

Shameless

She watched him still, her expression severe. "If you are a burglar, I must warn you that you are quite out in your timing: the house is full of people. There is a ball in progress just at this moment, you know. And perhaps this would be a good time to mention, too, that I have only to scream, and a hundred people will instantly come rushing to my aid."

"Why don't you, then?" he asked, genuinely curious. He almost wished she would scream. He would be upon her before the sound left her throat, of course, silencing her quickly and forever, his hand pushed by necessity, which would make this easier. It had been many years since he'd felt any hesitation at all about killing anyone, but he was conscious of having to deliberately keep reminding himself that in the name of self-preservation he had to kill her.

When his target died, as his target inevitably would, this too-beguiling chit would remember him. It would be trusting too much to luck to assume she would not then associate him with the event.

Get on with it, then.

His footsteps were entirely silent on the deep pile of the oriental carpet as he closed the distance between them. Years of necessity had made it second nature for him to move without making a sound.

"Oh. Well, " she said. "As to that...."

She paused.

With interest, he watched the quick darkening of her eyes as self-consciousness suffused them. He was so close now that she had to tilt her head back to meet his gaze, leaving her slender, pale neck more vulnerable than she had any notion of. She was clearly, foolishly, unafraid of him.

"I have no...." she started up again.

The man on the floor stirred and groaned. The lady jumped as if someone had grabbed her by the ankle, almost losing her grip on both the poker and her bodice in the process. She took a couple of skittering steps back and looked down at her victim with wide-eyed dismay. The man on the floor lay once again motionless, eyes closed, jaws slack. Drool spilled from the corner of his mouth. A smear of blood was now visible through his fair hair. It was the only real indication that he was not simply asleep on the rug.

"Do you think he'll die?" she asked anxiously. Neil looked into the big blue eyes that had

lifted to meet his again and felt grim. She was very young, very sweet - and very much in his way.

“Probably not. It’s difficult to be certain, of course. Do you wish him to?” He took another step toward her, until he was close enough to once again smell the faint, lavender-tinged scent of her. Like the rest of her, it was unmistakably - and titillatingly - feminine. Up close, her skin had the soft, pearlescent gleam of ivory satin. He was certain it would be smooth to the touch - and warm.

It had been a while - a long while - since he’d been this close to this kind of woman. Young ladies of quality were thin on the ground in the places he regularly habituated.

“No, of course not. At least....”

She broke off, hesitating, glancing back at the man on the ground. Neil reached out and took the poker from her - she made no protest, seeming more glad than not to be relieved of its unwieldiness - then realized he was, in effect, hesitating too. The poker posed not the slightest degree of hindrance to what he needed to do, and he knew it.

“Who is he?” Even as he laid the poker on the carpet, Neil recognized that in asking the question he was simply trying to delay the inevitable for a little longer. A glance upon entering the room had told him that the man on the floor was not his target. Therefore, he had no interest whatsoever in who he was. And yet he asked.

“Lord Rosen. He is - was - my fiancé.”

“Ah.”

The loathing in her voice was unmistakable. Having listened to the determined fight she had put up to defend her honor, Neil gave her full marks for emerging the victor in the encounter. Given her size and style - she was on the small side, and a lady to boot - and the size and style of her assailant, who was burly and thick-limbed, he would have expected the outcome to be very different.

Not, he told himself, that he cared one way or the other.

He cared about doing his job, and that was all. That being the case, he needed to do what was necessary to repair this farcical situation, and be gone.

“Did you end your other two engagements with the same amount of, ah, ferocity?” he inquired, and had the felicity of watching her eyes darken still more with self-consciousness and her cheeks turn even rosier.

“You were listening!” she accused. Then, primming up her mouth, she added, “I’ve no intention of telling you anything at all until you tell me who you are - and why you came in through the window.”

Her tone was haughty, her gaze direct.

To his own amazement, Neil found himself teetering on the brink of being charmed.

