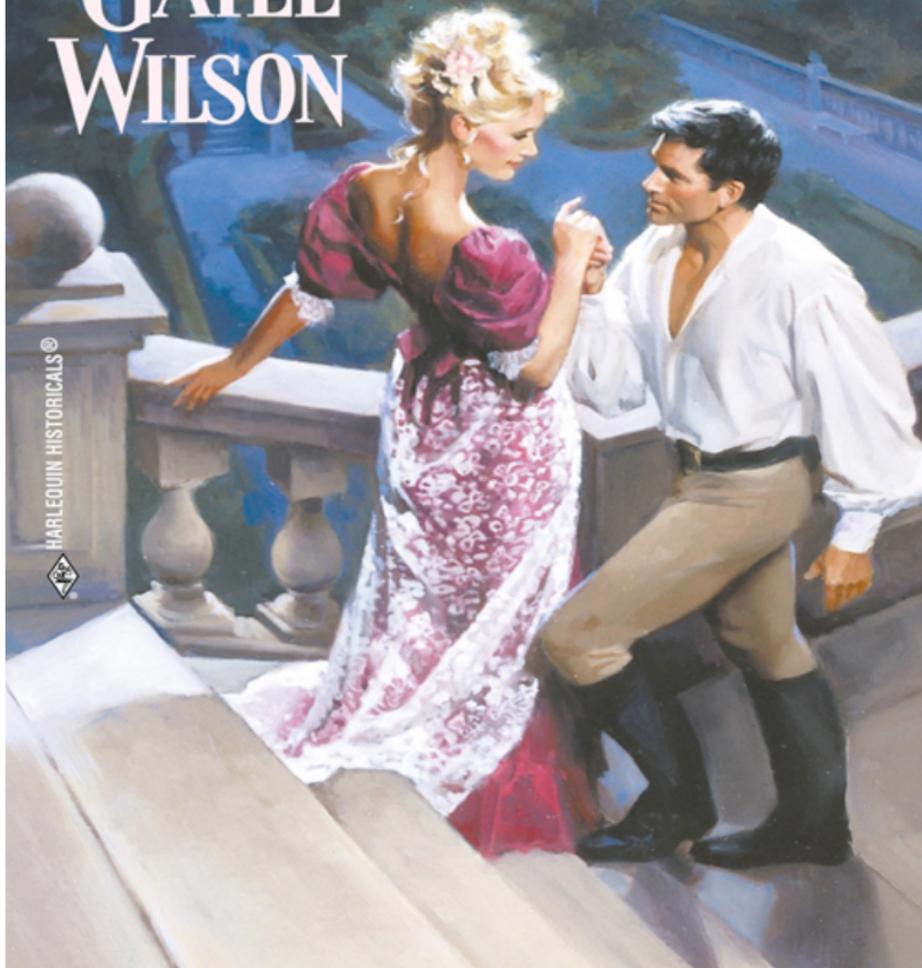


MY LADY'S DARE

GAYLE
WILSON

HARLEQUIN HISTORICALS®



Gayle Wilson

My Lady's Dare

Аннотация

Valentine Sinclair, the Earl of Dare, was an enigma, even to those who professed to know him well. For while his morals seemed suspect and his leisure pursuits as reckless as any of his well-heeled peers', there was something lurking beneath the facade of good looks, wit and charm that he so skillfully hid behind. Or so it had seemed, until the night Dare wagered a small fortune for a French gambler's English mistress, and won. Now, with the stunning widow installed at his town house, even the Matchmaking Mamas of the ton were doubting that the Earl of Dare would ever recover his good name, for it appeared that the infamous Mrs. Carstairs was destined to become a Sinclair Bride.

Содержание

“The woman,” the earl said softly.	5
Available from Harlequin Historicals and GAYLE WILSON	8
Contents	10
Prologue	11
Chapter One	18
Chapter Two	44
Chapter Three	63
Chapter Four	82
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	84

“The woman,” the earl said softly.

“I beg your pardon?” the Frenchman replied.

“You may wager the woman,” Dare said.

“Mrs. Carstairs?” Bonnet asked, his voice astounded. “But this is England, my lord. Not...” The Frenchman’s voice faltered, as if he could not think of a location where one might wager a human being.

“Indeed, it is,” Dare agreed. With one finger he touched the enormous pile of notes on the table between them. “And these are the coins of the realm. Quite a lot of them, as a matter of fact. I’ll wager them all, Mr. Bonnet, on one game. All of this for the woman.”

Bonnet’s eyes had followed the movement of the earl’s hand as it reached out and touched the money. And then they rose again, considering his opponent’s face. “One game?”

“Winner take all,” Dare said softly. “And the only stake you must put up is Mrs. Carstairs.”

Dear Reader,

Much of the beauty of romance novels is that most are written by women for women, and feature strong and passionate heroines. We have some stellar authors this month who bring to life those intrepid women we love as they engage in relationships with the men we also love!

We are very proud of Gayle Wilson, who has won awards

for several of her Harlequin Historicals novels, as well as her contemporary romances for Harlequin Intrigue. Known for her gripping and original stories, Gayle's latest book, *My Lady's Dare*, is no exception. This Regency-set tale will grab you and not let go as the Earl of Dare becomes fascinated by another man's mistress, Elizabeth Carstairs. Nothing is as it seems in this dangerous game of espionage that turns into an even more dangerous game of love!

In *Bandera's Bride*, the talented Mary McBride gives her Southern belle heroine some serious chutzpah when, pregnant and alone, she travels to Texas to propose marriage to her pen pal of six years, a half-breed who's been signing his partner's name! And don't miss Susan Amarillas's new Western, *Molly's Hero*, a story of forbidden love between a—married?—female rancher and the handsome railroad builder who desperately needs her land.

Jacqueline Navin rounds out the month with *The Viking's Heart*, the sensational story of a fierce Viking who vows to save a proud noblewoman from a loveless arranged marriage.

Enjoy! And come back again next month for four more choices of the best in historical romance.

Sincerely,

Tracy Farrell,

Senior Editor

My Lady's Dare

Gayle Wilson



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Available from Harlequin Historicals and GAYLE WILSON

The Heart's Desire #211

The Heart's Wager #263

The Gambler's Heart #299

Raven's Vow #349

His Secret Duchess #393

Honor's Bride #432

Lady Sarah's Son #483

My Lady's Dare #516

Other works include:

Harlequin Intrigue

Echoes in the Dark #344

Only a Whisper #376

The Redemption of Deke Summers #414

Heart of the Night #442

*Ransom My Heart #461

*Whisper My Love #466

*Remember My Touch #469

Never Let Her Go #490

**The Bride's Protector #509

**The Stranger She Knew #513

**Her Baby, His Secret #517

†Each Precious Hour #541

**Her Private Bodyguard #561

For my cousin Elizabeth—the pretty one

Contents

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Epilogue

Prologue

Paris, 1813

The edge of the blade sliced through the skin of the Earl of Dare's neck as its point thudded into the scarred wood at his back. Only a reflexive jerk of his head to the side had prevented the tip from piercing his throat instead of the door behind him.

With a lightning shift of balance, Dare thrust his own sword forward and into the chest of the man whose blade was momentarily useless, its tip embedded in the wood. When Dare pulled back his arm, the hiss of escaping air and the gush of blood that followed told him this fight was at an end.

The dying man slumped against him, and the earl supported the body with his sword hand while he sought for the latch of the door behind him with his other. Just as he found it, a cry went up from the courtyard in front of the house where he was hiding.

He didn't know how the French had found him. It made no difference now. What was important was getting out without being seen or heard by the soldiers in the street. He opened the door, making as little noise as possible, and stepped out, pulling the body of the dead man with him into the concealing darkness of the night.

Dare tried to execute his missions when no moon rode the night sky. During those expeditions, which put him within the very heart of the enemy's strongholds, he needed every advantage

he and nature could devise. But with the relentless manhunt now being carried out through the winding Parisian streets, he would need more of those advantages than ever before.

The earl eased the body he'd been supporting into the shadows cast by the wide eaves and pulled the door closed behind him. Then he leaned back against it as, breathing suspended, he strained to follow by sound alone the progress of the search.

The shouted commands and the noise of the milling horses all seemed to be coming from the crooked lanes that ran in front of the house. He could hear no movement here along the river, except for the occasional lap of water against one of the rotting piers that serviced the shops and houses that had been built along this embankment.

Using his teeth, the earl pulled the thin leather glove off his left hand and put his bare fingers against the wound on his neck. The cut had begun to burn, and he found it was bleeding more profusely than he would have liked, the blood warm and thick against the chill of his trembling fingertips.

He took his hand away, holding it by force of habit in front of him. The Stygian blackness of the alleyway, an odoriferous cobblestoned ribbon which followed the left bank of the Seine, prevented him from being able to see either blood or fingers.

Wiping the moisture on his cloak, Dare pulled the glove back on, again using his teeth to finish the job. He was still listening to the sounds of the hunt, ready to spring to action if his pursuers approached. He tugged his cravat higher around his

throat, hoping it would catch the blood.

Eventually the searchers would bring torches to try to find any trace of their prey as the hunt fanned out along the riverbank. He couldn't afford to leave a tell-tale trail of blood by which they could track him. Although he himself might be back in England by the time those droplets were discovered, the man in whose house he would take shelter tonight would not be.

And the Earl of Dare had a hard-earned reputation for protecting his associates. Anyone who didn't wouldn't last long in this business. The line of the earl's mouth slanted suddenly. Despite his predicament, he was amused by that thought. Actually, no one lasted long in his business, no matter the care he took.

He had certainly been pushing his luck tonight. Of course, that was something he had always done. His brother Ian accused him of needing the thrill this dangerous game gave him. The narrow escapes. The occasional pursuit. Perhaps his brother was right, he admitted, his lips tilting again. After all, Ian usually was. Especially about his siblings.

Dare stepped away from the shadows of the building, moving with the graceful stealth of a hunting cat, the hilt of his sword still clutched in his hand. He carried a loaded pistol as well, but it was the blade that had saved his life tonight. As it had on more than one occasion. The sound of a shot in a Parisian street would undoubtedly be investigated by the authorities, but the whisper of a rapier, as quick and deadly as an adder's strike, had never

given away his location.

Once he had put some distance between himself and the yard of the house where he had left the dead man, the earl began to hurry. He moved almost soundlessly, his booted feet running lightly over the rough and broken stones. His eyes examined every patch of darkness that loomed ahead, but gradually the noise of the soldiers faded away behind him.

It wouldn't be long before they found the body of the man he had killed, however. And when they did, he had no doubt that they would redouble their efforts. If only his famous luck would hold a little longer, he thought, recognizing that he was nearing his destination. Then the French would again be disappointed in their efforts to capture him.

Eventually, the earl slipped into a low stone doorway, ducking his head to accommodate his height to an entrance that had been constructed three centuries before. This area was one of the oldest in the city, the buildings still partially enclosed by the medieval wall.

Even without light, it was obvious he was in the right place. The scent in the low room was so strong it was almost taste. Dare stood a moment, his nose raised like a hound's, breathing in the thick air, richly pungent with hops and malt.

