

A romantic scene between a man and a woman in 18th-century attire. The man, on the left, has light brown hair and a slight beard, wearing a dark blue coat and a white cravat. The woman, on the right, has dark hair and is wearing a teal dress with a black lace collar. They are embracing closely, with the man's eyes closed and the woman's eyes looking down. The background is a soft, warm glow.

MARGUERITE KAYE

THE CAPTAIN'S
WICKED WAGER
Undone!

The Captain's Wicked Wager

Marguerite Kaye



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AUTHOR NOTE

Gambling has long been the vice of choice for the rich and famous, from horseracing, the traditional sport of kings, to today's televised celebrity poker tournaments. It is easy to see the attraction. The heady mix of glamor, money and drama is both alluring and seductive. This was certainly true in Regency London when the Ton and the demi-monde flocked to Hells of St James's and Piccadilly in search of illicit thrills and excitement.

But what if more was at stake than money? What if someone was driven to gamble with their body, their feelings, even their virtue? What if losing became more appealing than winning? Freed from society's conventions and constraints—for how can there be guilt when one has placed one's fate in the hands of the Gods—what might the gambler learn about his or her secret self?

This is what I wanted to explore through Isabella and Ewan's story, where a turn of a card, a throw of the dice decides how shockingly they must behave, what sensual acts they must indulge in. And at stake love, the ultimate prize, can be either won or lost.

I hope you enjoy reading this, my first ever Undone, as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'd love to hear what you think. You can email me at marguerite_kaye@hotmail.co.uk.

If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.
(John Donne, The Good Morrow)

For J, who makes any room our everywhere. Just love.

Chapter 1

London, 1785

The gaming saloon was packed, the clientele mostly male but with a fair sprinkling of women present, too. Thanks to the notorious Duchess of Devonshire, playing deep was very much *à la mode* for the fairer sex. The air was stifling, the atmosphere redolent of hair powder and scent, brandy and wine, mingled with the musky smell of too many bodies crowded into too small a space. Candles sputtered and flared, casting distorted shadows on the walls.

“Eight wins.” The large woman in charge of the faro bank glowered as she pushed a pile of counters across the table.

Isabella Mansfield, her attention focused on trying to calculate the value of her winnings, ignored the woman’s growing animosity. Faith, but it was hot! The fan she wore tied round her wrist provided her with precious little relief. The unaccustomed hair powder irritated her scalp. The rouge she had so carefully applied to her cheeks and lips prickled her delicate skin. The folds of her dark blue polonaise dress and the ridiculous layers of undergarments required to hold the shape in place at the back all contrived to make her distinctly uncomfortable.

Though they also, she reminded herself, served to ensure that she blended in, looked just like every other woman present. Aside from her complete lack of jewellery that is. Her great-grandmother’s pearls, the

only thing of value she owned, had been discreetly sold to provide her stake for this evening. Two more wins, if her luck continued to hold, and she would have enough.

Captain Ewan Dalglish watched with interest as Isabella pushed her entire stack of counters onto the two, causing a crackle of excitement to fizz round the throng of eager onlookers. There was something driven about her demeanour, quite different from the recklessness of a genuine gambler. She was clearly nervous: long fingers plucking at the sticks of her fan, her eyes fixed on the dealer's card box as if it contained the key to her very destiny. Which, he thought, raising his eyebrows as he calculated her stake, it most probably did. He was intrigued.

On the anniversary of the day he had resigned his commission following his father's death, and on his thirtieth birthday to boot, he had come to this newest hell made popular by Fox and his cronies in search of diversion. In the past year he had sampled every pleasure, licit or otherwise, the town had to offer, kicking over the traces and flaunting his newly-inherited respectability in the faces of his critics with gusto. Sport, women, sprees like this latest outing—they all provided temporary excitement, but nothing matched the visceral thrill of battle, the gut-clenching intensity of combat. He was coming to believe that the army had leached all feeling out of him. An intense *ennui* threatened to overwhelm him.

He'd had the devil's own luck with the cards tonight, but it meant little. The fortune his father had left him was immense. And as for the brandy he had

imbibed—his mind might be somewhat befuddled, but the abrasive edges of his poisonous mood had been in no way smoothed. To hell with all of it! Even his burning desire to try to right the wrongs of the world offered little solace. What he needed was something more exotic by way of an antidote.

The beauty at the faro table was most definitely that. Despite the regulation paint and powder, there was something distinctive about her. Winged black brows sat above cobalt-blue eyes fringed with long black lashes. There was a spark of intelligence there. A mouth wider than the fashionable rosebud, the bottom lip full. The long line of white throat swooping down to a luscious swell of bosom. The same flawless white skin on her arms, delicate wrists and long fingers. Slumbering sensuality combined with a haughty touch-me-not air. A challenging and enticing combination.

At the faro table Mrs Bradley, the banker, was declining the beauty's bet, clearly afraid it would break the bank. Her many chins wobbled as she shook her head. "I'm sorry, madam, that is twice the maximum stake permitted."

"But..." Isabella looked up, embarrassed to find all eyes upon her. Impatient. Speculative. Inquisitive. Leering. Under her rouge, she blushed. Not all the women here were ladies of the *ton*. Not all the gamblers were gentlemen. With a heavy heart she took back half her counters. At this rate, she would never win as much as she needed. She must have the full funds by the end of the week or all would be lost. She simply had to win enough tonight.

"With the bank's permission I will cover the bet, and any others the young lady cares to make." The deep voice had just the trace of a Scottish lilt.

Startled, Isabella looked up into the most striking pair of eyes she had ever seen. Amber tinged with liquid brown, the colour of autumn leaves. For a moment they clashed with her own, causing a flicker of excitement to shiver down her spine. A sculpted mouth curled in a half smile.

"Captain Dalglish," the banker exclaimed in surprise. "This is most unusual."

He flashed her a smouldering, flirtatious smile. "Unusual, Mrs Bradley, but I'm sure you can find a way to accommodate me."

The banker smiled coquettishly. "Captain Dalglish, I'd wager there's scarcely a woman in London who wouldn't be willing to accommodate you in any way you saw fit. If I was twenty years younger I might even be tempted myself."

A ripple of laughter spread through the onlookers.

Ewan's eyes twinkled mischievously. "Madam, that is a regret we will both have to live with." The crowd roared its approval. "Perhaps this will ease the pain somewhat," Ewan said, passing her a sweetener which she quickly palmed, indicating her acceptance with a coy fluttering of her lashes.

An air of heightened excitement eddied round the room at this new, unexpected development. Jaded gamblers tilted back their straw hats to stare. High class birds of paradise and raddled society *grandes dames* alike peered curiously from behind their painted and lace-trimmed fans. Into the brief silence blew a flurry of whispered asides.

“Rescued the climbing boy himself. They say he whipped the master.” “Apparently, he’s no stranger to the Roundhouse at St Giles. Locked up overnight with common thieves more than once.” “They say he found an escaped slave begging on the streets, set him up as an apothecary, no less.”

Captain Dalglish drew the attention of the whole room inexorably towards him with all the natural and unconscious ease of a magnet pointing a compass northward.

In common with everyone else, Isabella stared. When she had first heard tell of him he had been new to town, as famed for his daring exploits on the battlefield as he was infamous for his public condemnation of the American war in which he had fought. Now he was just as notorious, but for his hell raising. Ewan Dalglish was not a man who lived by society’s rules. A rebel in every sense, she thought enviously. Why on earth would he want to cover her bet? But unless he did—no, she would not allow herself to think of the consequences of failure.

She watched him covertly as he placed a roll of notes onto the table. He was tall, with his coat cut in the new fashion buttoned tight across his chest, showing off the breadth of his shoulders, the severity of the rich black velvet cloth lightened only by the glimpse of a dove-grey waistcoat, the fall of white linen with just a hint of lace at his throat. The deep copper of his hair glinted bright as a new-minted penny in the candlelight. It was a memorable face. High cheekbones with a small scar visible on the left

one, a sabre cut no doubt. A strong, determined jaw. His colouring gave him an untamed look. The perfection of his tailoring somehow served to draw attention to the muscles hidden underneath. A mountain lion, Isabella thought with a shiver. Strength and power barely concealed under a veneer of sophistication. A fierce Highland warrior in the sober garb of a gentleman.

She smiled at herself for being so fanciful and then flushed as she caught the echo of her smile returned from across the table. For a second she met his glance haughtily, amber clashing with cobalt-blue. An almost tangible current of awareness crackled between them. She dropped her eyes.

“Madam?”

Mrs Bradley's voice recalled her to her purpose. Isabella pushed all of her counters onto the table. The watching crowd craned ever closer for a better view.

The banker's card was a six of diamonds. The *carte anglaise*, the winning card, was hers.

“The lady wins,” Ewan Dalgleish said softly in his husky Scottish burr, pushing her counters back towards her and adding the same amount again from his own supply. He had just lost a fabulous amount, yet it seemed he was content to do so. A quirk of his mouth, a quizzical eyebrow formed the unspoken question.

