

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Ace of Hearts

Lisette Allen

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS

The background of the cover features a stylized, monochromatic illustration of several overlapping books. The books are rendered in various shades of gray, creating a sense of depth and movement. The pages of the books are depicted as curved lines, suggesting they are open and slightly fanned out. The overall composition is clean and modern, with a focus on geometric shapes and gradients.

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'Remember, my sweet,' everyone has their price,' said Lord Delsingham.

Marisa pulled herself together. 'I told you before, my Lord,' she said stoutly. 'No one pays me to do anything!'

'A pity,' he murmured, his narrowed grey eyes raking her. 'My imagination runs riot at the sight of you in those breeches. And the thought of you out of them is quite devastating.'

Author's other Black Lace titles:

Elena's Conquest

Elena's Destiny

The Amulet

Nicole's Revenge

Nadya's Quest

Risky Business

ACE OF HEARTS

Lisette Allen



Chapter One

The late afternoon sun poured in through the high windows, burnishing the bare oak floorboards of the spacious attic room. From the narrow London street below came the muffled clatter of carriage wheels on cobbles, and the shrill cries of street sellers. But up here, the only sound that mattered was the delicately lethal kiss of the two rapier blades that gleamed like slivers of light in the still air.

In a sudden flurry of movement, the shafts of steel shuddered together then fell, sighing, apart. The two opponents, solitary occupants of the room, circled one another warily. One was fair, the other one dark; their features were concealed by the wire face masks they wore. Both were clad in open-necked silk shirts that were tucked into slim-fitting buckskin knee breeches. The room echoed to the soft tread of their stockinged feet on the polished oak boards as they moved gracefully, assessing one another. There was a sudden hiss of indrawn breath as the fair one's arm whipped up; blades clashed gratingly, to be followed by a moment's fierce, sinew-straining tension as both strove for mastery. Then the dark-haired man gave ground and let his blade slide gently aside. The slither of steel died away in the silent room and he said thoughtfully, 'Your riposte was good. You improve every time we meet.'

His opponent's fair head bowed slightly in acknowledgement of the compliment. 'My thanks, Signor Valsino. That is my intention.' Then the two blades tapped once more in salute, and once more the stockinged feet tensed and stepped sideways in their purposeful dance. Muscles flexed and rippled beneath thin silk shirts that were

damp with perspiration; the room seemed charged with the energy of vital combat.

Suddenly the slighter of the two, the fair one whose face was all but obscured by the mysterious wire mask, lunged forward to deliver a lightning thrust in tierce, with arm held high and silk sleeve falling back to expose a slender yet sinewed wrist. The dark-haired man whipped up his blade in retaliation, the muscles of his forearm ribbed and hard. There was a scuffle of blades in forte, a sparking clash of metal as the rapiers jarred and adhered, to be followed by a final, deadly struggle as each combatant tried to force the other aside. A soft hiss of expelled breath was followed by a sharp clatter of steel as the fair fencer's rapier flew in a silvery arc through the air, landing with ringing finality on the oak floor.

The dark-haired man's sword flashed in for the kill, his rapier point jabbing with deadly accuracy at his vanquished opponent's heaving ribs. The moment seemed to hang suspended in the bright, thin air. Then the victor laughed. Lowering his sword, he pulled off his wire mask and tossed it onto one of the striped satin settees that lined the long wall. He lifted his sword in mock salute and said, in a musical, slightly foreign voice, 'You prove yourself a worthy opponent, my dear.'

The fair-haired combatant pulled off her mask as well and shook her long tresses out of the narrow black ribbon that restrained them. Once free, her hair clustered in thick curls round her slender shoulders, honey-gold in the spring sunshine. 'I will be a truly worthy opponent for you, Signor Valsino, when I beat you. I strive, as always, for perfection.'

Her voice was low and melodious and sent shivers down his spine, just as if he were stroking a fine rapier blade. He stood watching her in frank admiration, drinking in the pale gold silk of her cheeks and throat, lightly sheened with perspiration after her exertion. He noted her slender but deceptively strong shoulders and arms that wielded the

rapier with such skill, and saw how the sinuous folds of her silk shirt clung to the contours of her body, reminding him, with a familiar, stabbing ache, that beneath the cool silk were firm, high breasts crested with darkly tantalising nipples, as luscious as peaches ripened in the warm Italian sun. And as she stood there, with her hands poised boyishly on her leather breeched hips, he realised that he wanted her now, badly.