"Running late are you, my lord?" a voice asked. The accent was English, broadened by the speaker's obvious Yorkshire heritage. "I was beginning to get worried."

"Someone tried to slice my gullet," Dare explained, closing

the heavy door by which he had just entered and throwing the iron bolt across it. "I was forced to...dissuade him."

As soon as the lock shot home, he heard the sound of a flint, and the pale, wavering thread of fire it had produced gradually became a glow. Then slowly, out of the shadows beside the strengthening light, a face, Mephistophelianlike, floated into view.

Unlike the voice that had preceded them, its features were nondescript, as easily French or Italian as British: dark eyes, an undistinguished jut of nose, a wide, generous mouth, arranged in a grin. And all of them surmounted by mouse-brown hair, which had been tied back in a neat queue.

"Oh, you ain't gone and bloodied your linen, have you, my lord?" the earl's valet asked plaintively. "You've no idea what a time I have with bloodstains. And you would be wearing one of our new cravats."

"I've almost been beheaded, Ned, and all you can worry about is the state of my cravat," the earl said, laughing. He slipped the woolen cloak off his shoulders and threw it carelessly over a convenient cask.

"It's not just the linen that's the problem," Ned Harper said. "It's the lace as well. Hard to come by now that Nappy's got the continent tied up."

"Perhaps we might shop for a yard or two before we leave Paris," Dare suggested politely.

He crossed the room to where his valet was standing and took

the brimming mug held out to him. The earl raised the cup and drank down its contents in one long quaff, then lowered it to look into his servant's eyes.

"He wasn't there," Dare said softly, and watched the laughter fade from Ned Harper's face.

"Damn," the smaller man said feelingly.

"Bloody right," agreed the earl. "He wasn't there, and the gendarmes were."

There was a long silence as his valet considered the information. "Someone told them you were coming."

"There was only one man who knew that."

"He'd never talk," Harper declared with conviction.

"Anyone can be made to talk," the earl said softly. "There are things which may be done to a man..." The words faded, and again the Earl of Dare's eyes met those of his friend. "Anyone can be made to talk," he finished simply.

Harper nodded, his gaze still locked on the earl's classically handsome face. The grin with which he had greeted his master was gone. Perhaps he was thinking, as Dare was, of the terrible things that were done to prisoners in France today. The same unspeakable tortures that had once, a long time ago, been carried out in the bowels of England's own dungeons.

"Then...we have to get him out," Harper said. "Out of Paris. Out of the country."

"Indeed," the earl said, his eyes, made sapphire by the lamplight, were no longer focused on his valet's face. They were

gazing instead, unseeing, into the heart of the flame.

“What will you do?” Harper asked.

“First, we shall have to find him. Which may take some time.”

The earl’s voice faltered again as his imagination visited the prison where his friend would be held while his enemies tried to extract information from him. Information about his contacts in espionage, such as the earl himself.

“And time, Ned...” Dare continued after a long silence, his voice very soft. “Time is now a luxury we no longer have.”

Chapter One

London, three nights later

“If all goes according to plan, my dear, we shall have a very special guest tonight,” Henri Bonnet said, smiling with undisguised satisfaction. “One to whom I wish you to be especially attentive.”

Elizabeth Carstairs’ eyes lifted to the reflection of her employer’s in the mirror above her dressing table. She said nothing, however, and after a moment she returned her attention to the task of darkening the pale lashes above her blue eyes.

The Frenchman strode angrily across the room and caught her chin in his fingers, roughly turning her to face him. “A very special guest,” he said again, each word sharp and distinct. “Do you understand me, Elizabeth?”

“Of course,” the Englishwoman said. Neither her face nor her voice expressed dismay at the gambler’s treatment of her.

For the past two years, Elizabeth Carstairs had had little control over any aspect of her life except her demeanor. And she had decided from the beginning that Henri Bonnet would never be allowed to know what she was thinking. Or feeling.

Still gripping her chin painfully, Bonnet turned her face toward the light of the lamp on her dressing table. He examined it critically before he dipped one finger into a pot of rouge, which was standing open on the dresser. He added more color to her

lips and then to her cheeks, blending the rouge into the small amount she had already applied.

He stepped back, his head tilted, still assessing. Then he touched the sleeve of the blue gown she was wearing, flicking its edging of lace dismissingly. “And wear the red, I think, rather than this. We are entertaining someone important, Elizabeth. Someone very important. And I’m counting on you, of course, to do your part,” he added softly.

Without waiting to see if she would obey his command to change—because he knew that she would—the gambler turned, leaving her alone in her bedroom. Her eyes returned to the reflection in the mirror. She watched her lips tighten in anger, and then using the tips of her fingers, she scrubbed at the rouge, trying to remove it from her cheeks.

After a moment, the movement of her fingers stopped, and she leaned forward, staring intently into the eyes of the woman in glass. Slowly she shook her head, a single negative movement. Then she rose, her fingers working over the buttons down the back of her bodice, preparing to put on the dress the gambler had instructed her to wear. Her lips were set, her eyes cold, and after she had changed, she never looked again into the mirror.

“So good of you to honor us with your company, my Lord Dare,” Henri Bonnet said.

The Frenchman bowed from the waist. His left hand, graced by a brilliantly faceted emerald ring, made a sweeping gesture toward a large gaming table, which had been set up in one of the

private salons of his elegant London hell.

There were two empty chairs at the table. The other four were occupied by gentlemen of the earl's acquaintance, who had obviously been awaiting his arrival. Dare's gaze skimmed almost insultingly over his host, not even acknowledging his bow. He considered the group at the table, his eyes resting briefly on the face of each man.

"I believe you know everyone," the Frenchman added, his tone expressing no displeasure that the earl had failed to respond to his effusive greeting. However rude the earl might be, they all knew the gambler couldn't afford to offend so wealthy a patron.

All conversation at the table had come to a halt with the earl's arrival, and every eye was focused on the figure poised in the doorway. Despite the fact that he had reached his London town house less than an hour ago, Dare knew there was nothing to criticize in his appearance. With Harper's assistance, and according to the reassuring reflection in his mirror, he had again achieved the sartorial elegance for which Valentine Sinclair, the Earl of Dare was justly famous. Or perhaps justly infamous, he thought, mocking his own carefully constructed reputation.

It was said that some of the younger members of the beau monde had once tried to estimate the cost of the clothing Dare had worn to some court occasion, even going so far as to place wagers on the amount in the betting books. Despite the fact that he was known for indulging his expensive taste to the utmost, the sums Dare heard mentioned in that incident hadn't even

approached the amount he had actually spent.

And spent for a good cause, he acknowledged, bowing formally toward the Duke of Pendlebrooke, the only man present who outranked him. Dare's attention to fashion was part of his ongoing masquerade. As were most of his excesses, including the one he would engage in tonight.

"Gentlemen," Dare said, inclining his head to the men at the table, "I bid you good evening. And offer my abject apologies to have kept you waiting. My man was singularly inept tonight."

Forgive me, Ned, Dare thought, as he made that ridiculous statement. Harper's reputation rivaled Dare's own among the fops of the ton, and they laughed together about the secret offers the valet received, attempting to lure him away from his employer.

"I throw myself on your mercy and beg your forgiveness for my tardiness," Dare finished with the slightest bend of his upper body. His tone somehow made it obvious that he didn't really give a tinker's damn whether or not they forgave him.

As he bowed, Dare's fingers unobtrusively touched the heavily starched cravat around his throat, tied tonight in an intricate style that bore his name. He eased the cloth upward, although Harper had assured him the gash was completely covered.

Adjusting his clothing once he had left his dressing room was something that Dare, like Brummel, ordinarily would never have done. However, revealing that he bore a sword cut on his neck would be a far more serious faux pas. A wound of that nature

would be totally out of character for the Earl of Dare that London believed she knew.

Despite his apology for being late, Dare crossed the room as unhurriedly as if he were strolling along the shop windows on Bond Street. With impeccable timing, Bonnet's servant pulled out the empty chair on the nearer side just as Dare reached the table. Gracefully adjusting the tail of his coat, the earl sat down, blue eyes again considering the men who were very shortly to become his opponents.

Although he had rather be almost anywhere else on earth than here, Dare's face reflected nothing of that feeling. Only a languid boredom was allowed to play across his features. The expression appeared to be habitual and, like his clothing, was frequently aped by aspiring dandies, who hoped to achieve this same air of elegantly detached ennui.

The earl was not, however, suffering from boredom. He was grief-stricken and furious, exhausted from a more than forty-eight hour lack of sleep, and sickened by the events of the three days he had just spent in France.

He had kept this engagement tonight only because not appearing might have called into question his whereabouts during those days. And the fact that a dear friend had died in his arms today would not have served as an excuse for his absence. After all, given Dare's reputation, most people would be surprised had he claimed to possess a friend. Certainly not one who had been willing to give his own life to protect the earl's.

Remembering that sacrifice, Dare's lips flattened, almost imperceptibly. Emotion was something he could not allow, of course, so deliberately he forced from his mind the image of the broken body he had held. He could not afford to let his failure in France interfere with his purposes here, which were perhaps as important as the ones which had taken him to the continent.

Henri Bonnet entertained the most influential men in the British capital, including those who ran the Horse Guards and those who sat in the House of Lords and occupied positions of authority within the current government. Talk of politics and war flowed as freely at these tables as did the Frenchman's wine, which made this house an excellent source of information.

Bonnet was openly contemptuous of the Corsican upstart who occupied the throne of France. Reportedly the descendent of a family prominent in the ancien régime, Bonnet had come to England at the height of the Revolution. With no skills and little money, the former aristocrat had opened a small gaming house where, he had proclaimed, there would never be a betting limit.

His establishment had become the most popular gaming hell in the city and was now housed in this magnificent Palladian town house. And there was still no limit on what could be staked on the turn of a card or the spin of the wheel.

"Would you care for wine, my lord?" Bonnet asked.

Looking up, Dare realized that the servant who seated him had disappeared. A woman now stood beside his chair, holding a silver tray on which stood a decanter of claret and a single

goblet. The light from the candles which illuminated the room was refracted from the crystal, turning the wine a rich ruby red.

The woman's gown, expertly fashioned from a heavy satin of almost that same hue, was cut straight across and very low over the swell of her breasts. In contrast to the jewellike tones of the fabric, her skin was luminous as pearl, shaded with gold by the flattering candlelight.

Looking up into her eyes, Dare realized they were as blue as his own. As she waited, they rested on his face with a patent disinterest. Dare's features had evoked a myriad of responses from women through the years. Disinterest, however, had never been one of them, and it intrigued him.

To his very experienced eyes, it was apparent her face had been painted, although it had been done with an expert hand. The use of cosmetics, which no respectable Englishwomen of his class wore, of course, told the earl a great deal. Her hair, silver-gilt in the candlelight, was dressed very simply in a style that any hostess of the ton might have worn. Loose curls, tumbling artlessly above the flawless oval of her face, had been threaded with a single strand of what appeared to be genuine rubies.

"My lord?" she inquired softly. One fair eyebrow arched with her question.