Isabella took a deep breath and returned the entire total to the table, raising an audible gasp from the audience. It took all her courage, such a fortune as she had before her, but it would not yet suffice. Coming up short was not an option. A life depended upon it. Heedless now of everything but the game Isabella

clenched her hands together. *One more turn of the cards. Just this one.*

Ewan did not take his eyes from her. Her face was a mask of concentration, her eyes focused on Mrs Bradley's hand, which rested on the dealing box. Whatever she was playing for, it was not the thrill of it. He was conscious that a part of him wanted her luck to hold, no matter that he would be the poorer by thousands.

The cards were dealt and the colour drained from Isabella's face as they landed face up on the baize. A small sound, like steam escaping from a pot, hissed round the table.

She had not even a stake left with which to continue. Blindly, Isabella got to her feet. The gilded chair on which she had been seated fell backwards. The lace at her elbow had become entangled with her fan. *Her gloves...where were her gloves?*

Suddenly, he was there in front of her, handing her the gloves and her wrap. He took her arm firmly. "Come with me."

"No, no, I..."

But it was to no avail. A strong hand guided her away from the curious faces of the onlookers. She was propelled out of the crowded room and into an unoccupied one across the passageway.

Ewan closed the door behind him and pressed her onto a chair by the fire. A glass of fiery spirit the same colour as his eyes was handed to her. "Drink this," he said firmly.

Isabella drank. The brandy made her gasp, but it

also revived her spirits. She took another gulp.

"Slowly, take your time."

The amusement in his voice served to rile her. Defiantly, she drained the glass. "What does it matter if I'm drunk? You've already made me penniless."

"It was your choice to play so high, not mine," he said pointedly. "If you are now penniless, you have no-one but yourself to blame."

The truth of the remark hit her like a deluge of ice-cold water. Isabella slumped back in the chair. What had seemed, when she started out tonight, like an inspired solution to her problems, had left her worse off than before, for now she did not even have her pearls.

"You are right. I beg your pardon," she said, shakily placing the empty glass down on a side table. "You are the winner, and I the loser." She rose to leave.

"You don't have to be." It was a crazy notion, but he felt fate had sent her to him. He could see his own concealed desperation reflected in her beautiful eyes. And something else. Defiance in the face of defeat. He recognised that, too, from the battlefield. Unusual in a woman. Admirable. And very, very desirable. Like a call to arms.

Isabella eyed him uncertainly. "I've already given you all my winnings. I have nothing else to offer."

He towered over her. There was an animal grace in the way he moved. She was conscious of the palpable maleness of him. His laugh was like a low growl of pleasure. It made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. "The sum you've lost means nothing to me. In any event, I'll wager you have much more need of it

than I.”

Her smile was twisted. “You can have no idea.”

A long finger under her chin. Amber eyes looked deep into her own. “You can have it back if you agree to my terms.”

She held his gaze proudly, her heart thumping. “I am not a courtesan. I won’t be bought.”

Ewan placed the money casually in front of her. “I don’t want to buy you. All I ask is that you agree to take part in another, different sort of wager.”

Isabella tore her eyes from the money to his face. “What kind?”

Aware he was behaving outlandishly, conscious that his mind was excited from brandy, Ewan eyed her speculatively. Her lovely countenance was flushed. Excitement there was in her striking eyes, in the rapid rise and fall of her breasts. Defiance and daring, too. Beautiful. And highly alluring.

It was an impulse, nothing more. He wanted to see how far she could be pushed. Had no real intention of seeing it through, though he knew deep down even then, that whatever it took he could not let her go. “You spend three nights with me. The outcome each night will be dependant upon the fall of the dice. The winner to decide what happens between us. Anything...” he heard himself say, unable quite to believe he was uttering the words “...or nothing at all, if your luck holds. What do you say?”

Ewan’s smile entreated trust, but Isabella was not fooled. He had the look of a lion confronted with a wary prey. She swallowed her instinctive flat refusal

and forced herself to think rationally. The money would allow her to fulfil the plan which brought her here in the first place. This was her last chance, and she knew it. In the past three months she had exhausted all other avenues. But what price might she pay in the three nights which lay between now and then?

The man in front of her was a complete stranger, known to her only by reputation, and a disreputable one at that. If he won, and the odds were that he would on at least one occasion, she would have to give herself to him. Shocking to even consider it. Scandalous. No lady in her right mind would. And yet were not the circumstances so extreme as to justify the gamble? Would it not be more scandalous still to let this unexpected final opportunity to provide desperately needed salvation slip through her fingers?

In any event, the fates might favour her and allow her to win all three throws of the dice. She had been lucky tonight, until the last. She might be again. And if she was not? She probed deep, but could find only a strange quiver of excitement at the prospect. What was convention after all, when the stakes were so high?

"Why not, Captain Dalglish?" she finally said, with a shaky laugh, "I agree to your wager."

He took her hand and raised it to his lips, soft against her skin. "Ewan," he said, "my name is Ewan. And what might yours be, my fair opponent?"

"Belle," she replied instinctively.

"Belle," he whispered. "I would not have had you for a Belle, but it describes you well enough." Now was the time to laugh, to pass it off as a jest. Now was the time to step back. Instead, he kissed her, and in

doing so hurtled both of them irretrievably beyond the point of no return.

Gently, he kissed her, his lips cool against her own, his fingers tangling in her elaborate coiffure to tilt her head up. Isabella stood compliant, her mind numbed, conscious only of his mouth, his fingertips, the nearness and heat of his body. She was alarmed by the power she sensed there, yet reassured by the gentleness of his touch. Strangely, detachedly, exhilarated by the sensations he was arousing in her. A craving for more awoke in her but he stepped abruptly back.

“One thing you must know,” he said, taking her hand, “I will neither harm you nor hurt you. I have already seen enough cruelty to last me a lifetime. Come then, I’ll have them call my carriage.”

What had she done? What on earth had she let herself in for?

Chapter 2

Sitting beside Ewan in the carriage as they rattled their way along the cobblestones towards the imposing, recently-built mansions of Cavendish Square, Isabella tried to quell her jangling nerves. Whatever happened now, she reminded herself, she had secured the funds she needed. But it was not this, the much longed for achievement, which caused the fluttering in her stomach.

The carriage lurched over a hole in the road surface, throwing her against Ewan. A strong arm righted her. She could see his eyes glowing in the soft light. Nervousness turned to anticipation. Guiltily, she realised that the prospect of winning was not the only option which held allure. She had the sense to realise she had best keep such thoughts to herself.

An impassive servant opened the door to them. Handing over his hat and sword stick, Ewan gave him his instructions in a soft undertone before leading the way to a small saloon upstairs. Long curtains of heavy green damask were drawn against the night. A fire crackled in the grate, the light from the many candles reflected in the two long mirrors hung on the walls between the windows.

The reality of her situation struck Isabella with the force of a hammer. Whatever happened now, it was irrevocable. She was not sure she could go through with it. She knew she *should* not.

Something of her panic showed in her face. "You do not have to do this," Ewan said abruptly.. "I will understand if you want to reconsider now, before it is

too late."

"No," she said with a defiant tilt of her chin, throwing the last seeds of caution to the wind. "I will not renege on our terms—you need have no fear of that."

"I don't," Ewan replied, confident now that the rules of engagement were understood between them.

His touch sent a shiver up her arm. His extraordinary amber eyes glinted down at her. Desire. Confidence. Knowledge. As his gaze flickered over her face down to the neckline of her dress, Isabella flushed. Her breathing quickened.

"Shall we," he said seductively. "You may have the honour."

Isabella picked up the dice, running her tongue over her full bottom lip, where traces of rouge lingered. "Five," she called, throwing a six and a three. Ewan was watching her, catlike. Devoured. She would be devoured, she thought with shocking relish.

"Six", Ewan called with assurance before he threw. A five and one rolled obligingly onto the table.

Expressing neither surprise nor disappointment Isabella turned towards him, her eyes almost navy blue, dark with the rush of anticipation. "You win."

Without a word he led her from the room, along the corridor and through a doorway at the end into another room. Candles were lit on the mantel, another branch on the large inlaid chest which stood in the corner. A bottle of champagne and two glasses sat waiting atop a small table as Ewan had requested, so confident had he been of victory. A chair and a chaise-longue sat at

right angles to each other in front of the grate. Crimson hangings covered the windows. The polished floor was strewn with rugs, soft silk and rich wool. The room was dominated by a large four-poster bed, the hangings of silk damask the same colour as the curtains, the counterpane of velvet strewn with tasselled cushions.

Isabella sat on the chaise and took the glass of champagne he poured, her hands trembling.

"Wait here," Ewan said, opening a door in the panelled wall which presumably led to his dressing room.

She sipped on the ice-cold drink, feeling the bubbles sparkle and burst in her mouth. The unaccustomed alcohol relaxed her. She felt as if she was in a dream, observing herself from a distance. Disconnected. Isabella waiting in the background to see what Belle would do in the fore. She poured herself another glass of champagne, drinking it quickly down.