He said, 'You seem quite perfect as you are to me, Signorina Marisa.'

She gazed coolly back at him with her devastating blue eyes. She must have seen the blatant desire in his dark gaze, but she deliberately chose to misunderstand him, because she said breezily, 'My father taught me well. You told me that yourself, the first time I came to you for tuition.'

He stirred, conscious that he was still staring at her rather besottedly, and said, 'Your father must have been skilled in the art of swordplay. He's instructed you in all the moves of someone tutored by the Angelos themselves. Fencing was a pastime of his?'

She chuckled, a richly beguiling sound that drove him wild, and ran her hand through her thick, honey-blonde hair. 'You could say it was a necessity, Signor Valsino, rather than a pastime. You see, my father was forever fighting his way out of debt. Either that, or escaping from the people he'd cheated at the gaming tables.'

As she spoke, she was moving with unconscious grace towards the ewer of water that adorned a polished mahogany stand near the marble fireplace. She poured the cold water into a bowl, then she dampened a linen towel and bathed her face and wrists with sensuous pleasure. 'Together,' she went on, 'we travelled round half the capitals of Europe. Inevitably in rather a hurry.'

'An unusual education for a girl.'

'It had its advantages.'

He smiled, his arms folded across his chest, taking pleasure in just watching her. She'd unfastened the top buttons of her shirt so that she could draw the moistened towel across the delicate skin of her throat, and he could see the gleam of her naked shoulder in the shaft of slanting sunlight, could see the warm beginning of the heartstopping swell of her breasts.

He dragged his dark eyes back to her face, watching her as she threw back her head in unselfconscious delight at the caress of the cold water. Her long thick hair cascaded down her back, drawing his gaze down to the handspan slenderness of her waist, to the sensual swell of her tight, firm buttocks in her clinging boy's breeches. He ached for her, and was conscious, again, of the impelling heat at his groin.

Carefully he turned towards a small gilt table set between two French settees where a decanter and two glass goblets had been left, and said lightly, 'You'll take a glass of wine with me before you leave, Signorina Marisa? My next pupil isn't due for an hour.'

She had been letting her eyes drift idly along the display of illustrious visiting cards and invitations set along the marble mantelshelf, evidence that David Valsino numbered the elite of London society amongst his clients. But at his suggestion she turned from them and smiled.

'Wine. Why not?' And without waiting for further encouragement, she flung herself cat-like amongst the plump silk cushions of the nearest settee and rolled onto her back, her head pillowed by her arms, her stockinged legs stretched out luxuriantly.

David Valsino brought her a brimming goblet of the rather good hock. She pulled herself up, leaning her elbow on the padded silk arm of the couch, and drank it all down with evident enjoyment. He watched the slight rippling of the muscles in her slender throat as she eased her thirst and he reached to refill her glass. He waited for her to drink again,

then took the glass from her hand and replaced it on the small gilt table. Lowering himself with easy grace onto the tapestry footstool at her side, he took her hand and began to kiss her wrist. Slowly he pressed his mouth along the soft, blue-veined whiteness of her inner arm, at the same time easing back her silk cuff with his sinuous brown fingers. His eyes were dark and burning.

She ran her other hand through his black, curling hair and leaned back against her cushions with a contented little sigh. 'Dear David. It's good to be back in London.'

David Valsino, exclusive fencing master to some of the richest men in London and discreet lover of many of their wives, felt his heart lurch like a boy's. 'We've missed you, *carissima*, these last few weeks. Where have you been?'

She relaxed contentedly on the beautiful Louis Quinze settee. 'I've been living in luxury. In the country.' She wrinkled her face exquisitely.

'And the country bored you, my dear?' said David, still stroking her wrist with his fingertips.

'Not as much as I expected. I can always find some kind of entertainment.' She laughed. 'But my companion bored me excessively. He was very rich, and very stupid.'