"Of course," Dare said, realizing that in his fascination he had never answered Bonnet. Even to his own ears, his voice as he did sounded unnatural, almost husky, touched with emotion.

Surprisingly, he found himself still watching the woman as

she handed the tray to the manservant. She removed the decanter with a graceful economy of motion and poured wine into the goblet, which she had set on the table. She never looked at Dare during the process.

As she bent over him, however, the earl was suddenly surrounded by the subtle scent she wore. Not the familiar rose or lavender waters favored by the women of his set. This was something darker, heady with musk, sensually evocative, and almost certainly French.

When the woman straightened and began to turn to put the decanter back on the tray, Dare spoke, his accent deliberately no better than the average Englishman's, although he had been fluent in French since childhood. "Merci, mademoiselle."

"But Mrs. Carstairs is a countrywoman of yours, my lord," Bonnet corrected, his tone verging on amusement.

"Indeed," Dare said, pretending to study her features as if her nationality might somehow be revealed by them. "I'm sure I should never have guessed. My compliments, madam."

At his words, she turned back, the decanter still in her hands. From the look in her eyes, the earl could not be perfectly certain she wasn't about to throw it at his head.

"Your...compliments, my lord?" she asked.

"For being English, of course," the earl said, his lips tilting. "Why, whatever did you think I meant, Mrs. Carstairs?"

"I thought you were complimenting me that I didn't appear to be English." Her eyes challenged him a moment before she

added, her tone conciliatory, as befitted someone in her position. "Obviously, I was mistaken. Pray forgive me, my lord."

"Had I meant that, madam," Dare said smoothly, "then I should be the one to beg your forgiveness."

"There is no need for your apologies here, Lord Dare," Bonnet said laughing. "Whatever your meaning. Elizabeth is here to serve you. If there is anything you should require during your visit, anything at all..." The Frenchman paused and again gestured expansively, this time seeming to include the woman and the servant behind her, who was still holding the tray. "Please don't hesitate to make your wishes known. Any of my servants will be pleased to accommodate so welcome a guest. In any way you desire," he added, his voice soft, and his eyes on the woman.

There had been an obvious undercurrent in the suggestive words, and Dare found himself interested in Elizabeth Carstairs' reaction. Her eyes met Bonnet's. Dare was unable to see what was in them, but there was no doubt about the rush of color that ran beneath the translucent skin of her throat and spread upward into her cheeks, far more pronounced than the rouge.

The intent of Bonnet's offer had probably been clear to everyone. Mrs. Carstairs' "services" were available to the Earl of Dare, and perhaps even to the rest of them. Given the character of women who were usually employed in a gaming hell, there had been nothing particularly startling about the Frenchman's offer. What had been surprising was Mrs. Carstairs' response. Seldom had the earl encountered a demimondaine who had the capacity

to blush. Or, he admitted admiringly, the courage to parry wits so openly with one of her employer's guests.

"You are too kind, sir," Dare said, inclining his head.

The gambler had introduced her as Mrs. Carstairs, but that title was almost certainly a sop to convention. In England, any unmarried woman living under a man's protection was referred to in such a way. It was a ridiculous pretense, but then much about the conventions of their society was ridiculous.

At Dare's expression of gratitude, Elizabeth Carstairs had turned her head. Her eyes met his. In them, quite clear, was rage. And beneath that unspoken anger was pain, an agony perhaps as deep as that which he had seen in the eyes of the man whose tortured body he had held today as he drew his last breath. For a moment the force of her anguish was so strong and communicated to him so forcefully that it literally took his breath.

It had not been an appeal. He had no doubt that the revelation had been unintended. Perhaps if he had not had so recent an experience with suffering, he might not even have recognized what he had seen.

Breaking the contact that had briefly flared between them, Elizabeth Carstairs turned, calmly replacing the decanter on the tray and stepping away from the table. Dare heard the fabric of her gown whisper as she moved, and the hint of her perfume lingered in the air, but he could no longer see her face.

And he found he really wanted to. A discovery that was

almost as shocking to the Earl of Dare as Elizabeth Carstairs' unexpected reaction to Bonnet's offer had been.

"Gentlemen," the Frenchman said, "shall we begin?"

It was almost dawn. A thin, watery daylight was beginning to creep between the folds of the thick velvet curtains that had been pulled to keep it out. A pall of smoke, floating a few inches off the floor, hung over the Turkish carpets. Several of the candles had guttered and gone out, and there was no more conversation.

No one had yet left the table, although now only two men were playing. And it was obvious that very soon one of those two would be the victor.

The heap of notes piled carelessly before the Earl of Dare had steadily grown during the last few hours. The stack that stood before Bonnet had conversely shrunk until only a handful of what had been there at the beginning of the evening was left. And the fickle cards, like a woman enamored with one gallant, continued to favor the earl.

"Capet," Dare said. "Forty points, and my game, I believe."

There was no tally sheet beside his long-fingered hands that rested, totally relaxed, against the surface of the table. The totals were kept in his head, and in every instance Dare's calculations had matched those announced by Elizabeth Carstairs, who stood slightly to the right and behind Bonnet's chair.

The kind of score keeping she had done was little more than a parlor trick, and one Dare had certainly seen before. One of the German casinos employed a dwarf to do the same thing. And in

Paris, during the short respite from the hostilities provided by the Peace of Amiens, Dare had once seen a small, brown-skinned boy, dressed like an Indian rajah in a turban and a striped silk tunic, keeping up with the points.

All it took was concentration on the cards and a head for sums. It was unusual to find those abilities in a woman, certainly, and the novelty was almost sure to appeal to the jaded gentleman of London's ton. Dare suspected, however, that Mrs. Carstairs' physical attributes were far more important in drawing visitors to Bonnet's rooms than was her head for numbers.

Throughout the long hours of the night, with the lift of her brow or the tilt of her chin she had directed the Frenchman's servants to refill the wineglasses or light the gentlemen's cigars. And when he and Bonnet had switched to piquet, she had kept their points in order. However, since her challenge to the earl's comment at the beginning of the evening, she had said almost nothing, except to answer Bonnet's demand for the score.

Once or twice, when Dare had raised his eyes from his cards, he had found hers resting on his face. Her gaze would then move to consider the face of another of the players, without haste and with no indication of discomfort at having been caught looking at him. Each time that happened, the earl had allowed his amusement to show, smiling as he followed her eyes, watching the gambler's woman deliberately not look at him.

"Elizabeth?" Bonnet's tone this time was sharper and more demanding than it had been before. The strain the Frenchman

was feeling as his losses mounted had gradually become apparent.

That was hardly surprising, however, since an enormous amount of money had changed hands tonight. The earl had raised the stakes with each game. And it was by now obvious to everyone, including Bonnet, that Dare seemed out to ruin the house.

“His lordship’s total is correct,” Mrs. Carstairs said. “The game is his.”

Her eyes considered the man seated across the table from her master, and this time they remained on his face, even when he lifted his own to meet them. He inclined his head, silently acknowledging her agreement.

“Another game,” the earl suggested to his opponent, his gaze still on Elizabeth Carstairs’ face.

All night, his mind only partially engaged by the cards, he had found himself trying to imagine what would bring a woman like her to this place. It had been merely an intellectual exercise, perhaps, designed to prevent his having to think about what had happened today—yesterday, he amended—in France.

The Frenchman’s lips tightened angrily at Dare’s suggestion, but there was no doubt what he would say. As long as a guest wished to play, Henri Bonnet’s tables were open. No matter the elegance of its furnishings, this was, after all, a gaming house. Gentlemen came here for only one reason; they wanted to gamble. And usually the Frenchman wanted that, as well.

Tonight, however, luck had deserted him. The cards had fallen Dare's way, and he had won with stunning regularity.

Without speaking, Bonnet reluctantly pushed his remaining notes to the center of the table. The stone in the ring he wore flashed green fire with the movement, just as it had with every turn of the cards. At the last it had seemed almost an omen of the Frenchman's ill fortune.

Bonnet's gaze lifted from that diminished stack of notes in front of him to the earl's face. His lips pursed again, and then, reluctantly, he began to remove the emerald ring, twisting and turning until the thick gold band slipped over his knuckle. He placed it on top of the money.

"This wager is agreeable to you, my lord?"

Dare's eyes examined the ring as it lay among the scattered notes. Finally, he picked it up, and holding the band between his thumb and forefinger, lifted the jewel to the light. After a few seconds, he tossed the ring carelessly onto the table.

"An exceptional stone," he said. The Frenchman smiled, his relief was almost palpable, until Dare added, "Except that it is badly flawed."

He raised his eyes once more to Elizabeth Carstairs' face. Her posture was as erect as it had been when the evening began, her head high, her hands at her waist, one resting within the other. The earl's gaze traveled slowly down and then back up her slender figure, clearly revealed by the narrow cut of her gown.

"A piece not worth half as much as it appears on first glance,"

Dare said softly.

His voice was pleasant. There was no hint of accusation in its deep timbre. It was obvious to everyone, however, that Dare's words were a thinly veiled metaphor for the woman standing behind the Frenchman's chair.

"I had been informed that the emerald is a gem of exceptional value," Bonnet said stiffly.

There was a small and deadly silence as everyone waited for Dare to respond. He chose not to, his eyes now on Bonnet's reddened face, his own expressionless. He displayed no anger at the Frenchman's denial. And he made no defense of his statement. The silence grew.

"However," Bonnet said finally, "I bow to your lordship's undoubtedly superior knowledge of such things. I had no idea the stone was flawed when I offered it."

"I was sure that was the case," the earl said, "which is why I felt I could do no less than point it out to you. A shame you were hoodwinked. Did you take it as a wager?" Dare asked, his eyes again lifting to the woman's face.

The same flood of color which had invaded her cheeks when Bonnet offered her "services" to his guest had again begun to edge her throat. Nothing else about her face had changed. She appeared undisturbed by either the earl's eyes or by his words, her features tranquil and composed.

"I took it as payment of a debt," Bonnet said.

"Pity," Dare replied, the boredom in his tone dismissing the

ring as an object unworthy of further discussion.

He pushed the huge, untidy pile of notes which had been lying in front of him into the center of the table. It represented the bulk of everything that had been wagered tonight, and its size dwarfed the small stack the gambler had offered. Then the earl waited. And the silence grew once more.

Across the room a candle sputtered and died. A whiff of white smoke trailed from it, drifting upward into the darkness. After a moment, Bonnet picked up the ring and pushed it almost violently back onto his finger.

“This house,” the Frenchman said, his words clipped. “I give you my word, my lord, that it is unencumbered by debt.”

The earl’s eyes examined the room as if he had not been sitting within it all night. Then he inclined his head to Bonnet. “May I offer my congratulations on the excellence of your property.”

The gambler’s lips flattened at the mockery before he gathered control and said, his voice clearly furious, “I believe its value to be more than equal to your current wager.”

“Ah,” Dare said, as if in sudden understanding. “You wish to put the house up as your stake.”

“That was my intent, my lord.”

“Forgive my slow wits. I thought you were merely making conversation. Your house against...” Dare’s eyes fell to consider the notes he had pushed to the center of the table only a moment before. He began pushing through them with one long finger as if he were counting. “Then it seems that I must add something

to my own stake. Something to sweeten the pot, so to speak. Something to make my wager as valuable as yours.”