Ewan returned clad in an exotic banyan of Chinese silk tied loosely around the waist. As he sat down on the chair beside her, she eyed him cautiously. A long muscular leg emerged from the folds. A well-shaped calf. A glimpse of thigh. He was clearly quite naked underneath his robe. Isabella dragged her eyes upwards. A sprinkling of hair at his throat, a darker copper than that on his head. A strong neck. His hair, unfashionably untied, reached his shoulders. It suited him. Like a mane. She tilted back her glass, surprised to find it empty.

Long fingers relieved her of it. "You have a debt of honour to pay. I would have you sober enough to

deliver it properly.”

Beneath the cool tones his rich Scottish timbre served to threaten and entice at the same time. She glared defiantly at him. She was his prey, but she would not be his victim. “I am perfectly aware of my obligations sir. You have me at your disposal.”

Ewan reached out to clasp her hand. Long fingers. Pink nails. Pulse fluttering visibly on her wrist. He kissed it, his tongue touching her flesh. Inhaled the light flowery scent there, feeling his own pulse pick up a beat in response. “Not at my disposal, Belle. At my command.”

For a fleeting moment he thought he detected fear in her expression, then it was gone. “And what would you command me do,” she asked somewhat breathlessly, rising to the challenge as he had known she would.

“Undress for me. But do it slowly, I want to enjoy the spectacle.”

Isabella stared in consternation.

“You cannot deny me. I won, remember.”

That mocking smile of his riled her. So confident he was. Toying with her, she could see that now. It was a game. She could not allow herself to be defeated by her inhibitions. *She would not allow it!*

Ewan sprawled back on the chair. The sash on his banyan had loosened. Isabella’s eyes widened as she took in the rapidly hardening length of him nudging against the embroidered silk. He saw her looking. She must not turn away. She tried instead to imagine how it would feel inside her, but could not. A frisson of

almost-fear surged through her.

Slowly, she started to disrobe, embarrassed and self-conscious as she tugged at the lacing behind her dress. The silk gown spilled at her feet, leaving her in her shoes and underclothes. Blushing, she snatched a look at him. Broad shoulders, a muscled torso tapering down to where the belt tied, then up to his unblinking gaze. She heard his breathing, quicker surely than before?

Relief washed over her. He liked what he saw—was anxious to see more. *Slow, she should slow down.* Postpone his pleasure. Delay her own unveiling. Turn it into a performance, a contest.

Belle untied her petticoats and bustle, trying to make a drama of each button and string, stretching and bending to conceal and reveal. Embarrassment dissolved as she gave rein to her instincts, her confidence growing as she watched the effect on her audience through her lashes. Shocking. Her behaviour was outrageous, yet gratifyingly effective.

She stood before him in her stays and chemise, the ribbons of her stockings fluttering against her knees. When he reached for her she stepped back, and knew it for a turning point. She had learned how to tease. Pain and pleasure intermingled. She saw it in his eyes. Felt it take a tentative hold on herself. Ewan was not the only one enjoying her show.

Slowly, she twirled for him, like a dancer on the stage. Posing now as if for a portrait to show off the line of her throat, the curve of her spine, conscious of her breasts rising and falling in the confines of her stays. Discarding her inhibitions with her clothing. A transforming. She was not Isabella stripped. She was

Belle revealed.

In front of her Ewan no longer smiled. His face was a mask, eyes golden slits of light, lids heavy. Belle's glance flickered down to his manhood. She had never seen a man naked before. It was strangely beautiful, smooth and curving, like a separate being. She wanted to touch it. To run her fingers along its length. To caress it.

Her muscles clenched in anticipation. Her breath came faster. Ewan's gaze locked onto hers. Watching her watching him. A reflection of desire. And in the reflection a multiplying. Sure of her instincts now, she stepped out of the garments at her feet. Deliberately turning her back to him, she rested her foot on the chaise-longue, provocatively stretching over so that her chemise was pulled tight against her bottom. A shoe removed. Her stocking followed. She could hear Ewan breathing. She could smell her own scent. Salt and spice. Her other foot on the chair. Shoe. Stocking. She turned and walked towards him, the urge to touch was almost irresistible but she managed to restrain herself, presenting her back to him.

His hands on the laces of her stays. His fingers running down her spine, setting every nerve end on fire. She stepped away again. Slowly, she pulled her chemise down. The soft material felt strangely coarse on her nipples. Distracted, she touched one curiously with her finger. It was pebble hard. Amazingly sensitive. She closed her eyes at the spark of feeling. Opened them again as she heard Ewan's intake of breath.

"Sit down and do that again," he said, his voice ragged.

Embarrassment briefly flared. Mortification threatened. Then she remembered; *perform*.

Belle sat naked on the chaise-longue. Tentatively touched her nipple. That strange feeling again. Abrasive. Pleasure and pain. Like the teasing. She closed her eyes as her untutored touch sparked a connection, from her fingertips to her nipples to the knot in her belly and the heat between her legs. The damask covering of the seat had a deliciously abrasive quality. She writhed against it.

"Lower," Ewan rasped.

Her eyes flew open, startled. She must be mistaken. *Surely, she was mistaken?*

He raised his eyebrows, patiently waiting. The tussle for supremacy was almost tangible between them. She would not surrender so easily. He would not be the only one to exercise control.

She knew with shocking clarity what he wanted of her. *She could not!* But to deny him would be to admit defeat. She would not be defeated. In his eyes she was already a wanton, after all. Why not complete the illusion?

Closing her eyes, Belle sprawled back on the sofa. Released from shame by his command, she touched herself. She was in uncharted waters, navigating by intuition, steered by Ewan's visceral reaction. Tentatively, she allowed her finger to slide over the most sensitised part of her, dipping down, inside, then back. Slippery. Swollen. A feeling like waves rolling into the shore, like breakers ready to foam. Astonishing and yet somehow completely natural.

Then, a hand on her wrist. Her eyes flew open. Ewan was standing over her, his face hard planes and rigid control. "Not yet," he said harshly, placing her hand onto his erection.

Belle sat up. Giddy. Disoriented. Edgy. She touched him. Skin like velvet. A pulsing vein running up to a hot tip. She ran her fingers over it, felt him shudder and ran her fingers back down, mimicking the way she had touched herself. Trailing and fluttering. Now cupping. Feeling him contracting against her, feeling the roughness of hair on her palm, enjoying the contrast of his satin smoothness in her other hand.

"Like this," he said, wrapping her fingers around him.

She watched, fascinated by his response to her touch, and smiled with satisfaction at the pleasure she was giving, for in his pleasure lay her victory. She looked down, lest she give herself away, moving her hand more purposefully. Feeling a shifting response in herself she moved closer, grazing her breasts against him.

Ewan pushed her back onto the chaise-longue. Unresisting, Belle lay waiting for his next move. She did not know, but she knew. He had won the throw, and in the end she must capitulate. She did not care, as long as there was an end, and soon.

He pushed her legs apart to kneel between them. He touched her. A whisper of sensation in the delicate crease at the top of her thigh. The heel of his hand between her legs, cupping her as she had him. She pushed against him. Harder, she wanted to say, but

didn't. His finger eased her open, as if separating the petals of a flower.

His touch sliding over her, she felt gripped as in a vice. She struggled to breathe. Clenched to resist him. Hold on, she thought desperately, but she wasn't sure she could. Sparks of heat flickered out from where he touched her. She no longer cared what he did, so long as he did. It was profoundly different from her own caress. A change of tone and note.

Ewan plunged his finger deep into the honeyed flesh spread out in front of him, relishing the way she bucked up against him. Relishing the pleasure he could see etched on her face. Exulting in the knowledge that he caused it, controlled it.

Belle moaned, pushed, writhed. With every stroke she curled tighter into herself. She wanted only to complete this journey, to release the clutching, pleasurable tension between her legs.

Ewan rubbed and dipped and stroked. Faster. Then slower. She could not bear to wait. She reached down to grab a fistful of his hair.

He shook her away with a strange smile on his face. Vaguely, she recognised it as victorious. A sweeping, stroking, pressing movement, and she held it, clutched at it like something which would fall—and then she did, holding tighter, taut, resistant, until she could hold it no more and set it free like a bird soaring from her, flying high with a shattering pleasure, moaning, mindless.

Ewan pulled her onto the floor beneath him and entered her with one hard thrust, pushing into the hot, wet centre of her. So tight. So ready. He paused, his breathing ragged.

Beneath him, Belle said something inarticulate, her muscles gripping, holding, urging. Moving again, he was pushing hard into her, thrusting, a welcome sensation high inside her. So hard, questing, pushing in until she was sure he could not go further, but still he did. Her legs lifted over his shoulders. Pulled tight against him. Thrusting, all of him now, all of him, and she could feel every inch. She tried to hold him, feeling her own excitement build again as he moved. Harder. Higher, until she felt she would die of the tension. She wanted to scream from it, and just as she thought she would, it snapped, different from before, a sheer exhilarating drop.