David Valsino grinned, his teeth white and even in the sunbrowned perfection of his face. 'Most women of my acquaintance would say that was the perfect combination.'

'Not for me.' She reached languidly for her wine and drank again, savouring the sweet, rich liquid. 'Though I miss his wealth, I could do with some money of my own.'

'Couldn't we all?' said David lightly.

She turned suddenly towards him, resting her hand on his forearm. 'David, you've got lots of rich clients, haven't you? Won't you introduce me to some of them?'

'You want to seduce them, *carissima*?'

She shook her head, smiling. 'Not unless they're very, very eligible. You know how fastidious I am, David. No, I want to win their money. I want to be invited to those

discreet, fabulously wealthy parties of theirs, where the gaming goes on all night, and they think nothing of wagering thousands of guineas on the turn of a single card.'

Her blue eyes were glittering, her voice husky. He said, 'My dear, I know of your reputation. I can't possibly introduce you to my patrons, because you'd fleece them all within a week.'

She pouted a little, trailing her fingers down his forearm. 'You're accusing me of cheating, Signor Valsino?'

He laughed. 'Oh, no, Marisa. You're far too clever for that. But I have heard that you have the most incredible luck. Save it for the gaming hells of Leicester Street that you and your friends frequent, eh?'

Her eyes became shuttered. There was a silence, and then, to his relief, those wonderful blue eyes glinted mischievously as she smiled up at him from beneath the thick veil of her lashes. 'Ah, well. An hour before your next pupil, you say, Signor Valsino?'

He caught his breath, then said smoothly, 'A whole hour, *carissima*.'

'And what shall we do with that hour, signor?'

His eyes darkened in anticipation. Her shirt clung damply to her skin where she'd washed herself, and he could see the dark ripeness of her nipples thrusting against the silk. He swallowed and said, 'You are the one with the ideas, Signorina Marisa.'

She smiled deliciously. 'That's true. Well, then. In view of your recent, scandalous comments about my prowess, shall we have a game of cards?'

'As I've said, everyone knows of your luck in any kind of contest, Signorina. You are bound to win.'

She clapped her hands. 'Then let it be dice. And if you provide them yourself, then how can I possibly have the advantage?'

He hesitated, then nodded. 'But what shall we play for?'

She looked at him directly with an enticingly mischievous expression in her eyes. 'Why, the winner can have exactly what he, or she, desires.'

He felt a throb of excitement. 'I still feel you are bound to win.'

'Ah,' she murmured, leaning closer to him, her fingertips trailing along the soft dark hairs on the back of his hand. 'But if we both want the same thing, then that's no problem, is it? No problem at all.'

He got up, his dark eyes smoky with desire, and walked slowly across to the inlaid walnut bureau in the corner of the room. He took his time in unlocking it, because he was only too aware that his fingers were trembling with excitement and he didn't want her to notice it. As he searched for the dice, trying to appear casual and in control, he swiftly ran through everything he could remember about Marisa Brooke.

She'd arrived in London last summer, after travelling round the continent for many years with her father. He'd gathered that it was her father's unexpected death in Vienna that had precipitated her return; but Marisa spoke little of her past.

When she'd first made contact with David through a mutual acquaintance and asked him for lessons in fencing, he'd resigned himself to a mildly entertaining session with yet another spoiled society beauty who would be anxious to toss the rapiers aside as soon as possible and engage him in another sort of rather more intimate physical combat. David Valsino had no false modesty about his reputation in fashionable circles. Women found his dark Italian good looks and lithe, graceful body intensely appealing. His discretion was an added bonus.

But when Marisa Brooke arrived on his doorstep, he realised immediately that she was quite different. He judged her to be around 23, or 24. She looked younger, because of her slender build and innocent face, but she had all the

quiet self-confidence of a mature woman. She'd brought foils of her own, which he'd checked over; they were a trifle overlong for his taste, but they were wonderfully balanced. In addition, she had her own face mask, made according to the original design introduced by La Boissiere 35 years ago. 'It belonged to my father,' she'd explained simply in her low, musical voice when he admired the way the wires had been oiled and cherished.