Bonnet bowed. “I believe you are correct, my lord.”

“And do you believe I am correct, Mrs. Carstairs?” Dare asked. When she didn’t answer, he raised his eyes from the pile of notes. The color had drained from her face, leaving it milk-white. Her eyes met his.

“I do, my lord,” she said, her voice calm and controlled.

For almost the first time, Bonnet looked up, his gaze fastening on Mrs. Carstairs’ profile. His eyes narrowed when he found her oblivious to his examination, her gaze locked on Dare’s. Then the gambler looked at the English nobleman, whose mouth was arranged in an enigmatic half smile. Bonnet’s eyes came back to the woman standing just to the right of his chair.

Suddenly, with a violence that was totally unexpected, given the politeness which had veiled the accusations implied in the recent exchange, the Frenchman stood. He moved so suddenly that the heavy chair he had been sitting in tilted and fell over.

Startled, Elizabeth Carstairs’ gaze flew from Dare’s face to Bonnet. Without speaking, the Frenchman grasped her upper arm, his fingers digging into the soft flesh just above her elbow. Automatically, she flinched from the pain and tried to pull away, but his grip was brutal.

“Perhaps my luck might change if you weren’t here,” he said in French, adding a very idiomatic appellation, a gutter term which one might more appropriately expect to hear in a Parisian brothel.

The words were almost inaudible, muttered under the gambler's breath, and Bonnet had already begun to pull Elizabeth away from the table when he said them.

The Earl of Dare's hearing, however, was acute. He had heard them, half rising from his chair in response. His own iron control had already reasserted itself, however, when the gambler's eyes were drawn back to the table by that movement.

"No offense to you, my lord," Bonnet said, his fingers still gripping his employee's arm.

Elizabeth had by that time ceased to struggle. She did not look again at the earl, and her face was once more coldly composed, the blue eyes shuttered and emotionless. It was obvious she didn't expect Dare or any of the others to mount a rescue. She was Bonnet's property. He might therefore do with her as he wished. She understood that, it seemed, as did they.

Dare didn't glance toward the woman Bonnet was holding. His gaze was fastened instead on the Frenchman's face.

"Gamblers are a superstitious brotherhood," Bonnet continued. "When our luck is in, we wish everything to remain the same. When our luck is out, however—" The Frenchman turned to look at Elizabeth. "We make changes," he said softly, the words, and the threat, obvious.

Then he turned back to the table, smiling at his guests. "More wine, gentlemen?" He gestured imperiously to the servant across the room, the emerald again flashing, before he added, "We shall resume our game, Lord Dare, as soon as I return."

His fingers tightened, provoking another involuntary recoil from his victim. The gambler stalked to a small private door at the other side of the room, propelling Mrs. Carstairs along with him. With her free hand, she had gathered the long, straight fall of her gown to keep from stumbling over it.

When the two of them had disappeared through the door, which Bonnet slammed behind them, none of the Englishmen at the table said a word. Pendlebrooke signaled again for more wine, and this time the Frenchman's servant hurried forward to fill their glasses. When he had finished, he passed around more of Bonnet's cigars. Most of the men accepted, and as the familiar ritual of lighting them ensued, no one proposed any conversation to end the unnatural silence.

They had been as aware of the implication of what Bonnet had done, Dare imagined, as he had been. Bonnet might claim to be concerned about the effect the woman was having on his luck, but his action in taking her out of the room had suggested there was a more sinister explanation for Dare's good fortune.

The gambler had skirted very close to accusing the earl of cheating, implying that he had been receiving signals from the woman who stood behind the Frenchman's chair—in a perfect position to see his cards. Many of the hotheaded young coxcombs of the ton, ever careful of their honor, might well have challenged Bonnet, ignoring his stated reason for banishing Mrs. Carstairs from the room. Dare's reputation, however, was not as someone who went off half-cocked. He was considered coldly controlled,

almost dispassionate.

And so he appeared to be now. No one was aware of the surge of rage that had engulfed him as he had watched Bonnet humiliate and then physically mistreat Elizabeth Carstairs. It had brought back too vividly to his mind a torture far more brutal, but almost certainly as casually done. And to a victim who had been as helpless to prevent it as Bonnet's victim had been.

When the Frenchman reentered the room, he was pulling down his cuffs as he came through the door. Their costly lace fell over his hands as he walked back to the table. He nodded to his guests and waited as one of the servants hurried to restore his chair, which was still lying overturned on the thick carpet.

When he was seated, Bonnet raised his eyes to the earl. "I believe we were discussing the terms of your wager, my lord?"

Gradually, the smile began to fade as Dare said nothing, his eyes on the gambler's face. It disappeared completely when the earl spoke.

"What if your house, like your emerald, monsieur, has some hidden flaw? One may examine a stone, but it would be difficult to verify your claim of a free and clear title tonight."

"Do you doubt my word, my lord?"

"You didn't know the stone was flawed," Dare reminded him, his voice free of inflection. "Perhaps there is some...impediment to your title that you are also unaware of? How should I know if that were the case?"

"I possess nothing else of value, Lord Dare. My assets are,

at the moment, all tied up in this establishment. It is a recent purchase and needed a great deal of refurbishing. I'm afraid I have nothing else. If you are unwilling to accept my stake..."

He shrugged, the gesture eloquent and dismissive at the same time, neatly lobbing the ball back into Dare's court. It seemed that the earl's reluctance might offer Bonnet an escape.

"The woman," the earl said softly.

"I beg your pardon?" the Frenchman said.

"You may wager the woman," Dare said.

Again the silence in the room was complete. No one protested, although what Dare was proposing was unheard-of. Perhaps at one time women had been chattel, which might be won or lost on a hand of cards, but that was not the case today.

"Mrs. Carstairs?" Bonnet asked, his voice astounded.

"Mrs. Carstairs," the earl agreed, his voice expressing amusement at that astonishment.

"Mrs. Carstairs is..."

"Yes?" Dare questioned after there had been a pause of several long heartbeats.

"This is England, my lord. Not..." Again the Frenchman's voice faltered, as if he could not think of a location where one might wager a human being.

"Indeed it is," Dare agreed. With one finger he touched the enormous pile of notes on the table between them. "And these are the coins of the realm. Quite a lot of them, as a matter of fact. I'll wager them all, Monsieur Bonnet, on one game. All of

this for the woman.”

Bonnet’s eyes had followed the movement of the earl’s hand as it reached out and touched the money. And then they lifted again, considering his opponent’s face. “One game?”

“Winner take all,” Dare said softly. The corners of his mouth tilted. “And the only stake you must put up is Mrs. Carstairs.”

“My lord, I’m afraid that I really must—”

“We are all gentlemen here,” Dare continued, almost as if the gambler hadn’t protested. “This will go no further. I can assure you that what happens here tonight will never be spoken of again by any of these gentlemen.”

His eyes traveled slowly over the faces of each of the men at the table. They were all inveterate gamblers, well-known for their habits. What Dare saw in their eyes satisfied him that what he had said was indeed the truth. A wager legitimately made and agreed to by both parties was sacrosanct. Finally his gaze came back to the Frenchman.

“You needn’t be afraid,” Dare said. “No one will ever hear of this from any of us. Certainly not the authorities. After all, we would have as much, if not more, to lose than you if this were brought to their attention.”

That was true, of course. There was no reason for the Frenchman not to accede to the earl’s wishes. Dare might easily have demanded Bonnet put up the house, and if he had lost, the Frenchman would have been ruined. If he lost now, however...

“All right,” Bonnet said.

Apparently, once the decision had been reached, his reluctance disappeared. He picked up the cards and began to shuffle them with a practiced proficiency. They flew through his fingers in a blur. When he had finished, he placed the deck face down on the table for Dare to cut.

“Your stake?” the earl asked.

Surprised, the French gambler looked up from the cards.

“The lady should be present,” Dare said.

There was a long hesitation. “Superstition, my lord. I believe I explained my reluctance to you.”

“If her proximity to you bothers you, she may stand behind my chair.”

After another long delay, the gambler said, “I believe Mrs. Carstairs has already retired.”

“Send for her.”

“I’m afraid...that is, I believe she is...indisposed.”

“Send for her, please,” Dare said again, his voice very low. A command rather than a request.

Bonnet held the earl’s eyes a moment, his mouth tightening with unexpressed anger, and then he raised his hand and gestured to the servant who had refilled the wineglasses. When the man approached his chair, the Frenchman drew him close and whispered in his ear. The man nodded and walked across the room, disappearing through the same doorway out of which Bonnet had dragged Elizabeth Carstairs only moments before.

For the next ten minutes there was almost no sound in the

salon. Occasionally, one of the gentlemen pulled deeply on his cigar and audibly expelled the smoke. Finally, the door through which the servant had departed opened again. He entered and then stepped aside, holding it for the woman.

Elizabeth Carstairs hesitated in the doorway, her eyes first seeking Bonnet's and then touching briefly on the Earl of Dare's face before they came back to her master's. She was dressed in the same dress, but the rubies that had been entwined in her hair were gone. Apparently the curls they had held had been hastily repinned when she was summoned. A few unsecured tendrils floated around her temples and along her throat.

"Monsieur Bonnet feels, perhaps with some justification, that you have brought him ill fortune," the Earl of Dare said, speaking directly to her. "However, considering my own run of good luck, I have asked that you be allowed to rejoin us. If you would be so kind," he added politely.

She didn't move, her eyes again tracking from his face to the gambler's. Dare rose, walking across the room toward her. When he was near enough, he could see that he had been right in his suspicions. The imprint on her cheek, made by the Frenchman's palm, was quite clear.

The blow had reddened the delicate skin, leaving the distinct impression of each separate finger. There was a small spot of blood at the corner of her mouth, where it had cut against her teeth.

When Dare met her eyes again, he could see within them

doubt and perhaps even a trace of fear. She was uncertain of his motives. He couldn't blame her for being wary. After all, he had not protested when Bonnet dragged her from this room. None of the English gentlemen had. And so, Elizabeth Carstairs had no reason to believe that he intended to befriend her.

Dare himself could not explain why he had embarked on this crusade. It was out of keeping with the persona he had adopted years ago, and that made it dangerous, of course. As well as ridiculously quixotic, he acknowledged.

Without further comment, Dare held out his arm, wrist upward. He did not offer to take her hand. His gesture was far more formal, the same one he might have used to offer his escort to any lady of his acquaintance onto the dance floor perhaps or to be introduced to his friend, the Prince Regent.

As he watched Elizabeth Carstairs' slightly widened eyes come up to his, he knew that he had not been mistaken in his assessment of her. After a second or two, she placed her hand in the proper position on top of his wrist.

Despite her outward composure, he could feel her fingers tremble. They were cool against the heat of his own skin, and his body reacted to the feel of them there, the sudden rush of blood to his groin strong and hot.

And potentially embarrassing. Like a bloody schoolboy, Dare thought in amazement, exerting a control he had not been called upon to use in years. He allowed the images of his friend's face to reform in his mind, images he had fought all evening. Even

Elizabeth Carstairs' undeniable attractions were not proof against that horror.