Ewan could not think, his mind filled with the image of her spread out for him, creamy white thighs, full breasts, the nipples hard and dark, black curls hiding the hot pink centre into which he thrust again, oblivious now of everything save his own pleasure, holding her by the waist to pull her into him. Sharp nails dug into his buttocks, long legs curled round him. His eyes were screwed tight shut as he climaxed, pulsing into her, relishing the feeling of power and pleasure and release all rolled into one. He lay spent, breathing hard against the soft white flesh of her body.

Belle felt as if she were floating on a cloud somewhere. Sated. Now she understood the word. She could feel Ewan's breathing slowly return to normal. She had done something irrevocable, but she had enjoyed it. Relished it even.

Ewan raised his head to look at her and smiled. "Come to bed," he said, sweeping her up effortlessly

in his arms. "To sleep," he added in answer to her questioning look. "Tonight's wager has been settled in full."

Chapter 3

He was awoken by the grey light of dawn creeping in through the gaps in the curtains. Sitting up groggily, he was startled to find an extremely beautiful naked woman lying asleep next to him. Then he remembered. Belle. Ewan groaned. He must have had far more brandy than he'd realised. He searched his mind for regret, but could find none.

She lay on her back before him, a picture to drive any man wild with desire. Lips swollen from kissing. Lids heavy and slumberous. Full ripe breasts. Hair strewn out on the pillow behind her. "Perfect antidote, I knew you would be," he muttered to himself.

Slipping out of bed, Ewan threw on his robe and padded silently from the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Isabella awoke to the appetising smell of fresh chocolate and warm bread. She rolled over in bed, wondering what on earth she had done to merit such an unaccustomed treat. Sitting up, she rubbed her eyes and shivered with the cold, realising with astonishment that she was naked and not in her own bed.

"Charming," a deep voice said.

Ewan was standing by the bed, holding a tray and smiling appreciatively at the vision of her black hair glinting through her powder and tumbling down over her back, her shoulders and her breasts.

Isabella grabbed the sheet, blushing furiously, images of the night before whirling through her mind

like leaves in a gale. She had behaved shamelessly. She risked a glance at Ewan, busying himself with the chocolate pot. He looked tired, but showed no other outward signs of last night's events. It occurred to her that *she* must look different, changed somehow. Of a certainty she felt it.

Ewan handed her a delicate china cup patterned with dragons. Isabella took it gratefully, mumbling her thanks without meeting his eyes. She had no idea how to behave.

"I am no more familiar with the situation than you," Ewan said, echoing her thoughts. "I don't make a habit of letting women into my home. In fact, you are the first."

He stood by the bed in a heavy brocade dressing gown, smiling mischievously down at her. In the light of day she could see streaks of gold glint through his copper mane of hair. The stubble on his chin was the same dark shade of copper as the hair on his chest. The animal magnetism which had drawn her last night seemed enhanced by his dishevelled state. Really, he was quite unfairly attractive.

"Belle?"

His voice interrupted her reverie. There was an edge of amusement in it which made her certain she had been staring. She met his gaze. "I beg your pardon."

"I was asking if you regretted our wager."

Isabella eyed him speculatively. "And if I said I did?"

He laughed, sure now that she did not, for there was no indication of either tears or recriminations. "And do you?"

She shook her head. "I had no choice."

"You prefer the illusion that you are acting under duress. You will not admit you are enjoying yourself."

"The only thing I am interested in is my money," she said firmly.

"You are being less than honest, Belle."

Her winged brows rose. Her mouth quirked. It was as if they were redrawing the battle lines for later, and she knew she had to muster every advantage. "I was your prize. I did as you asked, nothing more."

Ewan remembered now what it was about her which had drawn him to her in the first place. Defiance in the face of adversity. A determination to win against the odds. He liked it. And in the luminous daylight, she was quite simply breathtaking. He was intrigued as well as aroused. "Let us call a truce for now. Have your breakfast, and then join me in the garden. You will find clothes in the chamber next to this one. My sister's. She is recently married, and left them behind when she bought her trousseau." He noted her sceptical expression. "I may have a reputation but I don't lie, Belle, you may count on that."

He disappeared into his dressing room. Isabella took her time, enjoying the rich hot chocolate, nibbling hungrily on the bread and butter as she pondered her own feelings. Had it not been for the extremity of her circumstances she would not have dreamt of entering into such an outrageous bet, but having done so she could not regret it one little bit.

She had secured the funds—that was surely all that mattered. Even as she thought it, she knew it was a lie.

Last night she had discovered something shocking about herself. She had relished every minute of what had taken place. The memory of it aroused her now. More shocking still was the admission that she wanted more, and with it the understanding that it wasn't just the physical act she had enjoyed. She had pleased herself before, but it had never felt like that. So intense. So gratifying. So primeval. Ewan's touch was part of it. Having Ewan inside her was another part—and a very large one, she remembered with a saucy smile.

But it was more than that. It was seeing him wanting her. It was about teasing him and taunting him and flaunting herself in front of him. It was knowing she was desirable and desiring to be more so. A heady mix, made all the more complex by their sparring.

Power was at the root of it all. And confidence. She trusted him enough to expose her secret self to him, though she could not have said why. She knew he had done the same. He was a stranger, yet he was familiar. As if she had always known him and somehow forgotten.

It was with a renewed sense of anticipation that Isabella dressed in a robe *à l'anglaise* of pale blue muslin. With her coal-black hair free from powder, she looked much more like her true self. Last night she had crossed over into a new world. Or so it felt to her. She was surprised to see no evidence of the journey reflected back at her from the mirror.

Tripping lightly down the stairs, she let herself out of a side door and into the walled garden at the back of the house. It was clement for the time of year, with the

sun shining high in a pale blue sky scattered with puffy white clouds. A paved path meandered through formal beds, the edges bordered with lavender and thyme which brushed against her skirts as she made her way towards an arbour at the centre of a rose garden where she could see Ewan waiting.

He was looking serious, but rose to greet her with a warm smile she could not but return with one of her own. He was so handsome, and the day was so perfect, and Isabella was so glad to have escaped the worries and sadness of the last few months. She felt released. Free.

"I'm sorry, Belle, but there is something I must ask you," Ewan said as they wandered arm in arm towards a small fountain playing in the middle of a lawn at the bottom of the garden. "What need have you for such a large sum of money?"

Isabella hesitated. "To pay off a debt," she replied cautiously.

He raised his brows. "That is a lot of debt. May I ask how you incurred it? Surely, not through gambling. Despite your best efforts you had not the look of a seasoned gamester."

"And yet, in a sense it is a gambling debt none the less," she said sadly. "My father's, originally. And now my brother's."

"Tell me," Ewan said gently.

They had reached the fountain, a frothy confection of nymphs and seahorses disporting themselves playfully. Isabella sat on the stone basin, trailing her hand in the icy cold of the water. The urge to confide

in him was strong.

"My father was always a bit of a dreamer. Always full of hare-brained schemes to make our fortune. When my mother was alive she kept his reckless impulses in check, but she died five years ago and since then—well, suffice it to say he was not inclined to listen to my advice."

"You mentioned a brother. Surely, he had some influence?" Ewan sat down beside her on the stone basin.

Isabella smiled. "Robin is my twin. I love him dearly. We are very alike to look at though not at all similar in character, I'm afraid," she said with a rueful smile. "Robin had rheumatic fever as a child, which left him with a weakened heart. His delicate constitution combined with his natural inclinations make him even more unworldly than our father."

"Leaving you to look after them both?"

"Not any more. Robin is married now. To Pamela, last year. She is a good wife, she nurses him devotedly. They moved to the country when Papa settled an annuity on them, his wedding gift. They are very happy."

"So happy that they did not enquire how your father funded his gift, I gather," Ewan said dryly.

Isabella looked at him in surprise. "You're quite right, they didn't. It was another of Papa's schemes of course. His grand design, he called it. Said it would shape our future. He was certainly right about that." She was silent for a moment, staring off into the distance. Continued in a curiously flat tone, as if reciting something by rote. "The scheme involved buying ships and speculating on the value of the cargo

of precious spices and the like they could pick up in the West Indies. I tried, but nothing I said could dissuade him. In fact, the more I begged him to back out, the more determined he became to prove me wrong. He borrowed an enormous sum—privately, of course No bank would have given him the money. He sailed with the ships. They were attacked by pirates. The ships and cargo were taken and Papa killed in the melee.” Isabella’s eyes filled with pain. “Poor Papa. He may have been foolish but he only wanted the best for us.”

She straightened her back and shrugged her head as if to cast off unwelcome thoughts. ”That was some months ago. As his heir, poor Robin inherited the debt, which is far beyond what could be recovered by the sale of his property. He has tried, God knows, to find some means of generating sufficient funds, but without success. Now we have run out of time. We have until the end of the week, or Robin will go to prison.” She swallowed, brushed impatiently at a tear. “The doctor has made it clear my brother would not survive the harsh conditions of prison. It is as good as a death sentence. So you see, I had to do something.”