She was also, he'd realised at that very first meeting, one of the most exciting women he'd ever met. At first, he'd thought her face to be utterly angelic; it was heart-shaped, exquisite, with a delicate tip-tilted nose and huge, thickly lashed eyes of cornflower blue, complemented by a full, enticing mouth that had a tendency to part in delicious invitation whenever she smiled.

Angelic. That was what he'd thought, when she'd first come to the door of his discreet residence just off St James's Street, asking him if he really was the best fencing master in all of London.

He'd realised extremely quickly that 'angelic' was not quite the right word to describe Marisa Brooke. He realised that when she first slipped her hands down his breeches, coolly and deliberately, then bent down to taste him, as if he were some fine wine.

They'd had several encounters since then, and they were always memorable. She told him little about herself, and he asked few questions, but he gleaned that she made some sort of living amongst the gaming dens with which the back streets of London teemed. Occasionally, he knew, she allowed herself to be patronised by some rich, besotted admirer, but these affairs never lasted long. David knew that it was always Marisa whose ardour cooled first. Not many men succeeded in holding her interest.

He found the dice at last in their little leather box and walked back towards her, bending to place them on the little gilt table by the settee. As he did so, Marisa leaned forward

to pick them up, and her loose silk shirt fell apart to afford him a devastating glimpse of her rosy-tipped breasts. It was done deliberately, he was quite sure. He swallowed hard, conscious of the rearing hardness at his loins. Dear God, but she was utterly bewitching.

Marisa Brooke, watching him discreetly from beneath her thick lashes, let the dice click in her palm like old friends and smiled secretly to herself. David Valsino was very sure of himself, as always. But, though he didn't realise it, she, Marisa, was the one in charge.

Her body was still supple and warm from the fencing. Surreptitiously she'd allowed herself to become progressively aroused as the duel progressed: the lithe, fluid movements of combat, the muscular grace of her opponent, her own taut prowess as her body's balance was gracefully expressed in the very tip of her dancing rapier, never failed to excite her. And what happened next was up to her.

She tipped the two dice into their little leather box and assessed her partner thoughtfully. David Valsino was not tall, but he was beautifully made, with wide shoulders and slim, muscular hips; just as she liked her men, even if he was somewhat arrogant. His face was darkly handsome, in a way calculated to make simpering English-women melt; his skin was smooth and warm, and gilded to a light bronze by the sun of his homeland. By way of contrast, she knew that his thighs and chest were lightly matted with silky black hair, which intensified to a thick, wiry nest of delight at his loins. As she fondled the dice, she remembered their first meeting with a little quiver of amusement. He'd been desperate for her, but was uncertain about making the first move. When Marisa had slid her hand down his slim-fitting breeches, her blue eyes wide with lethal innocence, he'd cried out hoarsely in surprise. She herself had been forced to admit privately to a pleasurable sense of shock when she'd felt the size of the hard, hot shaft of his erect

manhood thrusting agonisingly against her teasing fingertips. After that, she and the fencing master had proceeded rapidly to a most satisfactory mutual pleasuring, the first of several.

There was a rather promising swell at the fencing master's loins now, if Marisa was not mistaken. Her eyes glinted at the thought of that excitingly eager penis, sturdy and endearingly long in erection, pushing urgently at the placket of his breeches. He sat calmly before her on his stool, with the little gilt table between them, his elbows resting on his parted thighs. She knew that he would be quite sure of triumph, one way or another.

Marisa leaned forward confidentially and said, 'Let's keep it simple, shall we? Best of three?'

He nodded. 'Whatever you say, *carissima*. You first.'

She cast a three and a four. When David reached silently for the ivory cubes, Marisa felt her nipples harden against her soft silk shirt as she watched his lean brown fingers fondling the dice, and imagined those same fingers caressing her full breasts. She was aware of a pleasant stirring of sensuality, a sweet promise of pleasure that could all too soon flare into a primitive carnality that the handsome Italian would be all too ready to assuage. He was calmly confident that he would win, and she was equally confident that she would.

He threw two fives. Trying to keep the gloating tone out of his voice, he said, 'What did you say we were playing for?'

Her shadowed blue eyes glittered. 'Winner to decide.'

'Anything?'

'Anything.'