When they reached the table, the illogical aversion he had taken to Bonnet was stronger than it had been before. He almost regretted not having required the house be a part of this wager. But of course, this whole thing was now about something more than his dislike for the gambler. It was now about this woman, and that, Dare admitted, was even more illogical than the other.

Chapter Two

When they reached the table, Elizabeth removed her hand from the Earl of Dare's arm and took her place behind his chair. The apprehension that had begun when Bonnet sent for her again was unabated. She wasn't sure why she was here. Although she had questioned the servant, he could tell her little beyond the fact that Monsieur Bonnet required that she come back downstairs.

Since she had been made very much aware of the gambler's displeasure when she left the salon, she had been surprised by his summons to return. She had already removed her dress, but it had been a matter of a few seconds to pull it back on again. She had then gathered her hair atop her head, hurriedly securing the curls with a few hairpins from the top of her dressing table.

Despite the fact that she knew she had done nothing to deserve his anger, she was mortified to be seen with the mark of Bonnet's hand still livid on her cheek. It wasn't the first time the gambler had struck her. Once he had even used his fists, but the resulting bruises had been too difficult to hide. She had missed several nights in attendance at the tables, and so, thankfully, he had never done that again.

The blow tonight had been painful, but not disfiguring. Based on experience, she knew the mark would hardly be noticeable tomorrow. At least it wouldn't have been, she amended, had she been allowed to remain in her bedroom with a cold compress

pressed to her cheek. Now, however...

The man seated in the chair beside her reached across the table and cut the deck of cards that lay face down upon it. Unlike her own, his fingers were perfectly steady—long and dark and somehow elegant. Her eyes had followed their movements all evening.

The Earl of Dare. Elizabeth tried to think what she had heard about the man who bore that title, but she could remember almost nothing beyond the family name, which was Sinclair. She wasn't sure why that had stuck in her memory.

She looked down at the man seated beside her, desperately trying to determine his age. Only the midnight-black hair and a narrow portion of his profile were visible from where she stood. She wished she had studied his face more closely when she had had the chance. Instead, she had determinedly fought the impulse to look at him all evening.

That was something that never happened to her before. Usually she avoided eye contact with the men who came to play at Bonnet's tables. It was safer that way. Her greatest fear had been that she might encounter a familiar face.

Dare's had not been, but still, there had been something about it that had drawn her. She tried to re-create his features in her mind's eye, even while her attention, like everyone else's, was seemingly locked on the cards.

His nose was almost aquiline, she remembered, the bridge high and finely shaped. As were his lips. And there was a small

cleft in the center of his chin. His skin was dark, more in keeping with the raven-blackness of his hair than with the remarkable blue eyes. Of course, she admitted, those were made even more noticeable by the sweep of long, thick lashes that surrounded them.

His high forehead was softened by the fashionable curls that were arranged to fall over it. All in all, it was a memorable face, the austere planes and angles suggesting a purpose and discipline that his manner throughout the evening had not.

There was a touch of gray at his temples, she noticed now, examining his profile. And a minute fan of lines radiated from the corner of the eye she could see. Which meant he was older than Jeremy, she decided in relief. Older by perhaps as much as five years, a difference great enough that Dare had probably not known him. She drew a deep, infinitely grateful breath.

That was not, then, why he had had Bonnet send for her. Not because he recognized her. Maybe it really had been only what he said. Maybe he really did believe she had brought him luck. Something obviously had, considering the size of the wager that lay in the center of the table.

And with that her mind came back to the cards. She found that despite her inattention, she could remember every trick that had been played, every card that had fallen. She had done this so often now that it required almost no conscious thought, allowing her mind to range freely, unencumbered by her present circumstances.

Her father had taught her sums when she was only a child. He had been a mathematician and an amateur astronomer. For him, as for her, mathematics had been an avocation. A joy. And now, even that had been perverted. Again, out of necessity this time, she compelled her mind to concentrate on the cards. Thinking of her father was forbidden. Almost as forbidden as the other.

“More wine, my lord?” Bonnet asked softly.

She glanced at the gambler, and realized he was smiling, his eyes almost gloating. There was a satisfaction in his voice which she had heard there before. He believed he would win. Perhaps he had been right about her presence behind his chair bringing him bad luck. God knew that if she could possibly have arranged ill fortune for the Frenchman, she would have.

“Thank you, no,” the earl said. His eyes had lifted to his opponent’s face, and the corner of his mouth that was visible to her had also lifted. “The clearer one’s head, you know.”

There was nothing in the deep voice that she could read. Certainly not anxiety, despite the fortune that rested on the table, riding on the turn of the cards. Whatever Bonnet believed about his own hand, the man beside her, the man who claimed she had brought him luck, had not yet conceded defeat. And for some reason, she was comforted by his unspoken confidence.

In the end, the margin was very narrow, only a few points separating the totals, but Bonnet had won the first hand.

“I believe your luck may indeed have changed,” Dare said. He was smiling. Of course, the Frenchman’s victory in this hand had

not been so great that it could not be overcome on the next.

“I think you’re right, my lord,” Bonnet said.

His eyes found Elizabeth’s face. She schooled her features to indifference, but in truth, she knew she should be glad the Frenchman was winning. Life would be far easier for her if he were in a better mood.

Judging by his attire and by the deference with which Bonnet had treated him, the Earl of Dare could afford to lose. He could bear this loss, and if he did, then she might not have to bear the brunt of the Frenchman’s anger.

As the game unfolded, however, the lead went back and forth, the narrow margin that separated the two opponents making it impossible to predict a final victory for one or the other. It was full day now, and several of the gentlemen had indicated by the impatience of their postures, if by nothing else, that it was past time to leave. Everyone was reluctant, however, to cause any loss of concentration by the players at this critical juncture. And then suddenly, as so often happened with the fickle cards, it was over.

“My hand,” the Earl of Dare said again. “The game as well, I believe. An unfortunate discard brought you down, I’m afraid, Monsieur Bonnet. But then, knowing what to discard and when to do so is often tricky.”

Bonnet’s eyes rose to Elizabeth, and believing he wanted verification of the nobleman’s calculation, she gave it.

“The earl’s hand by thirty points. And the game,” she said.

“It seems the lady has indeed brought you good fortune, my

lord,” Bonnet said.

Elizabeth was surprised by the equanimity with which the gambler was dealing with his loss. She had expected rage. She knew that what he had told the earl was the truth. Everything Bonnet had was tied up in this house. And now...

“I wish you well of her,” the Frenchman added.

The phrase reverberated strangely in Elizabeth’s consciousness. It made no sense in the context of his congratulations. Why would he wish Dare “well of her”?

“And good riddance,” the gambler added softly in French, his eyes meeting hers. And then his tone changed, as did his language. “Gentlemen,” he said, speaking to his guests in English, “it has, as always, been a pleasure to entertain you. I hope you will all return tomorrow night. Since the earl has been so kind as to leave me my house, play will resume then. And I especially look forward to the opportunity of another encounter with you, my Lord Dare.”

The earl had risen. He gathered the notes that lay scattered across the table and stacked them together before he shoved the thick wad into the pocket of his coat.

“The pleasure was mine,” Dare said. “And as for a return engagement...” His eyes found Elizabeth’s face. “Anything is possible, of course, but I believe I’ve won already the best your house has to offer.”

“I wish you joy of her, my lord. Be warned. She’s headstrong and occasionally needs a firm hand.”

“Indeed?” Dare said, his eyes still on her face. “Such as the one you applied?” he asked softly.

Slowly realization began to dawn for Elizabeth. They were talking about her as if...

The Earl of Dare presented his arm. She stared at him, her mind racing. “Madam?” he said.

“What does this mean?” she asked, breathless with anxiety.

“I have won you. I trust you have no objections.”

“Won me?” she repeated. “I’m not a thing that might be won, my lord.”

“It was my understanding from Monsieur Bonnet that you are. And as a result of that understanding, I have just...won you.”

“No,” she said softly, appealing to the Frenchman. “Tell him, Henri, that he is—”

“A long-standing rule of the house, my dear,” the Frenchman interrupted. “Whatever a gentleman wishes to wager is allowed—if the value is deemed appropriate. Apparently the earl believed your value to be...appropriate.”

“You wagered me?” she asked, her voice incredulous.

“You were the stake Lord Dare required.”

“But surely you can’t mean...” she began, and then her voice faltered, the words dying away. She didn’t understand what Bonnet was up to, but she knew him well enough by now to know there was more to this than appeared on the surface. And the less she said that might endanger his plans the better it would be for her.

“Come, Mrs. Carstairs. I’m not usually considered to be such an ogre as all this,” Dare said lazily.

His eyes again examined the place where Bonnet had struck her. By now, she supposed her cheek would have begun to discolor. Her mouth was very sore where the flesh had cut against her teeth.

Then the earl’s eyes fastened once more on hers. In them was a question. He believed he was offering her escape. A way to leave Bonnet’s cruelty behind. And he was naturally curious as to why she wasn’t more eager to accept it.

“The unknown is always more frightening than the known, my lord,” she said very softly, “no matter how...unpleasant the known may be.”

“Frightening?” he repeated, his beautifully shaped lips tilting at the corners. “I’m quite sure that I have never before been considered frightening. And I promise I shall endeavor to make your stay with me at least as pleasant as your ‘service’ has been here.”

It was the same word Bonnet had used at the beginning of the evening. Her service. Never before had the gambler made that offer, and when he had done so tonight, her fury had almost escaped her control. In her situation, she could never afford to let that happen.

“I’m sure the earl will treat you with every consideration, my dear,” Bonnet said. “I wish you well.”

And with those words, it seemed she would have to be content,

her own questions unanswered. At least for tonight.

Dare was still looking at her. She turned her head, and he smiled at her again, his blue eyes full of curiosity. Perhaps even kindness.

Elizabeth Carstairs, however, no longer believed in kindness. Or in men who acted from altruistic motives. She knew very well what had prompted the Earl of Dare to demand that Bonnet make her his stake tonight. Therefore, she knew exactly what to expect from him. And she also knew there was nothing she could do except acquiesce. Not if this was what Bonnet wanted.

“Come, Mrs. Carstairs,” the earl said again.

The smile was gone, and although the words were soft, they were obviously a command. And so she placed her hand on the Earl of Dare’s arm, and this time, despite her dread, she was pleased to find that, through an enormous act of will, it did not tremble.

Dare had expected Elizabeth Carstairs to be grateful for his rescue, and instead she was clearly dismayed by the prospect of coming home with him. He might be suffering from wounded vanity, he supposed, smiling at the notion in the concealing dimness of the carriage’s interior. He had not really been anticipating any particularly favorable reaction to him. Nothing except a little gratitude, perhaps.

It seemed, however, that she didn’t plan to offer him even that. She hadn’t spoken since he’d handed her into the carriage. Through the window on her side of the closed coach, she had

examined the London streets, which were just coming to life, as if she had never seen them before.

Maybe she hadn't. At least not at this hour. Dare had, usually when coming home from an all-night gaming session such as they had just left. Or when returning from his mistress's.