“Does your brother know of your actions?” Ewan asked harshly.

“No, no, of course not. I will think of some tale to satisfy him, you needn’t worry.”

“He does not deserve you,” Ewan said, anger on her behalf warring with a kernel of guilt. With her hair unpowdered and her face free of rouge Belle looked younger and far more innocent than he had taken her

for last night.

"I won't have you judge my brother," Isabella said vehemently. "You know nothing of him. And I won't have you judge me, either."

Ewan disarmed her by kissing her hand. "I would not dream of judging you. You have my deepest admiration, Belle. It is myself I would judge."

"I don't regret last night if that is worrying you. I have already told you that." Unwilling to have him question her motives further, for she was not ready to examine them herself, she gave him a challenging look. "Do you?"

Here at least he was on firmer ground. Ewan smiled. "Not if you don't. I knew the moment I saw you that we would give each other pleasure."

She blushed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Come on, Belle, you felt it, too, admit it."

She shook her head, turning aside to hide her smile. "That is the second time today you have tried to make me do so, but I won't. I needed your money. That is what I found attractive."

He touched her, a finger on the shell of her ear. His voice became low and husky. "You wanted me as much as I wanted you. I felt it in your kisses," he whispered, his mouth on hers. "And in your touch," he said.

She brushed his hand away. "You are quite right, I did," she said, looking at him with the determined tilt of her chin he already knew well. "It was not just your money I wanted, it was you. But not for the reason you think."

"My instincts tell me you are about to launch an attack. Yet still I would know. Tell me," he said with a

sardonic smile.

She crossed her arms defiantly. "It's simple. I was curious. I am four and twenty, with no prospects. I do not want to die a virgin. I wanted the experience without creating an obligation. The terms of our bet made that possible."

He had known, of course he had known, that he was her first. It was inappropriate, but he could not help it. He was gratified as well as confused. "You should have told me. I would not have..."

"What," she interrupted, anxious to stall the guilt she saw looming in his eyes, "what would you have done differently? I knew the risks. I accepted the odds. I put up a creditable performance—at any rate, you seemed to enjoy it. That is what it was, though, a performance." She shrugged with what she hoped was nonchalance and turned to go, but a strong hand on her arm wiped the triumphant smile from her face.

"I wonder, though, my lovely Belle, why you waited so long? Had you made your need for a candidate to deflower you known, any man on earth would have been willing. Yet you chose me. Why?"

She licked her lips nervously.

Ewan laughed. "Take some advice from an experienced campaigner and retreat while you're ahead, Belle."

Isabella glared at him furiously, but could think of no retort.

Ewan took her arm. "It's gone one o'clock," he said, his tone more conciliatory now.. "I find a night such as the last makes me uncommonly hungry. Let us

go in search of sustenance.”

With her nose studiously in the air and her temper simmering, Isabella walked with him back to the house.

But it was not in her nature to sulk, and over a repast of cold cuts and hothouse fruits, Ewan set out to charm her. Since he touched not on the personal, and his opinions happily coincided with her own on an astonishing number of topics, this he did very well. He had a dry humour and pithy wit which Isabella found most invigorating. He made her laugh. She realised it had been many months since she had done so. His tales of his army days were fascinating, recounted with a modesty and humour which made her warm to him all the more.

“You’re very self-effacing about your exploits,” she said teasingly.. “I had heard you were quite the dashing hero.”

“I prefer to let my actions speak for me, rather than words,” he replied with a shrug.

“Tell me,” she asked, “what turned you into such an avid supporter of Mr Fox and the Colonists—Americans, as I believe they like to be called? Having fought so loyally for the King, it seems a rather paradoxical stance to take.”

“Some would even say traitorous,” Ewan said bitterly.

“Not I,” Isabella said firmly.

He looked at her searchingly. “Thank you for that.”

Silence reigned for a few moments and Isabella held her breath, aware that the matter was important to him and deeply personal.

“I suppose it started at Bunker Hill,” Ewan said in a

low voice. "I was just twenty, too young to question why I was there, nor to doubt that I was fighting on the right side. We won, but it was a pyrrhic victory, the casualties were severe. You can have no idea how..."

His grim expression bore testimony to the dark memories crowding his mind. Isabella took his hand.

"Anyway," Ewan continued, "it was horrible for both sides. And that's when I began to realise it was wrong, too. We British were the trespassers, the usurpers. I realised that, but I could not do anything about it. Soldiering was my life. Loyalty to my colonel unquestioning, even if I did question the cause. Then our old enemies the French joined the Americans, and confused the issue. It was only years later, after Washington took our surrender in Yorktown, that I had time to sort out my feelings. And only when I left the army could I speak my mind without being disloyal."

"You certainly did speak your mind," Isabella said, remembering that even her father had called Ewan a turncoat.

Ewan shrugged. "Much good it did. I was cut by a number of my comrades. I featured in one of Mr Gillray's caricatures as a wild Scotsman in a kilt, and now Fox looks like he'll be stuck in opposition to Mr Pitt for the rest of his life."

"Have you no desire to take a more active part in politics?" she asked curiously.

Ewan shook his head. "Words and posturing are not for me."

The ormolu clock interrupted their conversation by striking five, taking them both by surprise.

“We should take the opportunity to rest before dinner,” Ewan said with a wicked glint in his eye. “With any luck it’s going to be an eventful night.”

A frisson of pure anticipation coursed through Isabella’s veins. What would the fates have in store for her this time?

Chapter 4

Belle dressed simply for dinner in a gown of pale green muslin worn open over a white slip, the sleeves tight to her elbows, below which the ruffles of her chemise billowed. Green ribbon formed a sash around her waist, and was also tied artfully into her hair, one long ebony curl allowed to trail over her shoulder. She studied her reflection in the long mirror with satisfaction. *Au natural*, a veritable milk-maid in the style made popular by Queen Marie-Antoinette. With a frisson of excitement she headed downstairs to the dining room. Whether she won or lost, she was determined to have Ewan in a fever of wanting.

He was different in the candlelight. Less approachable in his dark evening clothes. More self-contained. She felt a quiver of apprehension. Or was it some less admissible emotion?

They sat adjacent to each other at the oval table. Ewan dispensed with the servants and served her himself. She took claret, he burgundy. Roast woodcock met with her approval. Expertly, he carved the game bird and placed a portion on Isabella's plate.

White teeth nibbling on the tender meat. Fingers first licked, then sucked clean, one by one. A luscious mouth dabbed delicately with the table linen. A glimpse of pink tongue. Ewan shifted uncomfortably against the high back of his chair, feeling himself stiffen against his breeches. He could not but help imagining her mouth on him. Licking. Sucking.

"What have you in mind for me if you win again

tonight," she asked, fixing him with her gaze.

He grinned. "It does not do to depend upon winning, for that way disappointment lies."

"So you would be disappointed if I win," she teased.

"I would not be the only one."

"Sir, you flatter yourself."

A hand grasped her firmly by the chin. "At least I am honest with myself, Belle. I want you. If I win the throw I will have you, and you will be willing. But if you win, what then? 'Twill be a frustrating night, for you will spite us both."

She pulled back, anger sparking in her eyes, not wanting to hear the uncomfortable truth. "For you perhaps. I told you earlier, you have already served your purpose for me." She pushed back her chair impatiently. "Come, let us settle it at once then, since you are so clearly unable to wait."

Ewan laughed softly and followed her wordlessly upstairs to the small saloon where the dice box lay waiting on the table.

Isabella looked blankly at the dice when they stopped rolling. "It seems you have won, Captain Dalglish. Once again, I am at your disposal. What would you have me do this time?"

"Come here, Belle." He could see her breathing through the thin muslin of her dress. A long curl, glossy black, trailed down over the white skin of her neck. So lovely.

She stepped closer. He smelled of clean linen and soap, a hint of wine on his breath. She looked up, found his lips close, felt his breath warm on her cheek,

an arm snaking round the ribbon at her waist. She could feel her nipples harden against the cotton of her chemise. Wanting flared in her, a need she had not known until yesterday and which since then had stubbornly refused to subside.

Her wrists were captured, tugged tight behind her back. She was pressed close to him, chest to chest, so close she could feel the buttons of his coat digging into her. His smile was cruel but she was not frightened.

“So I have served my purpose have I? You do not dispense with me so easily, Belle. I will make you ache for me.”

His words served to boost her determination to deny him. “You may try, but you will not succeed,” she said with a taunting smile. “There is nothing singular about you, Captain Dalgleish. What you can give me, I don’t doubt I could have from any other man of my acquaintance. You said as much yourself.”

“As I also pointed out, you chose to wait for me,” he reminded her. Her wrists were released abruptly. Ewan strode over to the door of the saloon. The lock clicked home.

He moved purposefully towards her. “Turn around.”