David swallowed. Outside, the sun was starting to fade, and cool shadows stretched across the lofty room. A dust-specked shaft of light fell across the marble mantel, with its enticing array of invitation cards. Marisa let her eyes rest just for a moment on one larger than the others, importantly edged with gilt. In the street below, there was a noisy

altercation between two carriages fighting for space, but the raucous oaths of the drivers seemed a world away. Marisa reached lazily across the table to place her hand on David's hard thigh, and felt him tense as her fingers travelled slowly upwards. She paused tantalisingly just before she came to the place where his taut breeches strained across the thick stem of his phallus, and she saw the colour rush to his face. Marisa smiled, and took the dice box. Perhaps she should let him win after all. She knew very well what he would claim as his reward, and the idea was far from repugnant to her. She knew from experience that his fingers were gentle yet knowing, his body firm and sweet, while his penis was an exquisitely lengthy weapon that he wielded as skilfully as any rapier.

She leaned forward to make her cast, aware that the secret flesh at the juncture of her thighs, which was gently yet insistently caressed by her tight breeches, was liquid with need. She longed to feel his hands cupping the fulness of her hot breasts, longed to feel his delicious mouth tugging at her tight nipples as her secret self opened up like a nectared flower to the dark thrust of his penis.

She trickled the dice out. Five and six. She saw the brief flicker of anguish on David's face and stopped him gently with her hand as he reached out for the box.

'There's no hurry,' she said softly, sliding the dice back in. 'Do you know, I've a fancy for some more wine.'

When he came back with two full glasses in his hands, she saw the shock in his face as he realised that she was lying back casually on the settee with her shirt unbuttoned, while her hands lovingly cradled her small but full breasts. He swallowed hard.

'Your drink,' he said in rather a hoarse voice.

'Thank you,' said Marisa charmingly. She was examining her thrusting nipples intently with her fingers, knowing that her self-absorbed caresses would make his already swollen penis rear in agonised need. 'Your throw, I think, David.'

With a low groan, he seated himself and emptied out the dice. A two and a one.

'Oh, bad luck! Last throw to decide,' said Marisa sweetly. 'This is so exciting, I can hardly bear it. Come and sit beside me, David.'

He ran his hand somewhat distractedly through his dark, curly hair and did as he was told. She nestled against him, still sipping her wine, with her pouting breasts deliciously exposed. He longed to caress them, but her cool self-possession disconcerted him.

She slanted a mischievous look up at him and murmured, 'Still as hotly primed as ever, David? How is Lady Morency? Does she still pay you to pleasure her? Does she still like to crouch on all fours for you, and call you her mighty stallion?'

He preened himself, just a little, and laughed dismissively. 'Lady Morency became rather a nuisance, so I cancelled our engagements for a while. But I'm busy enough, yes.'

'I'm not surprised. I've missed you, David. I've really missed you.' And before David could move, she'd twisted round to bend over his lap and was starting to unbutton his breeches. Within moments she'd freed his penis so that it sprang out, darkly engorged. David laughed a little weakly.

'Marisa, we've not finished the game yet. But of course, *carissima*, if you can't wait . . .'

She smiled. 'Poor David. It must be so trying to have women so desperate for you. How delicious you are. We'll return to the game in a moment, shall we?'

As she spoke, she let her fingers flicker along the dark stem of his rearing phallus. It trembled and strained towards her, and David's breathing became ragged. Marisa, her delicate tongue just protruding from her parted lips, positioned herself with great concentration so that her pink-crested breasts hovered just above the angrily swelling tip of his penis. Then she lowered herself and rubbed her nipples lightly against the velvety glans.

David clutched at her shoulders with a groan and pulled her face towards him to kiss her hungrily. She responded for one tantalising moment, her mouth yielding and her tongue flicking coolly against his. Then, almost regretfully, she pulled herself away.

‘Rather a wild thrust in prime, that, wouldn’t you say, Signor Valsino? What did you tell me about fencing, on my very first lesson? “Know your opponent’s weakness.”’

‘Dear God. Marisa, you witch!’

She laughed merrily and turned back to the dice. ‘My throw, I think.’

A five and a six again. She smiled at him, letting her eyes drift down to his swaying penis as it thrust up hungrily from his open breeches.