"I shall send for your things," he said, more to solicit a response than because he was concerned about whatever possessions she had left behind. Those could be easily replaced.

"Thank you," she said.

She turned to face him finally. In the sunlight, the cosmetics, even artfully applied, were jarring. There was something about them that was blatantly out of place. They simply didn't fit. Not with her speech or with her manner. Of course, that shouldn't be too surprising. Almost nothing he now knew about her fit with those.

"How long have you worked for Bonnet?" he asked.

There was a moment's hesitation, and then she said, "Almost two years, my lord."

"And before that?"

"Surely my past can be of no concern to you, Lord Dare," she said softly, her eyes almost defiant.

"I'm simply curious," he said. "Indulge me."

He was curious, of course, but that wasn't why he was pressing the issue. He wanted her to talk. She was obviously hiding something, and the sooner he discovered what it was, the sooner he could put this entire quixotic episode behind him. After all,

there were other things he should be doing today, far more important than trying to unravel the mystery of the Frenchman's whore.

The word jolted, annoyingly, almost painfully, just as the rouge was jarring against the clear purity of her skin. But she probably is a whore, he reminded himself. Before his admittedly romantic nature managed to transform her into something else, Dare knew he needed to engrave that fact on his consciousness.

"The story of my life isn't particularly interesting," she said. "Or unusual. I'm sure you would quickly become bored if I attempted to tell it to you."

"Why don't you let me make that determination."

"Because it doesn't matter. What I did before I came to Bonnet's has nothing to do with the present. And certainly nothing to do with now."

And nothing to do with you, her tone suggested.

"Be warned, Mrs. Carstairs. Mystery piques my interest. Forbidden fruit, I suppose."

"There is no mystery. If you must hear it, mine's an ordinary enough story. My husband died, leaving a number of debts. Many of those were owed to Monsieur Bonnet. He made an offer of employment, and I accepted it."

"You had no family to turn to, of course," Dare suggested, his lips quirking. "Nor did your husband. Neatly done, my dear. My compliments, but...no starving children? Or perhaps we are to pick them up on the way."

“Are you mocking me?”

“Are you lying to me?” he countered.

There was a long pause, and then she said, “If I am, what can it possibly matter to you?”

“I told you. I’m curious.”

She held his eyes a moment more, and then she turned her head again, looking out the window. The carriage had entered Mayfair and, in the morning sun, the facades of the town houses swept by in a panorama of architectural elegance. Servants busily polished brass plates and the bells on their front doors or washed marks of the previous day’s traffic from broad, shallow steps. Phaetons stood patiently before their entrances, waiting for the inhabitants to embark on rounds of morning calls or on business in the city.

“And what was the late Mr. Carstairs’ occupation?” the earl asked politely, almost as if the sharpness that had ended the last exchange had not occurred.

Again she turned to face him. “Are we to continue to play games, my lord? If so, perhaps I should tell you that my imagination is not great. I have no gift for storytelling.”

“Only a gift for numbers,” he said, the subtle movement of his mouth not quite a smile. “Where did you learn to do that? What you do for Bonnet?”

She didn’t answer, but she didn’t turn away.

“Forbidden as well? Then what would you like to talk about, Mrs. Carstairs?”

“I should like to know what you want from me,” she said bluntly, her eyes cold.

“The pleasure of your company?” he suggested, his tone lightly mocking. “Your wit. The scintillating sparkle of your conversation.”

“My... conversation, my lord?” she repeated, her tone equally caustic.

“Of course,” he said softly. “What did you think I wanted from you, Mrs. Carstairs?”

The carriage drew to a halt, preventing her from having to formulate an answer. The footmen rushed forward to open the door and to lower the steps. The earl descended, and then, playing the perfect gentleman, a role he had been trained for from birth, he held out his hand, palm upward. Elizabeth Carstairs gathered her skirts and put her fingers into his.

They were trembling again, Dare realized. If she was accustomed to being offered to Bonnet’s guests for their pleasure, like his wine or his excellent cigars, then why would the thought of entering his town house cause this reaction?

After all, what he had told her before was the truth. Dare was unaccustomed to being considered an ogre. Not by women. And certainly not an object of fear and trembling. If anything, he had the opposite effect on the fairer sex.

Of course, he had decided a long time ago that their favorable reception might more properly be attributed to his wealth and position than to his person. However, those considerations aside,

he had never had a complaint from a woman about his attentions. The thought was almost comforting in the face of her unspoken distress.

“I’m not going to eat you, you know,” he said sotto voce, as he escorted her toward the front door.

His servants were too well-trained to gawk, but he could imagine what they were thinking, despite their perfectly correct expressions. Dare had never even brought his mistress, who did not paint her face, to his home. He had certainly never before introduced a whore into its environs.

Even as he thought the word, using it deliberately and for all the good reasons he had determined in the carriage, he could feel the childlike softness of her hand in his, trembling as strongly as if she were in the grip of an ague.

“I can assure you, my lord, that I never once envisioned that as being my fate,” Elizabeth said.

Despite her shaking hand, her chin was tilted upward, her posture as correct as if she were walking into court. When the footman opened the door, Dare released her hand and watched her sweep through the entrance to his home like a duchess.

Whatever else Elizabeth Carstairs might be, the earl acknowledged in amusement, she was a consummate actress. And despite her earlier disclaimer, he definitely wasn’t bored.

“Mrs. Hendricks is my housekeeper,” the earl said. “She will look after you. Mrs. Carstairs will be my guest for...an as yet unspecified visit,” he continued, speaking to the woman he had

summoned as soon as they entered the town house.

Again he had managed to surprise her, Elizabeth acknowledged. She had been steeling herself for something quite different, something far more unpleasant than facing the clear disdain in the housekeeper's eyes. Quite different, she thought, glancing at the earl's face.

He looked tired. Exhausted, actually. Of course, they had both been up all night. That was not unusual for her, but perhaps Lord Dare didn't normally keep the same irregular hours she was so accustomed to.

"Very good, my lord," Mrs. Hendricks said stiffly.

Her eyes said that she saw nothing good about this at all, but she wasn't about to admit that to her employer. She might indicate her true feelings when she and Elizabeth were alone, but she obviously didn't want to anger the earl. And having spent the past two years in Bonnet's employ, Elizabeth could sympathize with her reluctance to incur her employer's wrath.

"If you'll follow me, miss," the housekeeper said. Her face was as starchy with disapproval as her housemaids' aprons would be. She had barely avoided adding an accompanying sniff when she issued the invitation.

"Mrs.," the earl corrected softly. "Mrs. Carstairs." The housekeeper's eyes focused on his face, evidently hearing the unspoken admonition in his voice. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Carstairs."

"Please don't," Elizabeth said. "I understand perfectly."

The housekeeper looked at her then, almost for the first time, her eyes widening a little at the sympathetic tone.

“I shall see you at dinner tonight, Mrs. Carstairs,” the earl said.

At dinner, Elizabeth thought. Tonight. Night. Was that when he planned...?

She tried to analyze the earl’s tone. Of course, since she had been unable to since she had met him, she didn’t know why she was attempting to do so now. His face was equally expressionless. There was no leer, no innuendo, no hint in his manner that she should expect more from this dinner engagement with him than what was usually conveyed by the word.

“I have nothing to wear to dinner,” Elizabeth said, refusing to look down on the garish, too-revealing gown in which she was attired.

The Earl of Dare laughed, and when he did, she could feel the rush of blood into her cheeks. Did his laughter mean—

“Do you know that’s the first completely feminine thing I have heard you say,” Dare said. “I can’t tell you how reassuring it is.”

With that, he turned and began to climb the enormous staircase that dominated the entrance hall. He took the steps two at a time, silk knee britches stretching with the play of muscles in his thighs. Much more strongly defined muscles than she would have believed a wealthy gentleman of the ton might possess, Elizabeth thought, and then realized, a little startled, how inappropriate her contemplation of the Earl of Dare’s posterior really was.

“This way, then, Mrs. Carstairs,” Mrs. Hendricks said. This time the sniff was audible.

Elizabeth had endured far worse than the disapproval of a housekeeper during the past two years. If nothing else, she thought, such experiences gave one the strength to know that there was really nothing that could not be endured. And those experiences had also given her the ability to evaluate a situation she found herself in without hysteria or magnification. That might come later, of course, but so far...

“Thank you, Mrs. Hendricks,” she said simply, and with real gratitude.

The room she was taken to was nothing like she had expected. She supposed she had been anticipating she would be hidden away among the narrow little attic rooms the chambermaids shared. The chamber she had been taken to was a suite instead, large, airy, and charmingly decorated in shades of yellow and dull gold.

Apparently, when the earl had said she was his guest, his housekeeper had taken him at his word. Which spoke well of his control of his household, Elizabeth conceded. And again she found herself surprised at that revelation. She had no doubt that if Mrs. Hendricks believed she could get away with it, Elizabeth would have been relegated to the attic, out of sight and out of mind. That she hadn't been was surely because the housekeeper knew the earl would check on her arrangements.

“Is there anything else, Mrs. Carstairs?” the woman asked.

“I shall, of course, have your luggage brought up as soon as it arrives.”

The housekeeper’s face was tight with the force of her disapproval. Elizabeth knew that as soon as Mrs. Hendricks got downstairs, she would verbally vent her frustration at being so misused by the earl. Not to the maids, of course. That would be beneath her dignity. Perhaps to the cook, if their relationship were of longstanding. Almost certainly to Dare’s majordomo.

And his reaction, perhaps more properly his relationship to the earl, would determine how Elizabeth would be treated by the staff during her stay. And so, she thought, feeling for almost the first time the effects of the long stressful night she had just passed through, she might as well take advantage of this period of forced cooperation. In for a penny, in for a pound, she decided.

“A bath,” she said.

“A...bath?” the housekeeper repeated, as if she had never heard the word before.

Judging by the clean scent of sandalwood soap that had surrounded the earl as he sat beside her in the carriage this morning, that was very far from the truth.

“Before the fire, perhaps,” Elizabeth said, ignoring the housekeeper’s reluctance. “And please tell them that I like the water very hot.”

She turned away, walking over to the windows to pull aside the jonquil silk draperies so she could look down on the garden. What she had just done was a trick she had learned from her

mother. Always assume that the servants are going to do exactly what you have told them to do, her mother had said. And then deal with it later if they do not.

“Of course,” the housekeeper said faintly.

More grist for the mill in her tale of mistreatment, Elizabeth thought, her smile hidden by her position.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hendricks. That will be all, I think.”

She waited until she heard the door close before she turned around, infinitely grateful to be alone at last. Away from the judgmental eyes of the servants. Away from the earl’s probing questions and his mocking smile.

Her own smile faded, the momentary amusement at imagining the consternation below stairs disappearing in the reality of her situation. As she had told Dare, the unknown was always more frightening than the known, no matter how awful the known had been. And the unknowns in this situation...

She had no idea what Bonnet was up to. She had believed that she knew what the Earl of Dare wanted from her, but so far nothing had gone as she had expected about that. And, of course, she also had no idea what she should or could do about either.