The ribbon from her waist was untied and placed around her eyes as a blindfold. “What are you doing?” Belle asked, a tremor in her voice.

“Proving a point. Since you cannot see me you are free to imagine me whichever man of your acquaintance you choose. But you will not be able to, Belle. No matter what you may say, I know you want

only me. And you will admit it.”

“I am at your command. I will say anything you would have me say.”

“No, Belle, you will say it because it is true.”

Strong hands on her. Her dress untied. Her petticoats, her stays, her chemise, all expertly removed. The pins taken from her hair. She could feel it cascading down her back. She stood, vulnerable in her stockings and slippers, unable to see, afraid to move, yet unafraid.

“I won’t say it because it isn’t true,” she said, knowing she was lying, knowing he knew it, too, knowing that the battle of wills enhanced the wild excitement of the battle of the flesh.

Nothing happened for a few agonising seconds. Time seemed to stand still, the sense of anticipation almost unbearable. Suddenly, she felt a hand touch her head, long fingers combing through her hair, fanning it out over her shoulders. He was standing behind her. She could feel the cloth of his coat. His mouth on the nape of her neck. Cool lips on hot skin, on the lobe of her ear, trailing kisses down to her shoulder. Fingers kneading her flesh. Hands reaching round to cup her breasts, trailing down to the curve of her waist, a tantalising flicker on the soft skin at the top her thighs. Belle stood motionless, her mind floating, empty of thoughts, allowing sensation to take over. Cloth on skin. Cool on heat. Dry on wet.

Ewan guided her towards a sofa and arranged her there on her stomach, running his hand along the perfect contour of her spine, curling into her waist, curving out to her bottom. Such skin, such softness. curves and flesh, all so different from his own. She

smelled of flowers and spice. As she shifted restlessly under his caress, he caught a glimpse of black curls curtaining flesh darkened by arousal. Desire twisted like a knife in his gut.

Quickly, Ewan divested himself of his clothing. To take her, possess her utterly was what he most desired. But first he needed her, more than he cared to admit, to put the evidence of her own desire into words.

The delightfully ticklish sensation of something unbearably light being trailed over her back raised goose bumps on already over-sensitised skin. Belle shifted on the sofa. Between her thighs now, whispering down, on the backs of her knees, her ankles. Back again. She arched her bottom up, pressing her knees into the sofa to give her purchase, inviting the soft caress back, down, between.

A quite different sensation now. A tongue, licking down the curve of her bottom, velvet soft, dipping into the curve of her thighs, away again. She tried to imagine another man as he had commanded, but it was impossible. She did not need to see him. Her body knew it was Ewan. Could only be Ewan.

Something else now, playing on her skin. Silken, hard, nudging against her thighs. "Ewan," she said, arching against him.

Cold space. "Say you want me, Belle," Ewan whispered.

Silence.

His erection was nudging against her, sliding against her. She felt the tip of him part her. Feelings almost painful in their intensity. Deprived of her sight

it was as if all her other senses were enhanced.

“Belle?”

Silence.

Cold again. She was turned over. Sprawled on the settee, one leg trailing on the ground. She wanted to touch him, reached out blindly for him, found her hands pushed away.

Her legs parted. That tantalisingly ticklish sensation again. A feather...that was it. On her thighs. Between her thighs. Brushing her heat. Tickling her curls. Now fingers doing the same. Now a gentle breath. His tongue. *Oh,, his tongue.* Licking her thighs. Closer. Flickering round the edges of desire. Then not round the edges. A gentle touch...too gentle. A sweeping movement now, hot on hot, wet on wet. Such sweet pleasure, she was melting. Belle pressed herself against his mouth. More.

Instead, his voice, insistent now. “Who is it you want, Belle?”

Edgy, he sounded edgy. Passion, but it could be anger. She could not tell. She bit back the urge to plead with him.

Tongue and mouth again. Sucking and licking. Twisting and clenching. Throbbing. She was so close. He stopped. “Ewan.” Her voice was husky with passion and need. Her fingernails dug cruelly into his shoulders. “Ewan, for heavens' sake, I want you. Now.” Co-operation, not defeat. There was a limited pleasure in resistance and she had expended it.

For what seemed like eons nothing happened. Belle waited impatiently in the enforced darkness. Then suddenly he was kissing her—a hard, insistent kiss. She could feel tension in his shoulders but it was not

anger. He was as desperate as she was. All of a sudden, she wanted to give him what he needed. "I chose you. I wanted you last night. I did not care about the bet. I want you now."

The blindfold was torn from her, and she saw amber eyes gazing at her, dark with passion. A mouth sculpted into a victorious smile. She cared not, secure in the knowledge that she possessed him as much as he did her. Her nails dug harder into his flesh.

Ewan knelt between her legs. No teasing now, he licked her roughly, unerringly, tugging and sucking with just enough friction to drive her into a frenzy, pulling her hard against his mouth as she climaxed, pulsing into him, onto him. Waves turned to ripples and he licked again, turning the tide back from ebb to flow, pulling her to her feet, bending her over the sofa. She could feel him behind her, the hard length of him nudging against her.

Ewan rubbed himself against the perfect white cheeks of her bottom, his hand cupping her, feeling her rippling, so achingly arousing on his palm. He could see her, dark pink and wet as he entered, slowly, pushing in between layers of heat and damp, her muscles pulling him in, feeling her parting, gripping, holding him as he pushed in and in and in, all the while watching himself as he thrust into her, feeling as if every fibre of his body was being set ablaze.

Belle clung to the back of the sofa. Her knees were pressed against its edge. Ewan's legs pressed into the backs of hers. Rough hair. His breathing heavy. His hands clutching. Higher than before he was going,

more and more until there was no more and he paused tantalisingly. She pushed back against him, gripped him, experimentally rocked back and forth, loving the way even such a tiny movement rippled inside her. He felt thick and hard and high.

Ewan withdrew then plunged in again with that same deliberate, excruciatingly exciting slowness. It became another battle; the need to keep him inside her, to stop him withdrawing, to hold him. And she was winning. He was thrusting harder now, faster. She could feel the delightful slap of him against her bottom as he bucked. She could tell from the way he seemed to expand inside her that he was close. She felt her own muscles contract in response. An echo of her climax or a continuation or something new, she didn't care, except it whirled her away unexpectedly, and immediately she felt him shuddering in response, a thrusting becoming a pounding becoming a release, and she felt him spilling into her and she moaned his name without realising, holding him vicelike to feel and feel and feel as he spent himself.

Afterwards, he was tender, sitting her down beside him on the sofa, holding her close, stroking her hair as she nestled into the hollow of his shoulder. They sat thus for a long time, neither willing to break the spell. Later still he took her by the hand and led her to the bed chamber. They lay in the dark together under soft cotton sheets gazing without seeing.

"Is Belle your real name," Ewan asked unexpectedly.

"Why do you ask?"

"A feeling. At times—these times—you seem to be

Belle. But in the day when I speak your name, you look at me as if I am talking of a stranger.”

“You’re right in a way.” She felt as if their love-making had reshaped her. “Belle is a shocking creature. She has dark thoughts and dark needs. Isabella, my real name, the real me, knows nothing of them.”

“Isabella. I like it—it suits you. We all have a dark side,” Ewan said softly. “It’s just that most people do not have a name for it.”

“Some abuse it,” Belle said with a shiver.

Ewan pulled her close. “Yes, some do. I have seen it in the aftermath of battle many times. But that is not what I meant.”

“No, you meant what we have together,” she replied with growing understanding. “We clash because it enhances the defeat as well as the victory. Like tonight, there is as much pleasure in submission as there is in domination. Provided we both stick to the rules, of course.”

Ewan ran a possessive hand down her spine. “That is it exactly. I knew when I saw you that you would understand me, though, I could not have articulated it so. And you knew, too, you will admit that now?”

Belle smiled into the dark. “Why not? You won after all,” she teased.

“Yes, I did. And I am not finished with you yet,” he said with a growl, pushing her onto her back.

Afterwards, she slept deeply and dreamt she had been shipwrecked, drifting at sea alone. In the distance, at last, she could see safe harbour.

Chapter 5

She awoke in the morning alone and feeling strangely contented, as if she had emerged from a dark tunnel into the light. New. Replete. For the first time, Isabella examined Belle cautiously in the light of day, like a scientist surveying a new-found species. Alien but familiar. Part of her, once caged, now set free by this game of theirs. Like an alchemist, Ewan had conjured something new from two separate elements.

Something destined to be short-lived, she realised poignantly. After tonight it was a part of her which would forever go unnourished. Without Ewan, Belle would surely wither and die. The thought squeezed her heart, and she banished it. Plenty of time for pain on the morrow.

After dressing, Isabella found Ewan in the library reading *The Spectator*. He held out his hand in greeting, looking much younger in the daylight, almost boyish. Welcoming. She remembered her dream. Here was a man to keep confidences. A man to trust. A man of integrity, so different from the dark soul she crossed swords with at night. And yet...