He said, a little tightly, ‘Is it really worth my throwing, Marisa? After all, we both want the same thing, don’t we?’

‘Possibly.’ She reached for the little leather box and gave it a light kiss before passing it to him. ‘Your throw.’

He shrugged, and made his cast. A three and a two.

‘Well. So much for the dice,’ he said dismissively, and turned swiftly towards her, his hot eyes lapping up the sight of her naked breasts pouting enticingly from between the parted folds of her silk shirt.

She put out her hands gently to stop him touching her. ‘We had a bargain, Signor Valsino. And I won, remember?’

‘Yes. Of course I do. But surely, this is exactly what you wanted, isn’t it, Marisa?’ he said, caressing her with urgent certainty.

She sighed and let her gaze linger on his quivering penis. Then, to his horror, she began to slowly button up her shirt. ‘Not exactly, no, pleasant though it would be. You see, there’s something I want rather more.’

‘What do you want, God damn it?’

She stood up and walked casually across to the fireplace. ‘I want this, David.’

And she reached for the large, gilt-edged invitation that took pride of place amongst the assorted cards and letters on the marble mantelshelf.

There was a moment's aghast silence, and then he exploded. 'But that's my card for a masked ridotto at Vauxhall tonight. Why in hell do you want that?'

She stroked the thick, creamy card with her fingers, almost purring. 'Because it looks rich and discreet. No names, no identity. Just this little mark of the ace of spades in the corner. A masked ridotto at Vauxhall, you say; it's ideal for me, David. Will there be card play, do you think?'

David stood up, his handsome face dark with annoyance and disappointment. He started to rearrange his clothing, and his penis throbbed angrily as he forced it back inside his breeches.

'Undoubtedly,' he said bitterly. 'So that's it. You want to make a fool of some other unwary punter, just as you've made a fool of me.'

She walked to where he stood and reached up to draw a finger softly down his lean, smooth-shaven cheek. 'Now don't be like that, David darling. I did ask you earlier if you'd introduce me to some of your wealthy friends, but you refused. Then I caught sight of that invitation, and decided I'd have to take matters into my own hands. After all, it was a fair contest, wasn't it?'

'I don't know,' he muttered. He'd heard all the rumours, that Mistress Brooke had a range of impossibly devilish tricks that enabled her to gull the entire world at faro and hazard without a flicker of her innocent blue eyes.

'But I couldn't possibly have cheated, David. After all, they were your dice. And you did agree when we started that I could have whatever I wanted.'

'I thought,' he said stormily, 'that you wanted me!'

'Then let that be a lesson to you,' said Marisa Brooke softly. 'Of course, I adore you, but just now, I want this

invitation rather more. A masked ridotto! No-one will recognise me. The whole affair will be delightfully *incognito*.'

David said, through gritted teeth, 'I could tell the host that my invitation was stolen. I could warn him not to let you in.'

'Oh, David. That would be most ungenerous of you. By the way, who is the Ace of Spades? Is he rich and stupid?'

She was laughing at him, mocking him. He replied stiffly,

'Surely you'd rather that the identity of your host was a surprise, Marisa. You like surprises, don't you?'

Her husky laughter tinkled around the darkening room. 'Yes. Yes, I do like surprises. Dear David, you are still my friend, aren't you? You're not really angry with me, just because I want to win lots of lovely money off a crowd of drunken, aristocratic fools who are only too eager to lose it all anyway.'

He struggled, then laughed ruefully at her deliciously expressive face. 'I'm not angry. Just incredibly disappointed,' he said frankly. 'Dear God, Marisa, you must be the most tantalising woman in London.'

'In that case our next meeting should be something for you to look forward to,' she smiled. She'd walked across to the doorway and was pulling on her supple leather boots.

'Perhaps we can play piquet next time,' said David, following her. 'I'm quite good at that. I might even win.'

'Don't count on it,' Marisa laughed. She was easing on her long, silk-lined greatcoat, cut to look like a man's, and then she pulled on her curly-brimmed hat, tucking her hair up into its crown so that she looked like some exquisite blond youth. She reached up to kiss him affectionately on the cheek. Then, without waiting for his footman to show her out, she ran lightly down the stairs.