Chapter Three

“And where did you find her, my lord,” Ned Harper asked, as he helped Dare out of his coat.

It usually took the aid of one of the footmen to get the earl into his perfectly tailored jackets, but taking them off was not quite so much a challenge as to require the presence of a third party in the earl’s bedroom. Perhaps, Dare thought, that was not to his advantage. Not if Ned was in the mood to lecture.

“At Bonnet’s,” the earl said easily. “I won her.”

He had given Elizabeth into the more than capable hands of his housekeeper. Although Mrs. Hendricks hadn’t spoken a word of protest, the earl had certainly been made aware of her disapproval of his “guest.” Her nostrils had flared in distaste, and she had never looked at Mrs. Carstairs as he had given his instructions.

“She was at the Frenchman’s?”

“Directing the servants and announcing the scores between hands.”

“At least you know she can count,” the valet said dismissively. “Perhaps you can get her a position in one of the shops when you’ve finished with her.”

“I don’t think she’s equipped for working in a shop, Ned,” the earl said mildly.

“I suppose that after yesterday I should have known something

like this would happen....”

The words, their tone clearly chiding, faded as the valet crossed the room. Smiling, Dare didn't ask for an explanation of what Harper had meant. Nor did he reprimand his valet for what had sounded very much like insolence.

Their relationship had long ago slipped from the rigid bonds that normally governed the roles of master and servant and matured into a deep, abiding friendship. Ned Harper was one of the few people who always told the Earl of Dare exactly what he thought. Which was, of course, one of the reasons Dare valued him.

Only Ned and Ian did that, he acknowledged, stepping in front of the dressing table's mirror to remove his stickpin. Actually, the earl thought with a smile, neither of them hesitated in expressing the most brutally honest opinion about his actions. At least the youngest Sinclair still held him in some awe. Of course, the gap between their ages alone was enough to ensure that Sebastian probably always would look up to him. Thank God someone would, he thought in amusement.

“Then what are you planning to do with her?” Ned asked when he returned from his errand, as if the break in the conversation had not occurred.

He had handed the coat to a footman waiting outside the bedroom door. From there it would be carried to the kitchens to be brushed and aired. Now Harper began to unwind the earl's cravat.

“Do with her?” Dare repeated.

“You have a mistress. Unless you’re thinking of taking on another one. And since you seldom have leisure to visit the first...”

“My nights have been...otherwise occupied,” the earl said, smiling at his valet in the glass.

Harper’s dark eyes met the blue ones reflected in the mirror. “Exactly. So what would you be needing with the Frenchman’s whore.”

“What makes you so sure she’s a whore, Ned?”

The valet’s snort was expressive.

“Seriously,” the earl said softly.

Again, Harper’s eyes lifted to meet his master’s. They were no longer derisive. They held on the earl’s a long moment before his lips pursed.

“Well, let me see,” he said. “One, she was working for Bonnet. Two, you won her on a hand of cards. Three, she’s painted like a Maypole. And four, there isn’t enough fabric in the bodice of her gown to make a good codpiece. Will you be needing some more reasons?” Ned asked sarcastically.

“Do you know, Ned, I believe I will.”

“You don’t have time for this,” Harper warned.

“I know,” Dare acknowledged.

“Shall I find a house for her?” Ned asked, removing the silver-striped waistcoat.

The earl slipped the lawn shirt over his head before he

answered. He turned, wearing nothing from the waist up, and held the shirt, still warm from its contact with his body, out to his valet. "It seemed to me that there might be enough room here for one more person," he said.

"Not if you want to keep your staff."

"Are my servants so sensitive that a woman's presence might drive them away? If so, I'm not paying them enough."

"Not a woman," Ned said, taking the shirt and folding it over his arm. "That woman. Mrs. Hendricks, for one, will never put up with it, my lord. No decent woman would."

"Then I suppose Watson will be forced to find another housekeeper," the earl said, meeting Ned's eyes.

Then he walked across to the bed and sat down, holding out one leg, still neatly attired in knee britches and silk stockings, which delineated the well-developed muscles of his calf. Harper watched him a long moment, and then, lips tight with disapproval, he threw the earl's clothing over a nearby chair and stalked over to the bed. He stooped and put his hand on the heel of the earl's evening slipper. He pulled it off, and held it in both hands, still squatting on the floor before Dare.

"If you are willing to let Mrs. Hendricks walk out, as long as she's been here, then you've got a bee in your bonnet for sure," Ned said bitterly. "I knew as soon as I saw that woman she was trouble."

"She's in trouble, Ned. Would you have had me leave her to Bonnet's tender mercies?"

“Yes,” Harper said shortly, grasping the other shoe by the heel and pulling it off roughly.

The valet carried the shoes over to the door and handed them to the waiting bootblack. When he had closed the door, he returned to look down on his master, who was stretched out comfortably on the bed, ankles crossed and hands locked together behind his head. The broad, dark chest was bare, and the skintight britches stretched over a flat stomach, narrow hips and muscular thighs.

The earl’s eyes were closed, the dark lashes lying against his cheeks like miniature fans. A lack of sleep during the past few days had left the fragile skin under them discolored like old bruises. Fatigue and grief had deepened the normally unnoticeable lines around his mouth.

Grief, Ned thought. He had known what this was all about from the beginning. The earl hadn’t been in time to rescue his friend, so he had rescued Mrs. Carstairs instead.

And here I am, Ned thought, nattering on at him like a schoolmaster because he’s brought some woman home. What does it matter if he wants to bring every strumpet in Gravesend home with him? Harper thought, unfolding a blanket he took from the foot of the bed and spreading it carefully over the earl. He’s more than earned the right to do that, even if they don’t want to be rescued.

Smiling at the thought, the valet walked across the room and pulled the heavy draperies across the windows. The room

darkened as if it were twilight instead of midmorning. Ned waited for his eyes to adjust, and finally, unable to resist the impulse, he walked back to the high bed, almost tiptoeing so as not to chance waking the sleeper.

Even as a child, this was the Sinclair who could be counted on to bring home the strays. Any sick or mistreated animal Val had ever encountered had found its way back to the warmth of the Sinclair stables. Everyone believed that Mr. Ian was the best of the lot, and in a way, Ned supposed they were right.

But I wouldn't be trading this one, Harper thought, adjusting the cover he had laid over the broad chest, which rose and fell with a regularity that told him the earl was already deeply asleep.

I hope to God you don't disappoint him, he thought, remembering the flawless beauty of the woman who had waltzed in through the front door of the town house this morning as if she owned it. Whatever your story is, lass, I hope it, and you, are worthy of his interest.

He watched a moment more, at least until the tense muscles in the handsome face had relaxed, giving way to exhaustion, and then Ned Harper turned and, picking up the clothing he had laid over the chair, tiptoed out of the room.

"More sole?" the Earl of Dare asked.

Elizabeth looked up from the contemplation of her plate, where her original portion of fish resided untouched. The delicate sauce with which it had been dressed was congealed unappetizingly around it.

“Or perhaps not,” Dare said softly, his eyes rising from the dish to meet hers. He signaled the butler with the lift of one dark eyebrow, and a footman obediently slipped her plate away. “I’m sorry if you found the fish unappealing. Perhaps there might be something else that—”

“Thank you, my lord, but no,” she said. “I find...I’m afraid I’m really not very hungry.”

“Indisposed, Mrs. Carstairs?” the earl asked, his deep voice touched with amusement.

Again the dark, highly expressive eyebrow arched. Its meaning was as clear to her as it had been to his majordomo before. He was mocking her. Mocking what he believed to be her false claim of being ill.

They both knew why she might attempt to invent an illness tonight, but that wasn’t the kind of woman she was. Whatever else she might have become during the past two years, she wasn’t a coward. Of course, the earl had no way of knowing that.

“I am not indisposed,” she said. “I am rarely indisposed, I assure you, Lord Dare. I am simply...not hungry.”

“May I tempt you with a sweet? Or a nice cheese, perhaps?”

“No, my lord, you may not,” she said, and then hearing the sharpness of her tone, she added more politely, at least on the surface, “Thank you, but no.”

“Cook will be devastated,” the earl said, lifting his wine to his lips. He watched her over the rim of the glass a second or two before he drank.

“You, yourself, have made an excellent dinner. My compliments on your appetite. And your servants are very well-trained for a bachelor household. My compliments on the service tonight, as well.”

“Why, thank you, Mrs. Carstairs,” he said, smiling, seeming not the slightest bit annoyed by her comments. “Your approval of my staff is very kind. And I hope their...service was also satisfactory in preparing your bath this morning?”

The question was highly improper, and he certainly knew it. It was intended to convey two messages, and she had understood the import of both. The first was a reminder, she believed, of her own recent “service” at Bonnet’s. The second was clearly meant to warn her that nothing went on in the Earl of Dare’s household about which he was not informed.

“The arrangements for my bath were very satisfactory, I assure you,” she said. “I was told by one of the footmen who brought up the water that you yourself bathe. Quite frequently, I understand.”

That was a lie, of course. Under Mrs. Hendricks’ watchful eyes, the footman hadn’t said a word, but unless Dare stooped to question his servants, he couldn’t verify that. Perhaps it would give him pause to believe that information passed both ways.

His lips tilted in response. “My staff seems much inclined to gossip about simple household...affairs,” he said.

He appeared unannoyed by her comment. Which was not, of course, what she had intended.

“Another warning, my lord?” she asked innocently.

“Simply a realization. Apparently my servants are not so well-trained as you have led me to believe.”

“Or perhaps they are simply bored,” she suggested.

He inclined his head, as if he were thinking about the possibility, but he let the silence build between them as the footmen removed the rest of the dishes.

“More wine?” he asked when that had been done. Again he signaled and the servant approached to refill their glasses. Hers was still untouched, a fact he was almost certainly aware of.

“Thank you, no,” she said, and the footman who had been approaching stepped back to his place against the wall.

“I thought you might feel in need of some Dutch courage.”

“Really?” she said, her voice conveying what she hoped was a note of surprise. “I wonder why?”

He laughed, the sound again as pleasant as she had found it to be this morning. And when his laughter faded away, he was still looking at her, his blue eyes serious for almost the first time since she had met him.

“Because you’re a woman alone with a man about whom you know nothing. A man who won you in a game of cards. I’ve been trying to imagine all day what you must be feeling.”

“And what did you... imagine my feelings to be, my lord?”

“A degree of curiosity, I suppose. Even anxiety perhaps. Or am I wrong?”

She hesitated, but what he had said was only what anyone in

her position might confess to feeling.

“No,” she admitted. “You aren’t wrong.”

He lifted his glass again, moving it in a small salute in her direction, before he brought it to his lips.

“Were you planning to satisfy my curiosity?” she asked.

“You may ask me anything,” Dare said graciously.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“My mistress is jealous of her position.”

It was the closest he had come to admitting what she had supposed all along to be his purpose. He was interested in her sexually. Bonnet had offered her “services,” and that had titillated the earl’s interest.

This, then, was why he had forced the Frenchman to stake her instead of his house. Dare had now openly confessed his intent, and the fear and dread she had fought all day tightened her chest, making it hard to breathe.