Two Ewans; one for Belle, the other for Isabella. Opposite sides of one coin. Like her. Exactly like her. Like an animal with hibernation in mind, she stored up this comforting crumb for the bleak months ahead.

Wandering aimlessly about the room, Isabella spotted a large map of America laid out on the desk. "Is this the New World?" she asked excitedly. "Tell me about it, Ewan."

He described cities and plantations, a land of

contrasts and plenty. "But no words can convey the sense of space the sheer size of it," he said with a sweeping gesture.

Isabella ran her finger over the vast empty space to the west of New England. "The Frontier, they call it. Think what that could mean. The chance to start afresh, without the prejudices and constraints of England."

"That is precisely why the early settlers went there in the first place. But it is a life of hard work and many dangers, too," he cautioned.

"Think of the rewards, though," Isabella said with a glowing smile.

"You are serious," he said wonderingly.

Her smile faded abruptly. "A dream, that's all." She was silent, frowning down at the map. "As a woman, I am allowed no ambitions," she said bitterly. "But you can do anything you want. You are marking time with your hell raising I think, but it does not satisfy you, does it?"

"You're very perceptive. It's not the danger I miss, nor even the battles—it's the challenge, the unpredictability. I had forgotten what that felt like until I met you."

"Your dark side," Isabella said, flushing. "You will need to find another outlet for it after tonight."

He was hurt. "And you, too," he said roughly, testing her reaction.

She shook her head. "Tomorrow, perhaps even tonight if I win, Belle will be gone forever."

"Don't talk like that," he said, putting a hand on her

wrist.

She brushed him away. "This is not real life, what has transpired here between us. It is a game. A necessity for me, a diversion for you." She stood, brushing out her skirts, and left the room, seeking refuge in her chamber. She would not give house room to this stupid sentimental feeling the day-time Ewan aroused in her. He was her adversary. For if he was not, then what was he?

The question would not go away. As she bathed and dressed in an evening gown, as dusk fell and night ascended, Isabella and Belle waged war in her mind.

It's ridiculous to imagine an acquaintance which can be measured in hours could amount to anything important. I hardly know Ewan.

I know the important things. I have known those since almost the moment I set eyes on him.

Extreme circumstances brought us together. I am here only to save my brother.

I came here for Robin but I am staying for my own reasons.

I am simply in thrall to my own passions then...that is it, surely?

This chemistry between us is a symptom, not a cause. My passions are the result of my feelings, not the other way around.

So I am in love with him?

Yes, I am in love with him. Deeply, irrevocably in love with him. There, it is said!

I am not foolish enough to think my love returned, though.

No. And I do not want his pity, either.

My opponent he must remain then, Isabella said.

My opponent, Belle agreed sadly.

But by the time Belle faced Ewan over the dinner table, her mood was black. She would be gone in the morning. She wished she could be sure Ewan would miss her. She wished she did not care whether or not he did. She wished she could stop wishing. She cut viciously into the capon on her plate.

"You have the look of someone with a hunger food won't satisfy."

His words cut into her thoughts. He was not smiling, but he was laughing at her all the same. Pettishly, she pushed her plate away. "You flatter yourself if you think it's you I hunger for," she snapped. "You are a skilful lover, and you have taught me a few tricks, but I am a quick learner. I don't need you. Rather it is you who has need of me."

Her words were meant to hurt him. He knew that, but they hurt all the same. He could not read her mood. When she had left him earlier, he told himself it was part of their game. But she was still angry; so angry with him, and he did not know why. With the curtain up on their final act, it was as if he was in the wrong play. He had not thought of the ending, but he did not want *this* ending. "Isabella," he said urgently, "it doesn't have to be like this, you know."

"Yes, it does," she said at last. "We agreed on the rules at the outset. And you must call me Belle, not Isabella," she added coldly.

As he followed her for the last time to the upstairs

parlour, uncertainty made him apprehensive. He had convinced himself that the fall of the dice tonight was irrelevant. He realised he had been horribly wrong. He picked up the ivories. "Three," he called, for the nights of their wager. "No four," he amended superstitiously, casting the dice reluctantly.

Belle watched unblinking as they landed. Five and six. When it was her turn to throw she looked at Ewan, not the dice. "Three," she called, and three is precisely what fell.

He could not believe it was over. Striding over to the silver salver standing on the table beside the fireplace, Ewan poured himself a large brandy and downed it in one draught.

"Slowly, take your time," Belle said, in a deliberate echo of his own words that first night. "I would have you sober. You have a debt to settle, Captain Dalgleish."

Ewan looked up. Blue eyes, alight with something. Mouth curled up in a mocking smile, a direct imitation of his own. "But you won," he said stupidly.

"Indeed I did. Which means that I decide what happens." She crooked her finger and swept imperiously from the room.

Ewan followed, his heart thumping with anticipation. By the time they arrived at the door of her chamber he was already hard. Never had he wanted something so much.

"Undress," Belle commanded him, busy rummaging for something in the tall chest of drawers set against the far wall.

He did so. She turned to find him magnificently naked before her. She caught her breath, allowed her

eyes to travel slowly over him, from his flaming mane down past the breadth of his shoulders, his chest, the rippling muscles of his abdomen, his powerful thighs, her breath coming shallow and fast as she took in his aroused state. She forced herself to continue down the length of his legs, the beautifully defined muscles of his thighs and calves. Standing thus, there was no trace of the sophisticated gentleman; he was all raw power and overwhelmingly male. Untamed. But not, she hoped, untameable.

She wondered if it was possible to tease a man in the same way as she had been teased. Brought to the brink of pleasure and suspended there, time and again. She was resolved to try.

"Well," Ewan demanded, more aroused than abashed by her scrutiny. "Do I pass muster?"

"You are a fine looking specimen," Belle said dismissively.

He laughed, genuine amusement rippling through his stomach muscles, making his eyes crinkle attractively at the corners.

She could not help it; she returned his smile.

"Come here, Belle."

His words brought her up short. "No! It is for you to do my bidding tonight. Lie on the bed."

A quizzical look, but he obliged. "What do you plan to do with me?"

She looked down at him, trying to etch his image in her mind. Anger gave way to tenderness. Desire, as ever in his company, lurked in the wings ready to take a leading role. "Tonight you are the vanquished. My

prisoner. I intend to make use of you. Raise your arms."

Warily, he did so, watching as she produced two silk ribbons, sashes from dresses, he realised, and tied one around each wrist. When she concentrated her tongue peeped out between her lips. He wondered if she knew. He wanted to kiss her. As she tested her knots and began to tie the other end of the sashes to the bed posts, he relaxed. She wanted revenge, but it was not his demoralisation she sought; it was the upper hand. In this dark part of themselves were they not made of the same clay? Tonight, she needed him to resist before he submitted. A reversal of last night. He understood that, too.

Belle surveyed her handiwork with satisfaction. She stood in front of him to unhook her dress, recalling how much he had enjoyed watching her disrobe that first night. How much she had enjoyed it, too. Watching his excitement mount served to increase hers, she had learned. Provocatively, she paraded in front of him, casting silk and lace and cotton and ribbons aside. Naked, she reached up to loosen her hair, stretching her arms above her head to tauten the line of her breasts, watching Ewan through half-closed lids with immense satisfaction. He was positively devouring her with his eyes. A curl of excitement knotted tight in her belly.

Ewan strained at the ribbons. Forced himself to relax.

Belle laughed for the pleasure of it. She climbed onto the bed between his legs. Leaning over him, she allowed her nipples to graze the skin of his abdomen. She shivered at the contact and stooped down to lick

him, tracing the line of his rib cage with her tongue. Stopped to watch him.

His eyes darkened with desire. She felt him strain at the ribbons again. "Kiss me, Belle," he whispered huskily.

She shook her head. Leaning over him again, she traced a path with her tongue down his stomach, cradling his length between her breasts, teasing him with her nipples, relishing the feel of their hardness against his silken skin. Down she licked; the inside of his thigh then the other, revelling in the heat and maleness of him, feeling herself tight and wet, aware of his breathing becoming harsh and quicker as she lingered on the crease at the top of his leg.

"Do you like being my prisoner, Ewan?" she asked, her mouth against his skin.

Silence.

Her finger fluttering along the length of him. Circling the tip. Her tongue now, repeating the action, licking her way up, lingering, circling. Ewan groaned.

"Tell me you surrender, Ewan," she whispered.

"No," he managed through gritted teeth, straining at the ribbons.

Belle licked again. More than anything she wanted his hands on her, his lips on her, but that way lay capitulation and she was not ready for that. Not yet. Daringly, she put her lips around him and sucked gently. Silence of a different sort. She sucked again. Breathing so rapid she thought he was in pain. Looked up. Saw his eyes fly open.

"Don't stop."

"Say it," she insisted.

Her lips on him again. He thought he would die with the pleasure. Now butterfly kisses and fingers stroking, her lips again. Now looking at him, demanding. Ewan closed his eyes and looked away, praying she would have pity.