'Enjoy yourself tonight,' called out David suddenly, but he wasn't sure she'd heard him.

Marisa paused for a moment on the pavement outside the row of tall stuccoed houses where David lived. The sun was

setting now behind the rooftops; the grey light of the London dusk softened the hard outlines of the busy street. A fruitseller went by, singing out her wares. Marisa bought an apple, and bit contentedly into its crisp, juicy flesh.

As usual, she'd got exactly what she wanted. She glanced up affectionately at the high windows of the lofty room where Signor Valsino gave his expensive private fencing lessons. Dear David. She'd almost given way to temptation and pleased herself with him, against all her resolve; the rapier-play had excited her, as it always did, and he was exceptionally handsome.

But he was also rather conceited. And from the moment she'd caught sight of that mysterious invitation from the Ace of Spades, displayed so enticingly on his mantelshelf, she'd wanted it badly, so she'd played to win. The exquisite thrill of uncertainty as she'd substituted her own weighted dice just before each of her own throws sent the blood racing through her veins. In fact, it was almost as exciting as the proximity of David's warm, virile body.

She'd heard once of a man who'd orgasmed at his moment of triumph in a low-class gaming hell in Southampton Street. She'd laughed when she heard of it, but secretly she could understand. Poor David wouldn't understand. He'd not suspected her of cheating at all, and that was part of the joy. He never had the slightest idea that each of her daringly intimate caresses was intended to distract him, while she dexterously replaced his innocent dice with the pair she always carried in a tiny secret pocket in her breeches, the pair that were weighted so that they never gave any result but a five and a six.

Marisa was gifted with luck and skill, a lethal combination. She considered that it had been a successful afternoon, but it could have been better. Her body told her so as it twinged softly with regret at what might have been. She frowned as she finished the apple and tossed the core into the gutter, only too aware that her secret feminine parts were still

moist and swollen, still anticipating the delicious caress of David Valsino's serviceable penis. But she'd been right to turn him down on this occasion. Sex was without a doubt the supreme pleasure, but as with all pleasures, Marisa's greatest strength was that she could take it or leave it, depending on how it fitted in with her plans.

Today, David had been oversure of her. And besides, from the moment she'd seen that invitation beckoning her from his mantelpiece, she'd wanted it badly. With a quickening of her pulses she reached into the silk-clad inner pocket of her coat and drew out the gilt-edged card with its intriguing instruction to admit the bearer to a masked ridotto at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens that very evening. There would be supper, dancing and cards, and from what she knew of such occasions, all the guests would be expected to remain anonymous, not revealing their names unless requested by their host, the ace of spades himself.

The Ace of Spades. Probably some fat, aging old roué, a contemporary of the Prince Regent, Marisa told herself dismissively. But at least he and his guests would be rich, and she could win lots of money off them and depart swiftly into the crowds at Vauxhall, with no-one being any the wiser as to her identity. No-one would even guess she wasn't a genuine guest, unless, of course, the ace of spades himself challenged her.

She shivered deliciously as she contemplated her evening, feeling as though she was on the verge of some exciting new world, where absolute discretion was the unstated rule, and not an eyelid flickered as fortunes were won or lost at the turn of a card. Where the winnings might be so great that she would never have to play again.

Her thoughts were interrupted as an open chaise, coming from the direction of St James's Square, edged rather too close to the kerb in order to avoid a milkman's dray. Marisa jumped swiftly back out of the way, at the same time instinctively assessing the fine equipage. The chaise was of

bottle green, with glittering brass lamps and high yellow wheels. It was drawn by two handsome chestnuts, and its driver was swathed in a many caped greatcoat of fine broadcloth and a tall crowned hat. He handled his spirited team with consummate skill, avoiding the big dray with inches to spare.

And then, she realised that he was drawing up outside David's house. She felt a moment's unease, then shrugged. Another of David's rich clients, no doubt. She turned to walk on, away from the splendid vehicle, but she pulled up in surprise as the driver's peremptory voice followed her down the street.

'Here, boy. A shilling for you to hold my horses.'

Marisa whirled round to see that the man in the fine green chaise had swung himself down from the box and gone to his horses' heads. She said darkly, 'Are you by any chance speaking to me?'