“I thought,” the earl continued, “she might not be pleased if I took you there. And I own only the two houses in London, you see.”

It took a second or two for the meaning of that to penetrate her anxiety. He had confused her again. Deliberately confused her. He was playing with her, as a cat will play with an exhausted and dying mouse, trying to make it jump and run again.

Cat and mouse was, however, a game she had played successfully for over two years. And it was one at which she thought she was perhaps the better gamester.

“So you brought me to this house instead,” she said.

“There is a great deal of room,” Dare agreed, again lifting his glass.

And then his hand hesitated, the journey never completed, as his eyes examined her. His scrutiny began with the arrangement of her hair. She had dressed it very simply, adorning it with a sprig of jasmine, which she had taken from one of the huge vases of flowers in her room.

His slow and careful appraisal surprised her. And unnerved her. For reasons she had not attempted to analyze, she had taken great pains over her appearance tonight. And yet, until now, Dare had hardly looked at her.

True to his word, he had had her things sent over from Bonnet's. As she had unpacked the portmanteau this afternoon, she realized there was really very little to choose from, if one were not planning to entertain strange gentlemen in a gambling hell. None of the gowns the bag contained had seemed appropriate for a quiet dinner at home.

She had finally chosen the least revealing, one she had brought to the Frenchman's house in the very beginning. It was more properly a day gown than half dress, although the fabric was a very fine blue silk. It was clearly several years out of style, something a man of fashion like Dare would be well aware of. At least it was modest, however, covering far more of her bosom than the one she had worn last night.

“My compliments, Mrs. Carstairs,” he said finally, after he

had studied her for several long seconds. Not long enough to be insulting, perhaps, but very close. “I find I much prefer the lily ungilded,” he added softly.

He meant without the cosmetics Bonnet insisted she wear. They had been included with her things. She had not used them tonight, of course. Surveying her reflection in the looking glass in her room, however, she had been surprised to find she had grown so accustomed to wearing them that her cheeks and eyes appeared almost colorless without the paint.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said simply.

His prolonged examination was as improper as his question about her bath, but she didn’t want to antagonize him. And indeed, he had offered her no real insult. Not openly. At least, not yet.

“I wonder if you would consent to join me briefly in my study. There are some things we should discuss before I leave,” Dare said.

She had been trying to read the tone of the first sentence, and so it took a second or two for the sense of the second to penetrate. “Before you leave?” she repeated in surprise.

“I’m afraid business calls me away for a few days. My apologies for leaving you alone,” he said, still watching her.

She tried to keep her relief from showing. He had not said when he was leaving, but that had sounded as if...

“Of course,” she said faintly.

“Harper, my valet, will see to your needs in my absence. He

will assign one of the maids to serve you tomorrow. I'm sorry I failed to think of that this morning."

It had been over two years since Elizabeth had had an abigail. She wasn't sure she remembered what it was like to be waited upon. The thought that he had been remiss in not providing her with a maid hadn't even crossed her mind. After all, in spite of what the earl had told his housekeeper, she was well aware that she wasn't here as his guest.

"If all goes well, I should be back within the week," the earl continued. "I've asked Harper to meet us in my study. He's probably waiting there now."

She examined the information, looking for hidden pitfalls; however, this seemed to be a reprieve, if anything. Dare was to be away on business, and she would be left alone. He had implied it would be for a few days. Perhaps long enough for her to find a way to get a message to Bonnet?

She didn't know what game the Frenchman was playing, but she knew he would never have allowed her out of his clutches if it had not been to his advantage. So she was certain there had been more to the game of cards in which he had staked her than appeared on the surface.

"If you would be so kind as to come with me..." Dare said, bringing her attention back to the present.

He was already standing, and there was a footman behind her chair, ready to pull it back so that she, too, might rise and join the earl in his study. Where she would be introduced to his valet. It all

seemed harmless enough. Already her mind was working on the possible implications of the earl's absence. And on its possible advantages.

"Of course," she said.

She wasn't sure what she had been expecting in the Earl of Dare's valet, but it was certainly not the man who was waiting in the room to which Dare led her. Small and undistinguished, it seemed Harper might be more at home in the stables of a country estate than in this vast and elegant town house.

"Mrs. Carstairs, this is Harper, my valet," the earl said.

There was something in Dare's voice. A note of amusement, perhaps? And Elizabeth thought she knew why when she confronted the open dislike in Harper's eyes.

This was the same assessment, the same judgment, she amended, Mrs. Hendricks had made this morning. And one which had been absent from the earl's eyes, she realized. Whatever his servants thought her to be, apparently Dare had not yet made up his mind. Or perhaps he had decided it didn't matter what she was.

"Mrs. Carstairs," Ned Harper said. There was a subtle, but obvious emphasis on the title.

"Mr. Harper," she said, echoing it.

The small barb struck home. His brown eyes widened, and he glanced at Dare before they came back to her face. At least the contempt that had been in them before was gone, replaced by wariness. Elizabeth found she infinitely preferred the latter to

the former.

“Ned will see to your needs while I’m gone,” the earl explained again, this time for his valet’s benefit. “You have only to ask him for anything you need.”

Except Harper can’t arrange what I need, she thought bitterly. And neither could the Earl of Dare, no matter how rich he might be.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said.

“That will be all, Ned,” Dare said softly. It was clearly a dismissal, but the valet didn’t move, his eyes tracing over her boldly now. Far too boldly for a servant.

“You’re making a mistake,” he said finally, his tone flat and hard.

Since he hadn’t used the earl’s title, Elizabeth wasn’t perfectly sure which of them he was addressing, but Dare seemed to be in no doubt.

“And that is my privilege, of course,” he said.

There was no anger in his voice. Again, she thought she sensed amusement there instead, and she wondered about the relationship between master and man. It was beyond her realm of experience. Her father’s valet had been a toadying, simpering idiot, whom no one held in respect, not even the other servants, despite his superior position in the household.

It was obvious that Ned Harper, however, was accustomed to speaking his mind, no matter the subject—even one so personal as the earl’s relationship to a woman. And he seemed to expect

that Dare would attend to his opinion.

Harper's mouth had tightened, and his eyes, if possible, had grown colder as they rested on her face. Elizabeth controlled her features, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of knowing she had noticed his dislike.

"That will be all, Ned," Dare said again, even more softly.

The valet's eyes held another second on her face, and then he turned and almost stalked from the room.

"I apologize for Ned's rudeness," Dare said after a moment, his voice untroubled. "It wasn't directed at you, I assure you. He's angry that I'm not taking him with me."

He moved to stand beside the fire. He put both hands on the mantel, looking down into the flames. The fine, wine-colored cloth of his jacket stretched across a broad back and well-defined shoulders.

Elizabeth was well aware that gentlemen often created the appearance of muscle by the artful use of buckram padding. It was obvious, however, just as it had been this morning when she had watched him climb the stairs, that the Earl of Dare had never been called upon to resort to such stratagems.

She pulled her eyes away, turning her head a little, so that she wouldn't be tempted to look at him any more. Ned Harper was standing in the doorway to the study, watching them. He held her eyes a long time, and then he shut the door, taking pains that its closing didn't make any sound. She looked quickly back at the earl, but he hadn't moved, unaware that his valet had been spying

on them.

“Why aren’t you?” she asked.

“Taking Ned?” Dare said, as he turned to face her. His hair was blue-black in the firelight. “A quick business trip. I won’t have need of his services.”

She wasn’t sure this time if the use of the word had been deliberate, but it brought them back to the crux of the matter. Back to what she thought he wanted from her.

“And I’m to stay here in your absence?”

“Of course,” Dare said. “I assume you don’t wish to return to Bonnet’s.”

She said nothing, wondering if he would let her go if she said yes. And, more importantly, wondering what Bonnet would do to her if she showed up at his door tomorrow.

Because she wasn’t here by accident, of course. Or by a turn of fate. Henri Bonnet, despite his unquestioned skill at gaming, left nothing to chance.

“Or do you, Mrs. Carstairs?”

“No, my lord,” she said softly.

“Then I shall see you when I return.”

The question she wanted to ask him trembled on her tongue. She watched as he walked across the room until he was standing before her. He held out his hand.

“Sleep well, Mrs. Carstairs,” he said. “Tonight and every night until I return. I promise Ned will take very good care of you while I’m gone.”

Reluctantly, she placed her fingers in his, and he raised them slowly to his lips. She could feel the warmth of his breath as he brushed his mouth across them, the lightest possible touch.

He did not release her hand, but he raised his head and his eyes held on her face. Finally, at whatever he saw there, he smiled at her.

Something moved within her chest, an unexpected jolt of reaction, almost painful in its intensity. Her heart began to beat so heavily she was afraid the movement might be visible externally. That he might be aware of the effect he was having.

It had been a very long time since a man had kissed her hand. It was a gesture both romantic and chivalric. And it had been far too long, it seemed, since she had stirred either emotion in a masculine breast.

She had become accustomed to leers. To suggestive comments. To hot, roving eyes that focused on the line of her throat or on her exposed breasts.

It had been too long since a man had treated her not like a wanton, but like a lady. Her reaction had been simple gratitude, a natural response to Dare's gallantry. Or so she told herself.

Although he seemed to be playing the perfect gentleman tonight, the earl had won her on the turn of a card. And he had not offered her freedom, which a real gentleman, one who truly considered her a lady, would certainly have done. So whatever his behavior seemed to indicate...

She pulled her fingers from his and almost fled toward the

door Ned Harper had closed only moments before. And despite whatever she had felt as the Earl of Dare had pressed his lips against the tips of her fingers, she did not look back.

Chapter Four

One more, the Earl of Dare told himself, the now-familiar words repeated like a litany, as he pressed his body more closely into the shadows. He was in the back garden of a small house on the outskirts of Paris. It was well after midnight, but there were still lights on inside. Apparently, and disappointingly, the occupant of the dwelling was either awake or, more likely, reluctant these days to sleep in the dark.

And despite the risks occasioned by his present location and by the task he had undertaken tonight, Dare found himself smiling at that thought. Relishing it.

He had known, of course, that this one would be the most dangerous. And he had added to that danger by saving this particular man for the last. That decision, however, had been both considered and deliberate, and even now, faced with the daunting prospect of the light, he had no regrets.

This was the man who had issued the orders. The one most responsible for what had been done to his friend, Andre. And considering his position in the government, this man, Paul Lefebvre was probably the most intelligent of the five whom the earl had set out from London a week ago to hunt down. And that meant, Dare had decided, that Lefebvre was probably also the one with the greatest capacity to imagine his fate.

At least I hope you've been imagining it, you bastard, Dare

thought, the smile on his lips without amusement. I hope you've been living in a state of absolute terror, dreaming about my hands fastened around your throat or about the coldness of my blade sliding into the vileness of your black heart.

For six days the Earl of Dare had stalked the streets of Paris like ancient Nemesis. And in those six days, he had relentlessly found, and killed, four men. Although what had been in his heart when he had begun this quest had been nothing less than cold-blooded murder, he had given all of them the opportunity to fight him. Far more chance than they had given Andre.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.