She remembered last night. She could do the same to him. She could have him without allowing him to have her. It was a powerfully erotic image. Ewan was looking at her. She could see the plea in his eyes, though he would not say it. She touched him with her fingers, stroking until she could feel the blood pulse, stopping as it did, glorying in the exquisite pain she could see etched on his face.

She put her lips around him again, drew him in as much as she could hold. Sucking purposefully now, feeling him engorged in her mouth, aware of him straining, breathing, saying her name, but caught up in her own powerful need to control him, feel him, and then he came, and finally she heard him, over and over again, saying the words, *I surrender*, but she didn't care anymore and it didn't feel like a victory; it simply felt right.

She lay on his stomach. She could feel his heart beating hard. She was conscious of her own arousal, and wondered what to do about it. She could make him tend to her as he had last night, but that was not what she wanted. She wanted him inside her. Cautiously, she touched him. Wondering.

A throaty chuckle. "Give me a moment."

She looked up. "Fighting back, Ewan?"

He shook his head. "Simply trying to do your bidding, but I need time to recover. If you untied me, it

would help.”

But she would not. And it did not take so very long after all. ;

Lowering herself onto him, shivering as she felt him enter her, satin smooth and hard in contrast to her soft and wet core. Slowly, she sheathed him until he filled her, and she held him without moving.

“Belle,” Ewan said urgently.. “Belle, untie me.”

She shook her head. Even that tiny movement reverberated inside her.

Ewan strained at the ribbons holding him but to no avail. Belle moved again, up, down, slow, too slow, tilting herself forward on top of him, nipples grazing his chest. She was doing something else now, so that he was caught in a vicelike grip inside her. He felt the blood rushing. “Let me go, Belle.”

Still she denied him, squirming on top of him, enjoying the friction, enjoying the power she had over him, enjoying the power she had over herself. She lifted herself up again, then down, then writhed.

She could feel herself unravelling. She leaned forward using her elbows for purchase and thrust again. Ewan pushed up to meet her. His eyes on hers, dark amber, watching her, waiting for her, she realised. Finally, she kissed him. Deeply. Passionately. Her tongue hot in his mouth. She thrust, could hold it no longer, came around him, gripping his shoulders, like a complicated knot untying, and felt him climax almost at the same time, so that she was lost, unable to tell which was her and which was he as they fell, glided, and soared.

Little kisses nuzzling her back to consciousness... Abruptly, Belle sat up. Reluctantly, she pulled herself away. She untied him.

Ewan smiled at her lazily. "How does it feel to win?"

"How does it feel to lose?"

"Surprisingly good." He sat up, massaging his wrists.

To her embarrassment, there were red wheals where the ribbons had been pulled too tight when he had strained against them. "I'm sorry," she said contritely. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

He shrugged and pulled her down on top of him. "It's of no consequence."

His hands stroked her back, pulled her close, so close she could hear the thump of his heart. Her head fitted snugly onto his shoulder. How could three days have passed so quickly? Why could not the night last longer? She was dreading daybreak.

"Belle, about tomorrow," Ewan said.

"There is no need to say anything," she mumbled into his chest, unwilling to hear any reminder of their terms or, God forbid, his thanks or his excuses. She would leave without betraying herself if it killed her.

Assuming they were in perfect accord, Ewan smiled contentedly. She was right. There was no need for words to frame something so fundamental. But he would say them all the same in the morning. Unconventional this courtship may have been, but it must be formally sealed. He slept deeply and dreamt of their future together. When he awoke she was gone.

Chapter 6

“Why did you leave without so much as a word?”

Ewan pushed passed the maidservant and slammed the door of the small parlour firmly behind them. He was clearly angry. It showed in the hard glitter of his eyes, in the rigid way he held himself, leaning against the door, muscles tensed as if waiting to pounce, holding her in a gimlet glare she dared not break.

Isabella shook her head helplessly.

“I thought things were understood between us,” Ewan said harshly, pushing himself from the door and closing the distance to her with three long strides. “Last night, you said we need not say anything, I thought you realised—” He stopped abruptly, ran a hand over his unshaven jaw, up to his hair, copper and gold in wild disarray, in tune with his mood. “Isabella, have you any idea how I felt? I did not even know where you live.”

She smiled nervously. “We did not get around to such common place information.”

“No. What we shared was rather more fundamental,” he said, taking her hand. “Luckily, the footman who summoned the hackney for you this morning has an excellent memory.”

Hope flickered in her breast, but she could not yet turn it into belief. “We certainly reached a—a frankness in a very short acquaintance which few people achieve in a lifetime.”

Navy blue eyes met amber. Each searching desperately for reassurance. It was Ewan who spoke

first.

"Two days and three nights that is all, yet I feel I know you. I feel you know me, too."

He was frowning, his mouth a tight line. It was a look which could have been frightening, so fierce it was, but she was not frightened. Uncertainty, need, too, were reflected there. She had never seen him look so anxious. Never heard that note in his voice, not even at the height of their passion. She recognised it all. A reflection of herself.

But still she sought reassurance. "You said last night we had no need for words."

"You thought I meant no regrets," he said, understanding slowly dawning.

She gave a ragged laugh. "I thought you were reminding me of our terms. That you had had enough of me. I could not bear to say goodbye."

A smile lurked at the corner of Ewan's mouth. "Goodbye! One word we will never say. No, it was not that. It was just—something so elemental as we share, it seemed to me sacrilege to speak it."

"Elemental," Isabella whispered. "That is how it felt."

"An irresistible force. We called it a battle, but it was more like an explosion, so powerful it was, that thing which brought us together." He pressed her hand between his, then knelt at her feet. "We fought for control, when we should have simply surrendered. We are two halves of one being, Isabella. One creation far more powerful than its components. Do you not realise that?"

She knew only too well. "*My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,*" she quoted softly. "I know that

I love you, Ewan, if that is what you mean.”

“I look at you and see me. That, my lovely Isabella, is exactly what I mean,” he said. “And though our wooing has been rather unconventional, that is what it was after all, a wooing. So I would beg you in the most conventional way to be my wife, for the most conventional of reasons, that I cannot live without you and my life would be empty without you.”

She fell to the floor beside him, wrapping her arms around him. “And I must reply in the most conventional of ways that I will, I will, *indeed* I will.”

“I love you, Isabella,” he whispered into her ear. “A mere three days we have spent together, but we have been meant for each other since the beginning of time.”

Finally, his lips met hers. Tongues tangling. Breath mingling. Hot, hard kisses. Arms entwined. Bodies pressed so tight together nothing could ever come between them.

A mere two hours they had been wed. They left on the morrow for the New World.

“You’re shivering,” Ewan said, running his hands down his wife’s arms.

“I’m nervous,” Isabella replied. “I know it’s foolish, but I feel as if this is the first time.”

“It is. Before, we indulged in love-making. Tonight we will be making love. I am as nervous as you are.”

Shyly, she untied the fastening of her chemise and let it fall to the ground. She came towards him, white skin, black hair, blue eyes, pink mouth.

“Beautiful,” Ewan whispered. “Beautiful Isabella.” He ran his hands down the line of her spine to cup the curves of her bottom, pulling her close against him. “My wife. I love you.”

“My husband,” she whispered, rubbing herself sensuously against him. “I love you.”

He kissed her, and his touch sent a jolt of fire through her. Ewan's hair clenched in her hand. Herself pushing, arching her hips into his, relishing the hardness of him against her. He lifted her onto the bed. Touching. Stroking. Licking. Sucking. Her mouth. Her breasts. Down to the heat between her legs. She moaned his name. Began to fall. Then he was on top of her, kissing her, thrusting deep inside her as she climaxed, arching against him, feeling him spill into her at the same moment, kissing, clutching. Calling her name. Calling his name. Drifting weightless, dispersed like a thousand stars into a new sky.

One. They were one. That is how it ended. And that is how it began. In a new world.

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Born and educated in Scotland, **Marguerite Kaye** originally qualified as a lawyer but chose not to practise—a decision which was a relief both to her and the Scottish legal establishment. While carving out a successful career in IT, she occupied herself with her twin passions of studying history and reading, picking up a first-class honors and a Masters degree along the way.

The course of her life changed dramatically when she found her soul mate. After an idyllic year out, spent traveling round the Mediterranean, Marguerite decided to take the plunge and pursue her life-long ambition to write for a living—a dream she had cherished ever since winning a national poetry competition at the age of nine.

Just like one of her fictional heroines, Marguerite's fantasy has become reality. She has published history and travel articles, as well as short stories, but romances are her passion. Marguerite describes Georgette Heyer and Doris Day as her biggest early influences, and her partner as her inspiration.

Though she continues to write regular pieces for a number of Scottish magazines and also publishes short stories in women's weeklies, romances are her passion. When she is not writing, Marguerite enjoys cooking and hill walking. A confirmed Europhile who spends much of the year in sunny climes, she returns regularly to the beautiful Highland scenery of her native Argyll, the place she still calls home.

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The Captain's Wicked Wager

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