He didn't even look at her. He was too busy attending to his horses as they restlessly champed at their bits. 'I am indeed. Be quick about it, will you?'

Marisa caught her breath. He hadn't realised she was a woman. No fault there, as she knew she looked very much like a youth with her man's greatcoat concealing her feminine curves and her wide-brimmed hat hiding her long hair. But she burned with indignation at the arrogance of him. Why, he hadn't even bothered to look at her as he issued his command. She said, with slow deliberation, 'I think you've made a mistake. No-one pays me to do anything.'

His face jerked towards her at that, his attention drawn at last from his precious horses, and Marisa had the satisfaction of seeing a pair of world-weary grey eyes open rather wide as he realised his mistaken assumption as to her sex. 'Really?' he murmured in a silkily cultured voice. 'You surprise me. I should think that quite a few people would pay a small fortune to see you out of those clothes.'

She caught her breath, and gazed calmly up at him. 'You certainly couldn't afford it.'

'You think not?' His wide, thin mouth mocked her. 'In my experience, everyone - but everyone - has their price.'

He'd taken off his high-crowned hat, and laid it on the driver's seat of his chaise. Marisa, her practised eyes assessing him narrowly, took in the fashionably short dark hair that was cut in a Bedford crop, the pristine folds of his white lawn cravat, and the luxurious shine of his top-boots that gleamed beneath the sweeping folds of his coat. An aristocrat, thought Marisa grimly, in his early thirties, awash with money and self-importance. Rich, powerful and utterly arrogant.

'How very sad for you,' she said sweetly, 'that you have to pay for your pleasures. But of course, I can understand it. After all, no self-respecting female would come to someone like you of her own accord, now, would she?'

The cold perfection of his haughty features seemed chiselled in ice. 'And what exactly do you mean by that, Ganymede?' he said softly.

Ganymede, the boy beloved of the gods, a kind of bisexual concubine. How dare he address her thus? Marisa's mind crept tantalisingly over all the backstreet cant she knew by way of revenge, but she rejected it all as being too subtle a form of insult. Instead she said pityingly, 'I mean, of course, that it's quite evident that you must have a very small penis.'

His face seemed to blaze. Then his eyes flickered over her thoughtfully. 'Well, I do believe I should horsewhip you for that,' he said in the same level, silky voice.

'Ah. You enjoy that kind of thing, do you?' said Marisa in wide-eyed innocence. 'Do you pay for that as well? There are some women in a house in Vere Street, most discreet, I believe, who'll not charge you overmuch.'

The man's hand was tightening ominously on his riding crop just as the big door of David Valsino's house flew open

and a flustered footman came hurrying out.

'Lord Delsingham,' the footman uttered in distress. 'A thousand pardons, my lord, that no-one was here to greet you. Signor Valsino is expecting you, of course. If you would care to go inside, my lord, a groom will take your carriage to the stables round the back.'

Marisa stood transfixed. Lord James Delsingham, one of the richest, most fashionable men in London. She felt rather faint.

Delsingham was saying coolly, 'No need for the stables. My visit is only a short one. Tell the groom to walk the horses up and down until I return - with care, you understand, or believe me, there'll be the devil to pay.'

'Yes, my lord. This way, my lord.'

Lord Delsingham turned to go up the steps to David's house. Then, seeing Marisa still standing there transfixed, his mouth twisted in unexpected acknowledgement, and she felt a sudden wild racing of her pulses.

'Remember, my sweet Ganymede,' he said softly. 'Everyone has their price.'

Marisa pulled herself together. 'I told you before,' she said stoutly. 'Nobody pays me to do anything, my lord!'

'A pity,' he murmured, his narrowed grey eyes raking her. 'My imagination runs riot at the sight of you in those breeches. And the thought of you out of them is quite devastating.'

Hissing, she lunged forward while at the same time whipping back her hand to strike him across the cheek, but he caught her arm effortlessly to parry her blow, and even as she gasped in surprise, he bent his dark head to plant a kiss on the inside of her wrist. As she struggled to free herself, he parted his lips to let his tongue trail insolently along the delicate veined skin, and she felt the wicked warmth of his caress burning her, melting her insides. She couldn't move. She couldn't speak.